

Tempted by Empire

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First Sunday of Lent

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1:9-13

"Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Matthew 3:8-9

We begin the season of Lent with Jesus in the wilderness with the wild beasts tempted by Satan and ministered to by the angels. Is that the set up for a great drama or what? I love that language. Angels and Satan are not part of my world. But at the same time it doesn't mean they don't exist. What I mean is that Satan and the angels are symbols for something that is real. That reality is the struggle, the conflict and the battle that is going on within us. Mark is telling his story to those who are faced with choices. Will they choose the temptation offered by Satan or will they like Jesus before them resist and choose instead to live for God? Will they choose conquest or will they choose justice?

The wilderness is where we discover who we are and what our values are. We discover and decide who we will serve. It is in the wilderness where we find the courage to live out those choices we make and accept the consequences of those choices.

Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg pointed this out: Of all the founders of the world's great religions, only Jesus was executed by established authority.

That was the result of the choices Jesus made and the consequences of those choices.

But the cross isn't the end of the story—his story or ours.

Another biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan wrote the following about the earliest Christians: *“Christians must have understood, then, that to proclaim Jesus as Son of God was deliberately denying Caesar his highest title and that to announce Jesus as Lord and Savior was calculated treason.”*ⁱ

In the wilderness we are faced with difficult choices.

Mark's gospel is about rough and tumble politics. You have the Empire of Caesar and you have the Empire of God. Where will you put your loyalty?

Mark was written around 70 of the Common Era. Between the years of 66 and 70 the Roman Empire shocked and awed Jerusalem. In response to Jewish terrorism or freedom fighting, depending upon your perspective, the city was totally destroyed and the Jewish temple was reduced to rubble. The Western or Wailing Wall is all that remains. Mark's gospel is written as that event is concluding. Mark seems to be writing to both gentiles and Jewish Christians. Mark is saying to them, it is time to make a choice.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus represents those who have been crushed by empire. Yet he also represents those who have rejected empire and have found a different way to live in the world. This new way is the way Jesus taught. It is the way of the realm of God. The realm of God is coming and it is here. It is a way of justice and peace not victory and conquest. This is the message of Mark:

“Don't give up hope. Do not give in to your fears. Do not give in to the lure of empire.”

One estimate is that the Romans executed by crucifixion approximately 500 people per day during their occupation of Palestine. But Rome was not an evil empire. They were not bad people. They were keeping peace. The collateral damage of empire is simply what happens when you have a military presence all over the world. When you understand that your mission is to lead the world, you do what you have to do to keep the peace.

Again, quoting from Dominic Crossan: *“Rome was not the evil empire of its ancient time....Rome was simply the normalcy of civilization within first-century options and the inevitability of globalization within first-century limits. Rome was maybe even the cutting-edge of civilization...”* ⁱⁱ

The Romans thought they were divinely inspired. Virgil in his Aeneid “claims that the divinely willed destiny of Aeneas is to ‘bring all the world beneath his laws’ (4.231) in order that ‘glorious Rome shall extend her empire to earth’s ends, her ambitions to the skies’ (6.781-82)” ⁱⁱⁱ Rome will rule because Rome is good and blessed by the gods.

However, Jesus, Paul, and the New Testament opposed Rome’s Empire. Jesus and Paul and according to tradition, all the disciples, were executed by Rome’s Empire. Jesus was called in the Gospels and in Paul’s letters, the son of God, in direct opposition to Rome’s claim that Caesar was son of God. Jesus didn’t buy the claims of empire. He resisted.

Some of you may be familiar with the Project for the New American Century. It is an educational organization. Its members include Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Jeb Bush, Paul Wolfowitz and others, many of whom are within the Bush administration. This is from their website. It is their mission statement:

The Project for the New American Century is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle. <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>

Last week in the Johnson City Press I read this quote from a former United States Senator from Tennessee: *“‘We’re the strongest nation on Earth militarily.’ He said, ‘We’re the most moral nation on Earth. We are an example to the rest of the world, even that part of the world that doesn’t like us much. ... You realize that even our most vocal adversaries really in a way are expressing an envy for America, for our ability to create wealth and*

distribute it as equitably as has ever been known in history.... We are the greatest nation on Earth, but we have the greatest obligations of Earth.”^{iv}

I am interested in the senator’s first two statements. *“We’re the strongest nation on Earth militarily. We’re the most moral nation on Earth.”*

Strongest military. Most moral. I find it interesting how morality and military go together. I have no doubt about his first statement that we have the strongest military on Earth. I have a serious problem about the second statement that we are the most moral nation on Earth.

