

Who is Jesus?
Fully Human, Fully God
First in Lenten Series

by
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Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the

temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The season of Lent always begins in the desert. After he is washed in the waters of baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit of God into that dry and barren place, to prepare himself for the life and ministry that lies ahead. His forty days in the wilderness recall the forty years of ancient Israel, between their deliverance from slavery in Egypt to their settling in the Promised Land.

As it was for Moses and his people way back then, so it is for Jesus, a time of testing. When the people of ancient Israel thought they were dying of thirst, God made water flow from a rock. When they thought they would die of hunger, God sent manna from heaven – just enough for each day, daily bread. When they needed help finding their way, God sent a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When they forgot about God and created the Golden Calf so that they would be like other nations and have a little god they could worship, God had to remind them who and whose they were. For forty years, every doubt-filled turn in their wilderness wanderings was answered by God.

So when we get to Jesus' time of being tested in the wilderness there is a striking parallel. His temptations are basically the same as the temptations that haunted ancient Israel. The devil, whose name means the Confuser, peppers Jesus with questions, asking him to rely on his own divine power, to forget that God is God, that God will provide what he needs, and that God alone is worthy of worship. But there is also a striking difference between the wilderness time for ancient Israel and for Jesus. When Israel is tempted to deny the presence and power of God, God shows up out there in the desert and responds to them with outward signs that they can see and touch and taste. However, when Jesus is tempted to deny who he really is – God shows up within, and he seems to discover the power of God in him is revealed in his humanity.

One Biblical scholar comments on this text saying, “Jesus refuses to put his power to work on the problem of his rumbling belly. Instead he strengthens himself quoting words of Deuteronomy as a reminder to

the devil, and possibly himself that he is dependent upon God, even as he is God... He is not a messiah who will take care of his own physical needs with his power. He is not a messiah who will seek out the authority and glory of earthly kingdoms. He is not a messiah who will protect himself from the dangers of the world. Jesus will not use his power the way in which we would mostly likely use it, were it ours.”¹

He will not be the Savior we sometimes think we want – a sort of magical miracle worker. Rather, he will remain true to his divine vocation and be the Savior we ultimately need – a God so human that he will suffer and die a very human death. Therefore, when tempted as we are, Jesus shows us who he really is as we journey toward the cross in the weeks to come – fully human, fully God.

Of all the doctrines of our Christian faith, this one may be among the hardest to wrap our heads around, that the fullness of Jesus’ divinity is found precisely in his refusing to invoke the power of God to save himself. It’s hard to get our heads around that because we live in a culture that sometimes seems to have reduced Jesus to something other than fully human, fully God.

United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, put it this way: “The gospel presents a real challenge for us. Here is how I would describe that challenge: The contemporary North American church has succeeded in sentimentalizing Jesus to the point where we have taken the romantic ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ of the 19th century and reworked it into Jesus – our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always blesses and never curses.” But,” Willimon concludes, Jesus is more unsettling than that.... Jesus will not be tempted to be the Savior we thought we wanted.”²

¹ Doug King, unpublished Moveable Feast paper 2007.

² Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Jan.-March, 2010, p. 41-42.

Journalist, Jane Coaston, drives this point home in a recent article about a candidate for Governor of Georgia who has a sign on her campaign bus that reads: “Jesus, Guns, Babies.” The obvious connotation is that Jesus is all in favor of anyone owning a gun, and against everyone who is for the right to choose abortion. Her message is – mine is a political campaign that Jesus would endorse.

