

Date: April 21, 2024

Texts: Gen. 3. 1-7 / Luke 4. 1-13

Title: "The Jesus I Never Knew - Temptation: Showdown in the Desert"

Intro -

as we continue to delve into "the Jesus I never knew" - Philip Yancey...

we come to the temptations, which Yancey sees as:

the showdown in the desert...

a pivotal event for our understanding of

who Jesus is, and -

why he came...

cf. - The Gospels assert that Jesus... was none other than God's own Son,
dispatched from heaven to lead the fight against evil.

With that mission in view, certain questions about Jesus' priorities

immediately come to mind. At the top of the list, natural disasters:

If Jesus had the power to cure illness and raise the dead,

why not tackle a few macro-problems like earthquakes and hurricanes,

or perhaps the whole sinister swarm of viruses that plague the earth?

relate - Philosophers and theologians blame many of the rest of earth's ills

on the consequences of human freedom,

which raises a whole new set of questions.

Do we in fact enjoy too much freedom?

We have the freedom to harm and kill each other, to fight global wars,

to despoil our planet (and - we engage that freedom...)

We are even free to defy God, to live without restraints as though

"God were not..."

At the least, Jesus could have devised some irrefutable proof to

silence all skeptics, tilting the odds decisively in God's favor.

As it is, God seems easy to ignore or deny.

and then - we have this: Jesus' first "official" act as an adult -

when he went into the wilderness to meet the accuser face-to-face,

[who] gave him the occasion to address these problems.
Satan himself tempted the Son of God to change the rules and achieve his goals
by a dazzling, shortcut method.
i.e. - more than Jesus' character was at stake in that desert...
human history hung in the balance.

I) The Crux

relate - when is the crux of the matter...
not the crux?
- when John Milton wrote Paradise Regained (the sequel to his epic
"Paradise Lost")
he made the temptation - not the crucifixion - the hinge event
in Jesus' life...
in what God had planned for the redemption of the world
cf. - In a garden, a man and woman had fallen for Satan's promise of a way to
rise above their assigned state.
Millennia later, another representative—the Second Adam—faced a
similar test, though curiously inverted.
Can you be like God? the serpent had asked in Eden;
Can you be truly human? asked the tempter in the desert.
cf. - dig into those temptations for a moment, and you may wonder:
where is the evil in these requests...?
turn a stone into bread...
rule the kingdoms of the worlds (likely better than we manage...)
relate - these temptations seem like Jesus' prerogatives,
the very qualities to be expected in a Messiah.
Would not Jesus go on to multiply bread for five thousand...?
Would he not also conquer death and rise again to become King of Kings.
- The temptations do not seem evil in themselves—
and yet clearly something pivotal happened in the desert...

II) What Should Messiah Look Like?

... something having to do with the basic question:

What should Messiah look like?

- A People's Messiah who could turn stones into bread to feed the multitudes?
- A Torah Messiah, standing tall at the lofty pinnacle of the temple?
- A King Messiah, ruling over not just Israel but all the kingdoms of earth?

In short, Satan was offering Jesus the chance to be the
thundering Messiah... - we think we want.

because...

we want anything other than the Suffering Messiah
that Jesus came to be

(and - truth be told - on one level, Jesus was not too keen on this either)

i.e. - these temptations cut through to the core of who Jesus is...

they challenged the very purpose of why Jesus came...

not just for how we view him...

how we embrace him...

but also for how he actually lived... what he did...

and how he submitted to God's will in journeying
to Jerusalem...

journeying to the cross.

here - I would draw your attention to the writings of Dostoevsky,

who made the Temptation scene the centerpiece of his
great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*

(if I had read it, that is... and since I haven't, I would draw your attention
to Yancey's thoughts on it)

The agnostic brother Ivan Karamazov writes a poem called

"The Grand Inquisitor" set in sixteenth-century Seville

at the height of the Inquisition. In the poem, a disguised Jesus visits the
city at a time when heretics are daily being burned at the stake.

The Grand Inquisitor... recognizes Jesus and has him thrown into prison.

- The Inquisitor has an accusation to make: by turning down the three temptations, Jesus forfeited the three greatest powers at his disposal, "miracle, mystery, and authority."

He should have followed Satan's advice and performed the miracles on demand in order to increase his fame among the people.

He should have welcomed the offer of authority and power.

Did Jesus not realize that people want more than anything else to worship what is established beyond dispute...?

By resisting Satan's temptations to override human freedom, the Inquisitor maintains, Jesus made himself far too easy to reject.

He surrendered his greatest advantage:

the power to compel belief...

- For this reason, the Inquisitor must execute Jesus one more time, (lest he hinder the church's work...)

i.e. - the temptation in the desert reveals the profound difference between God's power, and -

Satan's power

Satan has the power to: coerce, to dazzle, to force obedience, to destroy...

and we humans have learned much from that power -

a power that is external and coercive

God's power, in contrast, is internal and non-coercive...

which - on the surface - may seem at times like weakness

but - upon deeper reflection - we must conclude that true power...

turns over the possibility of making the choice -

into the hands of the beloved

true power...

has a light touch

III) What We Want

which is what we find when we give thought to what it is...

that we want...

cf. - Soren Kierkegaard wrote about God's light touch:

"Omnipotence which can lay its hand so heavily upon the world
can also make its touch so light that the
creature receives independence."

but sometimes, we might wish that God used a heavier touch.

because we have too much freedom, too many temptations to disbelieve.

At times we may want God to overwhelm us, to overcome

all doubts with certainty...

to give final proofs of his existence... and his concern.

to reach down and take an active role in human affairs -

Putin...?

gone, and peace reigns in Ukraine.

the conflict in the mideast...?

why not peace and brotherhood among all God's children...?

and while we're at it -

why not reach down and take a more active role in our personal lives -

quick and spectacular answers to prayer...

healing for all diseases, and - why not start with

seasonal allergies...?

if I had the chance to step off the Empire State Building and have God send

his angels to lower me gently to the street...

well... would that not compel people to believe?

but - it seems -

God resists those temptations now

as Jesus resisted them on earth,

settling instead for a slower, gentler way.

cf. - in this, we see a pattern of restraint...

a pattern wherein God pretty much leaves it up to us -

it is ours to decide...

ours to respond...

ours to own - in that God has gifted us with the

wonderful blessing of "what to do with our lives"

cf. - per George McDonald:

"Instead of crushing the power of evil by divine force; instead of

compelling justice and destroying the wicked; instead of making peace

on earth by the rule of a perfect prince; instead of gathering the children

of Jerusalem under His wings whether they would or not,

and saving them from the horrors that anguished His prophetic soul—

He let evil work its will while it lived; He contented Himself with the

slow un-encouraging ways of help essential;

making men good; casting out, not merely controlling Satan....

To love righteousness is to make it grow, not to avenge it... .

He resisted every impulse to work more rapidly for a lower good."

why work this way...?

why does God content himself with the slow, unencouraging way of

making righteousness grow rather than avenging it?

- That's how love is...

cf. - this quality of restraint in Jesus may come across as surprising...

but again - that's how love is...

it does not force it's way, but rather -

freely waits

i.e. - it may sound trite, but there is a deep truth in the simple proverb:

"If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it's yours.

If not, it was never meant to be."

Jesus triumphed over these temptations to see things otherwise, and -

we are blessed ever since