

### “Called to Become Irrelevant?”

Each year, the readings for the First Sunday in Lent are from one of the synoptic gospels about Jesus’ forty-day sojourn and fast in the wilderness. As we are starting our Lenten disciplines, it is good to remind ourselves what inspired this practice. However, if you are like me and have already failed at least once in your Lenten practice, it may be discouraging to hear about Jesus’ perfect fast and resistance to Satan.

Satan starts with a very human temptation. Jesus has fasted for forty days, he is hungry. The devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus counters with words from Deuteronomy, saying one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

Satan then tempts Jesus with power, telling him that he can be the king of the world if he just worships the Devil. Jesus answers, quoting Deuteronomy again, saying, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”<sup>2</sup>

Satan is cunning. The third time, he uses words from scripture to tempt Jesus. He takes Jesus to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem and says, quoting Psalm 91:

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus answers scripture with scripture, noting that in Deuteronomy, we are told, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”<sup>4</sup>

What may not be obvious about these temptations is the devil’s attempt to play on Jesus’ ego. Satan is betting that Jesus’ alone time in the desert may leave him vulnerable. If we read between the lines, the devil is saying, “We know you have special powers. Show them off by turning rocks into food.” And “Let’s show everyone how powerful you are by making you king of the world.” And “You are God’s Son you can leap from a tall building, and God will protect you.” These are gifts no one else has. Show people, and they will follow you.

We believe Jesus was fully human. These are very human temptations. If people find out about any one of these miracles, Jesus becomes famous beyond all expectation. He becomes important.

Even the most humble people like being recognized for something special they have to offer. At a minimum, we seem to brighten up when we are recognized and separated from the masses. All of us may not have the need to be the king of the world, but the desire for fifteen minutes or fifteen seconds of fame drives us to post something that we hope goes viral on Facebook or YouTube or TikTok. Some people do or say something outrageous just to see if they can get attention. Try hard enough,

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 8:2-3 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13 perhaps based on a translation of the Septuagint LXX a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 91:11-12 NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16 NRSV

and they might become an influencer. Besides fame or infamy, they might make some money out of it. Jesus doesn't fall for it.

One of the most important and life-changing books I have ever read is *In the Name of Jesus* by Henri Nouwen. I read it at a time when I was trying to sort out my reasons for doing certain things. In particular, I had been working with Martha's Table in DC, distributing food to the poor and homeless, for five years. I knew the work was important, but it did not feel fulfilling. I could not figure out why I felt so dispirited by what should be a life-giving act.

The patrons were often rude and demanding. The volunteers were often just going through the motions, probably just to get brownie points from their employer. Other volunteers thought our work would be like the feeding of the five thousand in the Wilderness. But not everyone was politely sitting on the grass and breaking bread like it was a holy picnic.

When I read Nouwen's book, a hard truth became obvious. I was looking for volunteer work to validate me. I wanted to be appreciated by the people I served and by the other volunteers. Nouwen posited an important if uncomfortable thought. We who minister to others need to get out of the way so that the Holy Spirit can move through us. Instead of needing to feel relevant, we must learn to become irrelevant.

No one wants to be irrelevant. That smacks of being disposable, unneeded, and unloved. Someone who is irrelevant may as well not exist. To be irrelevant is to be immaterial, extraneous, unconnected, inapt, beside the point, or superfluous. If I am irrelevant, I am nothing.

Nouwen is not saying we need to be nothing. He is saying that when we are in ministry, we need to stop seeking validation. We must move our needs to the side so that the Spirit can work through us to accomplish God's goals. We are not here for self-aggrandizement. We are here to be conduits for the work of God. When we do God's work, and we let our need for importance get in the way, we stifle the goodness that is possible. I think that is why theologians say that no matter how great the potential good is, if we do it without God, it will never reach its potential.

With my volunteer work, I wanted those I served to see I was a good guy and thank me for my service. I wanted the other volunteers to respect me for my level of experience and how I shepherded them and kept them safe. I needed to be relevant. When I put my needs aside, I learned more about what was really needed. The clients needed to feel important and recognized as individuals with unique desires and needs. The volunteers wanted to be recognized by the experienced leader for the work they were doing. By letting the Spirit work through me, I more effectively and lovingly served the clients and volunteers. Things went more smoothly. People were happier. And I felt better about the work I was doing.

We may never be tempted like Jesus because we do not have his miraculous powers. When we realize that the undercurrent to all the satanic tests is our ever-present need to feel relevant, important, special, unique, or someone's favorite, we cannot ignore that we are tempted just as Jesus was.

Becoming irrelevant may be horrible, unsavory, and even un-American, but it is the key to enabling us to do the work we were called to do by God. Without that transformation, we will be left wondering why nothing ever quite feels right, and

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despite our best efforts we feel unfulfilled. It is only with God that the peace we seek can be found.