In an article entitled “It’s Easy to Put Jesus on Your Bus. Practicing Faith is Harder,” she writes: “As someone who has covered politics, I can appreciate the brutal simplicity of the messaging. But as a Christian I am depressed by it. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the savior of all... who died on a cross at Calvary, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. I believe that as much as I believe the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. I read the Bible regularly and I think a lot about my faith and its role in my life. Suffice it to say, faith is hard... faith in the unseen, faith in something that encourages you to act against your first instinct, faith that, no matter what you want to do, tells you what you should do instead. It’s not hard to be a Christian in America,” she concludes, “But it is hard to live a Christian life – to exist as a person who has a belief in an eternal savior but spends a lot of time wondering what that really means. No one can learn anything about Jesus Christ from a campaign bus reading: “Jesus, Guns, Babies. Putting the word *Jesus* on a campaign bus is not hard. And it is not an exercise in faith.”³

Based on today’s text, I would argue, that whoever came up with that campaign slogan succumbed to the temptation to align Jesus with weapons of violence and unwarranted power, that Jesus himself would never succumb to. We see this everywhere we look. This is the thing to remember on the first Sunday of Lent. When the devil is actually testing Jesus in the wilderness, asking him to do a little hocus pocus over the stone to turn it into bread and to dive head first off the top of the Temple

³ Jane Coaston, “It’s Easy to Put ‘Jesus’ on your Bus. Practicing Faith Is Harder,” *The New York Times*, 2/19/22

to see if God's angels will catch him, the devil may as well be suggesting he find a way around the cross that awaits him in Jerusalem. The devil was saying, "If you can do *this* now, you might as well avoid *that* later. But Jesus will not go around his own suffering and death, any more than God is willing to go around us in our suffering and death. Fully human – means Jesus suffers as we suffer and dies as we die. Fully God – means nothing, absolutely nothing – not even death itself will separate us from God's love. This is why our kind of faith is so hard, and can never be summed up in a campaign slogan.

Just now, as we watch and grieve and despair over what is happening in Ukraine our primary consolation is that Jesus is fully human; fully God meaning none of those who suffer is alone. Not those mothers and their babies in the underground subways; Not those brave unarmed civilians standing in front of Russian tanks; Not those refugees crossing through snow into a neighboring country; None of them – amid unbearable suffering is alone.

The Great Confuser who tempts us, which the bible calls the devil, got through to Vladimir Putin and his cronies and their like when they heard inside their heads: "All these Kingdoms of the World can be yours.... If you ..." But Jesus Christ will not be so tempted. Jesus will be found among those who suffer and die at the hands of those who have succumbed to that temptation. My preacher friend Jon Walton said it simply: "Only a God who knows our suffering can take it to himself. Only a God who has experienced the sorrow of our life can take us to its joy."⁴

In Frederick Buechner's book, *The Eyes of the Heart*, he tells the story about the last conversation he had with his brother, Jamie. Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, a thoughtful writer and theologian who lives in Vermont and now 95 years old, doesn't travel away from home. His brother Jamie claimed little faith, never went to church, lived

⁴ Jon Walton, "No Evil Shall Befall You," 2/29/04, First Presbyterian Church, New York City.

in New York, and as he was dying they talked on the phone. Buechner describes the conversation as one of hesitancy as much as expression, as such calls are between siblings who have not exactly mastered the art of telling one another what is most in their heart. Each of them knew this call would be the last one made, and these words the last words spoken. “You have been a wonderful brother,” Jamie said to Fred. And Buechner in turn said he had a feeling they had not seen the last of one another. “Jamie made a soft, descending, ‘Ah-h-h’ sound as a way to thank me for saying it, for maybe even believing it,” wrote Buechner. “And he didn’t want a funeral, he told me but when I suggested maybe cocktails and dinner with some of his old friends in the fall.... He said that sounded like a good idea. But he did ask me if I would write a prayer for him that he could use, and my son-in-law David said that he had it there on the table beside him when he died. “Dear Lord, bring me through the darkness into light. Bring me through pain into peace. Bring me through death into life. Be with me wherever I go, and with everyone I love. In Christ’s name, I ask it...”⁵

That prayer is what it means to say: We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Only a God who knows human suffering can bring us through darkness into light, through pain into peace, through death into life. May that be our daily prayer for the suffering people of the world, for the people of Ukraine, for the for the pain of our nation’s suffering and our city’s violence for the people within this room, for each of us.

Let us pray:
Dear Lord, bring us all through the darkness into light. Bring us through pain into peace. Bring us through death into life. In Christ’s name, we ask it. Amen.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Eyes of the Heart*, p. 162 ff, also used in Walton’s sermon.