

“Word Up”

Each year as we begin Lent we get one of the Gospel versions of Jesus in the wilderness. I suppose it is to set an example for us as we enter our forty-day journey through the wilderness of Lent. I am not sure that being reminded that Jesus accomplished his time in the Wilderness perfectly, is helpful considering that by now many of us have already broken our Lenten fast or discipline. If that is the case the passage about Jesus resisting the Devil may feel like having salt rubbed in a fresh wound.

How many have read C. S. Lewis’s book *The Screwtape Letters*? If you have not read it I heartily recommend it to you. It is fun, pithy, funny, and convicting all in one fell swoop. In this book Wormwood is a trainee of the Devil. He is interning under the tutelage of his uncle Screwtape who is writing him letters of advice and admonition. Wormwood is working on “the patient” to seduce him subtly into forfeiting his soul through little seemingly minor temptations that slowly draw him away from good and from God. It is very clever.

Unlike Jesus who deals with the devil in a face to face confrontation, Screwtape counsels Wormwood to go after the patient, which could be you or me, in almost imperceptible ways. These are ways that make sense to the patient and, to his mind, do not seem to be drawing him away from his better angels. The more subtle and reasonable the temptation that Wormwood provides the easier it is for the patient to rationalize his acceptance of it. And so the story goes as Screwtape attempts to train the fumbling Wormwood to be adept at drawing the patient away from God.

The devil works in devilish ways in both scenarios. Screwtape is indirect while the Satan of Luke is transparently obvious in his temptations. I do not know which is more difficult to resist. The indirect ways are subtle and tempting. We might fall into the trap without knowing it. We also might avoid the trap because it is a bit too subtle. That happens to Wormwood several times.

Jesus temptations are all very human. Having fasted forty days he is hungry. The devil knows Jesus has special powers and tempts him to turn stones into bread. Jesus counters with Deuteronomy saying one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.¹

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.”²

The devil being cunning takes the hint and tempts Jesus with scripture. He takes Jesus to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, a place as high as any church steeple and tempts him to jump quoting Psalm 91

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

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

¹ Deuteronomy 8:2-3 NRSV

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

³ Psalm 91:11-12 NRSV

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

Whether subtle or blatant the devil tempts us in myriad ways. If the devil can even quote scripture we could be in a hopeless bind. But turn back to the reading from Romans. St. Paul writes quoting Deuteronomy “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” I expect that we all read that passage and we think that “word” is with a small “w” and it refers to scripture. Even if Paul is quoting Deuteronomy he may have been thinking of Jesus as St. John did. That is that the word has the capital “W” which means Christ as the Word of God. That certainly changes how we respond to what he writes and even moreso to the temptations of the Satan.

For then Satan cannot fool us by citing scripture nor can Satan’s subtle temptations befuddle us. If we follow Jesus’ actions in regard to the temptations of the world we have an example that cannot be subverted by humans or devils.

If we are tempted to overindulge ourselves we can see that while Jesus clearly enjoyed table fellowship he did not gorge himself on food or get drunk on wine. If we are tempted to condemn another person we know that Jesus reminds us that we all bear sins worth condemnation and should deal with our failings before we condemn another. If we are tempted to harm another we know that Jesus despite his Divine status did not use that status to harm another so that he might forego the cross. We could go on and on for the capital “W” Word does not fail us.

Verna Dozier writes in her little book *The Dream of God*,⁵ that when the Church went from following Jesus to worshiping Jesus it started to lose its way. Jesus did not come into the world to create a new religion, indeed he remained a Jew throughout his life. However, he did come to set for us an example that is “The way, the truth and the life.” If we in truth can follow his way of being we will find a true and rich life.

When we realize that God’s word in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is near us and abides with us on our lips and in our hearts we have the strength we need to live the life that we are called to. If we deny that word we are lost. If we deny that the tempter exists and is working his way into our hearts to create a division between us and Jesus by our denial, we have given Satan a way in. I

The old saying “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” might work in human power struggles, but when it comes down to living a rich life of peace we need to keep our best friend, Jesus of Nazareth, as close as possible. He is the one who will guide us “down right pathways for his Name’s sake.”⁶ The report of Jesus’ time in the Wilderness can inspire us even when we have already stumbled on our journey. Jesus as God’s Word can also be relied upon to help us in time of temptation and wandering. His example and his companionship will help us back onto the right path even when we falter, as long as we keep the word on our lips and in our hearts we remain near to the one who loves us forever.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:16 NRSV

⁵ Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God* [New York, Church Publishing, 2006]

⁶ Psalm 23:3 The Book of Common Prayer, p 613.