

“The wilderness of the soul”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I am about to say something controversial. I have thought long and hard about the ramifications. Some of you aren't going to like it, but it needs to be said. I am going to talk... about the new Star Wars movie. (What did you think I was going to talk about? I know what you thought I was going to talk about.)

Whether you love or hate the newest addition to the Star Wars saga, there's a powerful scene toward the end of the film, where the bad guy is trying to tempt Rey into joining the Dark Side. Outside, the forces of the Republic Resistance are dying. Ships are falling from the sky. All the people she loves, the only people in all the universe who've ever meant anything to her—they're out there, dying. The bad guy says that every one of them could live. All she has to do is give in and save them with the power of the Dark Side.

It sounds a lot like Jesus' temptation.

Today, when we meet Jesus in the desert, John the Baptist has been telling everyone how Jesus will save the world—no pressure! He doesn't have a single disciple yet. He knows the hard road ahead, the suffering, the death. He knows that it will be two thousand years later, and we still won't get it, we'll still be rejecting him. And then along comes the tempter. He says, you could skip all that; I could give you all the kingdoms of the world; everyone would hear your message; you don't need to suffer; all you have to do, to have everything you ever wanted, to save every soul on this miserable planet, is serve me.

The tempter isn't just offering power and riches; he's offering Jesus a way to achieve his mission, to save the people he loves. In the very next verse, John—the one person right now in all the world who believes in him—is arrested. Jesus could save him. If Jesus were king, there'd be no Herod, and thus no one to execute John.

It's a tempting offer—on the surface, a heck of a lot better than God's offer: serve me, and you'll die on a cross. (Gee, thanks!)

The drama of these temptations, Jesus' and Rey's, might feel un-relatable: when was the last time you had a chance to save the world? I want to suggest, however, that every day, in every decision we make, we're right there, in the desert, standing next to Jesus. It happens every time we have a choice between what is right and what is convenient. It happens in all the little moral compromises we make everyday, often with the best of intentions: we think these compromises are the only way to get what we want or need, sometimes even the only way to save what we care about.

It can be at the market, in the food or clothing we purchase. It happens on the street, when we pass by someone in need. It happens in our relationships, every time we lie because we think the truth would be too hurtful. It happens at work, in the choices we make to rise in our career.

This logic has run like a scar through human history, from the very beginning, in the garden: only by sacrificing our principles can we safeguard what's important to us. It's there, beneath many wars (because violence is the only way to protect us); beneath the church's cover-up of abuse (because if the truth got out, people would stop believing); beneath the feminist movement's sacrifice of women of color (because we won't get the votes if we make this about race); beneath the rejection of immigrants (because we need to protect what we have for ourselves). Always a justification, always a reason, which on the surface seems wise, but in truth is an acceptance of the tempter's offer: just give me your soul, and I'll give you the world.

Nowhere is this clearer than in politics today. (What? You thought I was going to talk about politics before; you felt this huge relief that I didn't; and then just when I had you feeling comfortable, bam! How's that for some sleight of hand? I'm like a magician!)

Don't worry, I'm going to criticize everybody, so it's not just liberals or conservatives, it's everybody who hates me. I told Jenna a few days ago: some folks ain't going to like this sermon. Her response: I feel like you say that about a lot of your sermons.

Now you know that we don't advocate partisan politics here; our allegiance is to Christ alone. But that's why I've got to talk about politics today, because we are serving the wrong lord, and it's at those times that Samuel's got to have a talk with King David.

Politics should, and can, serve God, in that they should be about the rigorous debate of ideas, as we work together in service of the common good, of principles which we hold true. But in today's political milieu, it seems that we no longer serve principles; we serve parties and leaders, who offer us the world. Truth and fact have been replaced with opinion, while the common good is supplanted by self-serving, cynical, destructive tactics.

Democrats do it. They talked of racial and economic justice, hailing Bill Clinton, as he demolished poor and black communities in the 90s, "presided over the largest increase in federal and state prison inmates," supported a crime bill that further institutionalized racism, and obliterated welfare, effectively doubling poverty.¹ They justified these tactics because they got them elected. The idea was that, once in power, they'd be able to use it for good, but instead the power supplanted the good, and now once again Democratic candidates debate electability over policy. (Remember: it was Barack Obama who deported more immigrants than any other president in US history.)

Republicans do it. Many Christians saw in Donald Trump all that dangles before Jesus in that wilderness: a chance to recover their lost cultural power, a chance to secure Supreme Court Justices, to improve the economy, to protect the lives of the unborn. But they knew that this man was no Christian. He has said that he has never asked Christ for forgiveness, because he doesn't need it. He boasts of assaulting women and has turned back decades of women's rights,

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The Nation*, Feb. 10, 2016.

including making domestic violence victims more vulnerable. He mocks people with disabilities. He kindles the flame of white supremacy and xenophobia. He has cut vital services to the poor and to the protection of God's creation. He separates families, cages children, a number of whom have died in custody. And just a month ago, at the National Prayer Breakfast, he mocked and rejected the words of Jesus Christ, the command to love your enemy, saying he prefers an eye for an eye. But Christians look the other way, because they want power.

It's been like that since the beginning of the church, from Peter (and his denial of Jesus) to Paul (and his endorsement of slavery and patriarchy) to Constantine (and his nationalization of the church). Conservative Christians do it; liberal Christians do it; we do it; I do it.

There is only One who never did: Jesus. He refuses every temptation. He insists that he must serve God alone. He asks, "What profit a man if he gain the whole world but loses his soul?" (Matt. 16:26)

This Lent we are doing a sermon series on rebirth. Today, Jesus invites us to place this core part of our humanity on that cross and let it die, so that from its ashes may be reborn the soul—too precious to barter, belonging only to God. We are able to do this, because he did it, does it still, not just for his soul, but all souls.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1938 preached a sermon to young men and women who had just been confirmed as Christ's disciples. He said, "You have only one master now... Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world. Belief means decision."

Bonhoeffer preached those words in 1938 Nazi Germany. He knew what they meant. In fact, Bonhoeffer would later die for them, just as Jesus did.

Bonhoeffer knew, as we know, that it's impossible to live sinless and pure in this world; sometimes all we've got is the lesser of two evils. That's the whole point of universal sin, and we can be thankful for forgiveness. But Bonhoeffer also knew that, if we are serious about Christ, then at some point, we have to draw a line in the sand. In this desert there can be only one God.

There must be actions, words, policies that are off limits because they violate the will of God. Today, you received vials of sand, and I want you to carry them with you this Lent, and every time you feel it in your pocket, know that you stand on the sands where Jesus stood—and in those sands, he offers you your soul back; he makes the choice you could not; and he gives you the power to come home.

Maybe you'll hear this song by Daniel Deitrich: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GT-LfLpzzo&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3Z4XMepFJ2xORduwidLV_tpoGIJp-VisiiEJ6DvIzDVzaBpQXyhIViXI.

Come home. **Amen.**