

Don't Let the Word of Death Fool You!

Based on Matthew 4:1-11

March 13, 2011

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I share this extra reading of the Word About Life because I think it provides an exciting framework for our life together as a congregation, especially our life together over the next six weeks as we share Journey of the Spirit and the weekend event of Profound Journey Dialog.

The story begins with the Spirit tugging at Jesus and pulling him into a journey and into the wilderness. The Spirit of Life and Love called Jesus and said, "Take time out to face who you are and what is your calling! Weigh, judge, and decide what you will do with your life. Affirm how you will relate to the ultimate and mysterious reality which is life. Face up to the alternatives!"

The Spirit that called and led Jesus is the same Spirit that calls and leads us.

It is this story that gives rise to the proverb, "Even the Devil can quote scripture". It reminds us of the way that the Word About Life can be used to further the agendas of empire, those who hoard power, and those who would do not affirm life.

Reinhold Niebuhr – soft imperialism and a hard imperialism

Justice is not served when power is hoarded and centralized

The Word About Life can be used as a Word of Death and the Word of Death can be disguised as a Word About Life.

I want to provide one more defining point before we look closer at the story. The Devil is not intended to be a real entity that confronts Jesus. ***The Devil is a representation of the voice of the cynical and conventional wisdom of the world. The Devil is the voice of Empire.***

Our Spirit Journeys and our Spirit dialogs are important because they push the limits of our current understandings about ourselves and about life. This story pushes us. It is the behavior of an Emperor to dole out bread which looks like an act of charity but is really an act of control

The first temptation is to use Jesus' own hunger against him. The appeal is to an ancient story of blessing when bread came from heaven. The temptation is to do it again. However, to turn stones into bread is to go the way of the Roman Empire. Rulers would offer "bread and circuses" as a way to appease the masses so as to hoard power for themselves. The Empires of this world figure out a way to share just enough to keep in control. Jesus rejects the *Word of Death* disguised as a *Word About Life* and proclaims a greater bread that sustains a greater life.

The first temptation acknowledges that Jesus has power and shows Jesus as choosing not to use his power. The second temptation raises the stakes. The Word of Death disguised as the Word About Life again presents itself. Basically the Devil says, "*You are the People of God and you have been promised,*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
⁸ You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*⁹ If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

The question is this, Jesus! If you have such power then what good is it if you do not use it?

The temptation is to use power, especially in the face of such a mocking challenge. However, to use such power as defined by the Devil is to go the way of the Roman Empire. Herod's Temple is built on a gigantic scale, towering on its eastern side over a deep gorge. I invite you to imagine Jesus gazing into the gorge as the Devil's taunts ring in his ears. How much confidence does Jesus have in himself? Has his Spirit Journey brought him into such acceptance of himself, his power, his limitations, and clarity about his options that he fully understands the temptation and can resist it?

Jesus does not step into his own authority but rather anchors his own authority within the larger context of the power of Life itself; "you must not put your God to the test". The temptation is to exercise power the way Empire uses power. Jesus' response is that the exercise of power is right when it is not forced by a Word of Death disguised as a Word About Life.

The first temptation was,

- Use your power the way Empire uses power

The second temptation was

- If you have any power, then what good is it if you don't use it as Empire would use it?

The third temptation is,

- All power shall be consolidated under your authority if you use it the way Empire uses power

The three responses of Jesus keep him from falling into Reality as the Devil would define it. Jesus instead re-frames the argument and restrains himself from exercising his power on death's terms. In a way, Jesus accomplishes nothing, but as far as the purposes of the Spirit Journey and Dialog, Jesus meets his goals. **In his three responses, Jesus, shows clarity about who he is, what he believes life is really like, how to live a meaningful life given this reality, and what his vocation is.**

Please note that despite Jesus' responses and no "come back" by the Devil, the Devil remains unconvinced and unimpressed. The agenda of hoarding power and diminishing people's lives will continue. Empire will always try to wrap its Word of Death with the Word About Life and in doing so claim some moral authority.

My own Spirit Journeys have lead me to understand

- Nations have interests, not virtues.
- God transcends gender and race.
- Homosexuality is not a sin but part of the gift and diversity of human sexuality.
- I am united with all human beings first and a citizen of a nation second.

Do we see through the disguises of our political rhetoric and all the fear mongering? My own Spirit Journeys have lead me to understand I am united with all human beings first and a citizen of a nation second. I believe I have more in common with the suffering people of Japan than the Arizona state senator on the Committee for Border Security, Federalism, and State Sovereignty.

I hear the voice of Empire every time I hear there is no more money for our children, especially our poorest children. The essay for today is from Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund.

A list of imperatives

Her Fifth Imperative: monitor and conduct regular national audits of how private sector and governmental policies impact on children and engage in strong, systematic advocacy to meet child needs first.

Children don't vote but adults who do must stand up and vote for them. While personal responsibility, moral example, and private charity are crucial, so are jobs, decent wages, child care, health care, clean air, water, and public safety that government must ensure, in collaboration with employers. All the soup kitchens and homeless shelters in the world cannot substitute for community and economic development which provide jobs with decent wages, and dignity. But we will not achieve adequate child and family investments in the U.S. without a massive, moral movement to redirect the leadership and budget priorities of our nation.

Do you feel the tug of the Spirit to resist the Empire's Word of Death disguised as the Word About Life? Join the Spirit Journeys in our midst.