

Christus Victor, Part 5: Jesus's Temptation
By Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Countryside Community Church
March 26, 2017

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13, 16-21; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15

As we found last week, when Jesus arose from the waters of baptism and was sitting in meditation by Jordan's shore, he experienced a fundamental shift in consciousness – an opening of the eyes, a widening of the heart, an explosive expansion of soul that scholars and theologians for centuries have described as a “mystical experience”. Jesus saw the world for what it really is: glorious. *Filled* with beauty and splendor. Filled, indeed, with God's very *presence*.

Instead of experiencing this vision for mere moments, like many people do who have had similar experiences, Jesus's internal “eye” seems to have remained open long enough to make an indelible stamp upon him. Jesus saw clearly that God was a part of everything and everything was a part of God – from the river and rocks, to the bushes and trees beside the river, to the people who sat in their shade – all was full of God. All was therefore radiant with life and love and beauty, and everything was connected to everything else in one seamless fabric of Being. Even human pain and sorrow, sin and rebellion, was part of this intimate web of relationship with God, joined in such a way that all sin and alienation was ultimately bound up in salvation and the Beloved Community.

The implications of what Jesus discovered on Jordan's shore were staggering. God's Kingdom wasn't on its way, as the Jewish people had supposed for centuries. It was *already here* – and probably had *always* been here. The Messiah, therefore, would not be one who would usher in a *future* Realm, but would open people's awareness to the presence of a Realm that was here already and invite them to become its citizens.

There on the shores of the Jordan, Jesus experienced a deep form of knowing that cannot be taught or logically ascertained, but can only come from direct experience. And this knowing revealed that Jesus was the One who would proclaim this very unexpected message to his people.

The message that Jesus was given to bear is rather hard to believe, isn't it? When we see the chaos and calamity that takes place on a daily basis in this realm, when we experience pain and suffering – and witness the pain and suffering of others – it is quite hard to affirm that this realm is the Kingdom of Heaven. Surely if this world is the Kingdom of Heaven and God is its ruler, then it would seem that something has gone off the skids.

Likely, until Jesus's experience on the Jordan River, Jesus shared his people's view that God's Kingdom was yet to come. Jesus's experience of God's deep presence in the world, and therefore the overwhelming goodness and perfection within it, so fundamentally challenged his notion of Reality that he immediately sequestered himself in the wilderness for forty days to try to make sense of it – and to confirm whether the vision was from God or a product of his imagination, and if from God, to discern the implications. This is where we left off last week.

This week, we join Jesus in the wilderness where he has been fasting for forty days. There are several possible reasons why Jesus would fast in the wilderness. First, you can spend a lot more time praying if you don't have to hunt around for food and prepare it. Second, fasting is a time-honored way used by mystics of all faiths to alter human consciousness. Since Jesus's experience at the Jordan opened his eyes to an invisible dimension to the world, he is likely trying to keep his "inner eye" open as much as he can. Third, Jesus is likely posing a challenge to the vision he has seen. Namely, he is wondering how this realm can in any way be called Heaven when there is so much suffering in the world. So Jesus is putting himself in a position of many of those whose suffering would make Heaven seem to be a most distant reality: those who hunger.

Certainly, Jesus saw that you could be poor and find Heaven all around you in the very same way he experienced it, if you have "eyes to see" and "ears to hear". In fact, Jesus believed that the poor can see Heaven a lot easier than the rich. But if you are starving, can you really experience this realm as Heaven, even a lower region of it? When your whole body is aching from malnutrition and your mind has grown numb, it is all but impossible to experience even the smallest of glories that we would associate with the heavenly realm. So Jesus intentionally starves himself in order to challenge his own heavenly experience.

What he finds is that when you are starving, you do not experience this world as Heaven. You experience it as Hell. This awareness is signaled in our story by the fact that after forty days of starvation Satan comes. Satan in Hebrew means "Accuser" or "Adversary".

Satan says in essence, "You see, Jesus? Heaven is not here as you thought. You experienced a false vision – a period of temporary insanity brought on by your religious fervor – at the Jordan River. If you are God's Son, the Messiah, you must solve the hunger issue before the Kingdom of Heaven can be found on earth."

In the gospels, we read Jesus's response to the Adversary as if Jesus immediately knew exactly what to say, "Man shall not live on bread alone." This assumption that such an answer came readily to Jesus is a big mistake. It doesn't do justice to the incredibly difficult challenge Satan has set before him – that Jesus can feel not only in his heart and soul, but in his very body. Someone who is starving is definitely not "living the dream" in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Insisting that they are is about the most pig-headed, uncompassionate, and flat-out wrong thing you can do.

