

## **Who is Your Power For?**

Rev. John Allen

Immediately, following the great highpoint of his baptism, when the heavens opens and the spirit sang like a dove, “you are my beloved.”

Immediately, Jesus was driven by that same spirit out into the wilderness.

And it was in that wild, barren place, alone and away from the crowds, that Jesus was tempted.

Three temptations.

First, Jesus’ body aching with hunger during the depths of this 40 day long fast hears the whisper “take these stones, and make them bread, you know you could...”

Second, Jesus preparing himself for a life of leadership in service to others hears the whispers, “you know if you turn your back on God, all that charisma and power could make you a pretty good king...”

Finally, nearing the end of his time in the desert Christ finds himself on a high pinnacle and hears the whisper, “throw yourself down, you know God won’t let you come to harm...”

Three temptations.

They have some differences, but at their core they are all pretty much the same.

Jesus is tempted to take his power and turn it away from the service of others, and toward the service of himself and his own glory.

Instead of following through on his mission to feed the world, not just with bread but with the nourishing love of God, Christ is tempted to make some bread for his hungry self.

Instead of following through on his life which he knows will lead to suffering and death at the hands of the powerful, Christ is tempted to become one of those powerful people himself.

And finally, in the face of the immensity of his power and glory, Christ is tempted toward a sort of nihilism, where his divinity is reduced to a party trick, I can throw myself off the roof and I won't get hurt.

These specific temptations are particular to Jesus, but at their heart, they express the temptation that every human being who has ever held an ounce of power as felt.

I know I should use this power for others, but I could use it for myself.

Think about just how tempting it must have been. Jesus who had to know that the road he had been called to would lead him to the cross. He spoke so frequently and so openly about the fact that the

knew that, the road he was on led to confrontation with the powers of the world, and suffering, and death.

But here is the out, the devil whispers, forget about God, worship me, and you don't have to die like that, you can be the ruler of all this, all you can see.

And that temptation did not end after 40 days in the desert.

Everywhere Jesus goes he is overwhelmed by crowds of people who see him alone as their greatest hope.

The crowds press in on him so much that he starts preaching from boats to avoid being trampled.

I cannot doubt that he was tempted more than once to think that this was all about him, and how great he was.

And how about Palm Sunday, the people of Jerusalem throw an impromptu parade for Jesus.

How tempting must he have been to call that crowd to his defense when he was arrested, and being tried. Anyone of them would have exchanged their palm branch for a sword and answered his call if he issued it.

That crowd, those people, would have followed him anywhere, they would have done anything for him. And yet all he had to do was follow him along a long road, from Galilee down to Jerusalem, and all he asked them to do was sit at the bottom of a hill and watch him rather die than repay violence with violence.

There is this moment in the story of Jesus that comes very near to that day when he laid down his life for the people he loved. This is in Matthew chapter 16.

Jesus asks his disciples: “who do people say that I am?” And they answer, some say you are Elijah, some say you are John the Baptist, others think you are a prophet.”

Then he asks them, “And who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers, “You are the messiah.”

Jesus praises him for his answer and then goes on to explain to them that being the messiah means he will be handed over to suffering and death. He tells them that the road they are on leads not to glory, but to humiliation.

And Peter won't listen to it. He says: “God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you!”

Jesus' response has always struck me as harsh, he shouts at perhaps his closest friend, “Get behind me Satan!”

It always struck me as an overreaction to Peter's mixture of simple misunderstanding, and understandable concern for his teacher and friend.

But now I realize that it is not Peter that Jesus is reacting to.

In Peter's simple suggestion that perhaps Jesus could avoid his fate, Jesus hears the familiar voice of the tempter, the same one who whispered to him in the Galilean desert years ago.

Remember how our reading today ended: "then the devil left him until an opportune time."

And by the force of Jesus' response, I get the sense that that familiar voice of temptation had been living with him through it all.

Jesus lived with this temptation and it followed him to the end. The temptation to take the gifts that were given to him for the sake of serving humanity, and turn them into occasions to make himself more glorious and powerful in the eyes of the world.

And if Jesus faced this temptation, how much more do we?

The pages of history books, and our world today, are replete with dramatic and public examples of powerful people who came to see their power as an opportunity for personal gain.

The public unveiling and reckoning of the #meToo movement is a recent glaring example of how often power and influence distorts people, and how many use power and influence primarily as a tool to take advantage of and abuse others.

And anger is welling up across our political spectrum in the face of the unshakable feeling that for too long, those who have held position of public trust have seen their power as something to be hoarded for personal benefit, rather than used for the benefit of the nation.

But you don't have to have that much power to abuse it. Everyone of us has areas in our lives of influence. In or families, or at work, or in community organizations.

And as citizens of one of the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world, even our simple everyday choices have an outsized impact on the lives of people around the world.

Who is your power for?

It is a universal temptation to turn every ounce of power and influence we can muster back toward ourselves.

How does Jesus resist the temptation? He is very clear about who he is and what he values. And he has unshakable confidence in God.

Confidence in God is the greatest defense against temptation.

Because those opportune times come amidst tremendous anxiety.

Like when Jesus was standing face to face with the price he knew he would pay for living his life with conscience and love.

How often do we hedge our generosity, because we are fearful of scarcity?

How often does our courage falter because we are tempted to protect what we have?

How often do we fail to offer love, because we are reluctant to expose our own vulnerable hearts?

How often are we tempted away from doing the right thing, because we are offered a path of much less resistance?

No one of us is going to get this perfectly right. All of us will fall to our temptations hundreds of times again before we take our last breath.

And our worthiness does not depend on achieving any sort of perfection.

Yet, I do believe that we are called to resist the temptations, to live with a little more courage and hope, and to hold our power as something entrusted to us for the sake of others.

And I believe that in order to do that, we need to remember that our fate and our future is in God's hands, and no amount of anxiety today could inoculate us against the insecurity of tomorrow.

Instead, trust God. And learn to see the power you have as something entrusted to you for the sake of others. Not to be held, but used to help bring about the world God dreams of.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, and he may well have been writing to us as well:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Therefore, my beloved, work out your salvation; for it is the same God who is at work in you.”