If you can convince people that you are operating with moral principle, you can do whatever you want with your military. This is the key. Our leaders do not have to convince other nations of our moral superiority. We do not have to convince the people of Spain or Egypt that we are more moral than they are. That would be impossible. Our leaders only have to convince Americans. Americans are told again and again by our leadership: *“We are the most moral nation on Earth.”* Isn’t that nice to know? Feels good doesn’t it? You are the most moral people on Earth. Therefore, we carry a benevolent sword.

One of the seven deadly sins is pride. Augustine thought pride was the deadliest one of all. Pride is the sin that got Adam and Eve in trouble in the garden. This is solid traditional Christianity. These are not John Shuck’s wild ideas. This is orthodoxy. The serpent, that old snake, that satan, tempted Eve with pride. *“Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God!”*

From Matthew’s gospel:

“Again the devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Matthew 3:8-9

From the Project for the New American Century: *“American leadership is good both for America and the world”*

From a former Senator: *“We’re the strongest nation on Earth militarily. We’re the most moral nation on Earth”*

Pride.

Pride is the temptation to think we are better than others. Since we are better we have the right *even the obligation* to police others and to control others.

Later on in the *Gospel of Mark*, we find the following narrative:

As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'" Mark 10:17-18

Now if Jesus doesn't think of himself as good, how do Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, and all the rest dare to claim that America is "good"-- that America is the most moral nation on Earth? The greatest evils in the world have been perpetuated by people who think they are good. No emperor, dictator, king or president has ever thought of himself as bad. The villain who says, "I am doing this in the name of evil" is found only in cartoons.

When we think we are more moral than someone else we deceive ourselves, we give ourselves over to the sin from which all other sins arise, pride. Dante defined pride as "love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbor."

The United States has over 700 overseas military bases in 130 countries.^v Why? Is it because we are moral? Perhaps. Maybe the gods have divinely commissioned us to control the planet for beneficent purposes. There could be another reason.

Americans make up 4% of the world's population yet we consume 25% of the world's oil.^{vi} It is in the interest of Americans to keep that oil flowing *if we wish to sustain our way of life*. If everyone on Earth consumed at the rate of the average American, we would need four planets worth of resources to sustain our consumption. My hunch is that is why we have a military presence all over the globe. I am doubtful that morality has anything to do with it.

Lent is the season of introspection. Lent is about stripping away. We strip away all of the external attachments so that we can listen to the deeper part of ourselves. This stripping away includes stripping away fantasies and illusions about ourselves. Lent is the time for honesty. What really is our situation? Lent is also the time for change. Lent is about repentance.

Repentance is not about feeling bad. It is about thinking and acting differently.

It is important to know that only Americans are fooled when our leaders tell us that we are the most moral nation on Earth. Others see America in a different light. It is also important to know that not all Americans see America as more moral than other nations. The real struggle is not outside our country. It is within it.

The struggle is within each of us. We are talking about competing visions in regards to our nation's future. What will our choice be? Those Americans who do not see America as any more moral than any one else also love their country. They also believe in democracy. They believe in having a military that guards its borders. But they don't believe in empire. They believe in using their share of the world's resources but not more than their share. They know that the way Americans live will need to change so that *all* may live.

We are in the wilderness and we have choices to make.
The lure of empire is strong and flattering.

“Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

ⁱ John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L Reed. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), p. 11.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 412

ⁱⁱⁱ bid., p. 408

^{iv} Former U.S. senator Howard Baker. Net News service, *Johnson City Press*, Wednesday, March 1st, 2006, p. 1.

^v <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0115-08.htm>

^{vi} <http://baltimorechronicle.com/080304ThomasWheeler.shtml>