Of course, Satan has a suggestion: “Turn these rocks into bread. Devote your life to feeding the hungry, and when they are all fed, then we can have a conversation about how this realm is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

For awhile, I assume Jesus takes this suggestion seriously – imagines himself devoting his life to feeding the hungry. Yet at some point, Jesus realizes that he can devote his whole life to feeding the hungry of the world and never do more than, in essence, put a Band-Aid on the problem. If you are to solve the problem of hunger, you must change the whole system that creates hunger to begin with. You have to control the political and economic system.

So Jesus answers Satan, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone,’” meaning, “Hunger is just the end product of a much larger problem.”

And Satan responds, “I’m right there with you, Jesus. If you’re going to solve the problem of hunger you’ll need to control the government. Lucky for you, I just happen to hold the keys to all the world’s kingdoms. If you’ll just bow down and worship me, I’ll be happy to place my keys in your hands.”

Again, we make a big mistake if we assume Jesus simply rattled off his response, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only God.” After all, what person who really cares about human suffering would fail to consider the opportunity to change the system that creates so much suffering in the first place?

Yet, at some point, Jesus realizes that, at its root, hunger is not a political or economic issue. It is a spiritual issue. You cannot actually change human systems without changing human hearts first. Hunger is the product of spiritual evils such as warfare and corruption, greed and envy, and a lack of compassion by those who could help but choose not to get involved. When Jesus responds, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only God,” he is signaling that being in control of all the governments of the world will not put an end to unnecessary suffering. Hearts must change before systems do.

In response, Satan says, effectively, “I see that you are truly discerning, Jesus. Hearts must change! But in order to change people’s hearts, they will need to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are the Messiah. You must make this absolutely clear, without any wiggle-room for doubt. Otherwise, not enough people will follow you to make a difference.”

Satan proposes that Jesus devote himself to performing miracles that would make it perfectly clear that Jesus was God’s chosen One. “Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and let the angels catch you,” Satan says, “That’ll be a good start!”

I believe this third temptation was the easiest one for Jesus to overcome but has been the hardest one for the Christian Church to grapple with. The temptation is to replace faith with certainty. If Jesus can just perform enough miracles, no one will *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah ... they'll *know* he's the Messiah. *Everyone* will know. *Everyone* therefore will set their hearts on Jesus, taking to heart everything Jesus says about corruption and warfare, greed and envy, and the lack of compassion that supports systems that create poverty and hunger. In other words, once everyone affirms that Jesus is the Messiah, then the Realm of God can finally be established on earth.

Do you see the subtle trick that Satan is playing here? The vision that sent Jesus straight into the wilderness to begin with was overwhelmingly about the presence of a heavenly realm that is *here already*, not one that is coming in the future. But now, Satan has shifted the focus "back to the future," so to speak, and done so by wrapping his temptation up in religious clothing.

Satan is saying, in essence: "Heaven is not now, but later, *after* pain and suffering is removed from the earth ... which won't happen until *after* you change the political and economic systems of the world ... which won't happen until *after* you change everyone's hearts ... which won't happen until *after* all people know that you are God's Messiah. So this whole thing is really all about you, Jesus. Heaven will not come to Earth until all people believe in you as their Lord and Savior."

Happily, Jesus knew something that his Church has forgotten time after time after time. The Christian Church has, too often, made its whole focus about belief in Jesus. Belief in Jesus is, of course, a good and right thing. But since not everyone believes in Jesus (even many so-called "believers"), the Church has tended to miss Jesus's message about heaven-in-the-now, instead proclaiming that Jesus will one day return to earth in some sort of glorious "second coming" that makes it perfectly clear to everyone who Jesus is so that we can finally get started on this Heaven project ...

In contrast to his Church, Jesus knew that his purpose was not to proclaim *himself*, but to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven – to proclaim Heaven as a present reality, not one that will only exist once everyone knows who Jesus is. "Heaven is already here," Jesus says. "Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news."

Until we do change our whole way of thinking (which is what repentance means), we live not in Heaven but in Hell. For what is Hell, anyway? Here's my definition: *Hell is living in Heaven without ever realizing where you are, or serving the ruler of Heaven.*

If the presence of pain and suffering in this world bothers you – as it very well should – consider what would happen if those who live in Heaven did, in fact,

realize where they are and therefore served the God to whom they owe their allegiance? How long would suffering exist on the face of the earth?

If the presence of Heaven still eludes you, then Jesus invites you to look not at him but at the world he sought to reveal to you through his life and ministry, and through his death and resurrection. Look at Jesus finding citizens of heaven among the outcast and the denigrated, the poor and the persecuted. Look at how Jesus teaches us to treat others: by loving our enemy, doing good to those who hate us, by refraining from condemnation of others, and by giving to those who have need – because these are all Heaven’s citizens too. “Whatsoever you do to the least of these who are members of my family you do unto me.” (Matthew 25:40) And when you have failed to do these very things, look at how Jesus instructs you, as a citizen Heaven, to find forgiveness for your sins: by forgiving others their sins.