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Becoming other Christs

Roger Karban | Feb. 16, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

At the end of his life, Moses delivers some final words to the Israelites, who are finally about to enter the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 26:4-10 concerns the proper way to offer the first fruits of their future harvests. Setting their offering before Yahweh?s altar, they?re to say, ?My father [Jacob] was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong and numerous.?

First Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 26:4-10
Psalm 91
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13

But then note a key shift from their ancestors to them. ?When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to Yahweh, the God of our ancestors, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt.? What had once happened to others is now happening to them. Yahweh is leading them through the sea to freedom. They aren?t hearing past history; they?re actually reflecting on what?s taking place in the present, in their own lives.

That?s why we have Scripture. Consider the late Jesuit Old Testament scholar Dennis McCarthy?s classic definition of canonicity: We have these specific writings in our Scriptures ?because they?ve helped the most people over the longest period of time to understand their faith.? Scripture doesn?t give us our faith. Scripture makes sense only after we?ve already acquired faith in Yahweh, or Jesus; offering us ways to reflect on our faith, to understand its implications in our daily lives. That?s why our Bible is so thick. There are lots of ways to reflect, lots of implications to surface. One size doesn?t fit all.

Our sacred authors weren?t historians, scientists, biographers or zoologists. They simply were people of faith, writing for other people of faith, presuming there was always something new to learn about that faith, always something new to reflect on. The starting point for all biblical exegesis isn?t the event the author narrates, but the community for whom he or she writes.

Today?s Gospel passage presents us with a classic example of that methodology. Both Matthew and Luke add something to the temptation story they copied from Mark: three specific temptations. How did they come up with these particular temptations? The answer is simple: they took for granted he was tempted in the same way they were being tempted. What was happening to them must have happened to him.

It?s significant that they had these specific temptations in the earliest days of the faith. We see in the passage from Romans that there never was a ?golden age? of Christianity. A commitment to follow Jesus, in the first century or today, is automatically accompanied by temptations to take that commitment in directions that would nullify Jesus? life and ministry. That?s why it?s important to appreciate these three particular temptations; each applies to us and our imitation of Jesus.

The first: ?If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.?

Jesus? response, ?One does not live on bread alone,? tells us what?s at the heart of this temptation. Disciples are always encouraged to choose life over death. But is there something deeper to life than just maintaining our vital signs until we achieve eternal life? Like Jesus, we?re tempted just to take care of the surface needs without actually changing the environment that created those needs in the first place.

This logically leads us to the second temptation: ?[The devil] took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant, and said, ?I shall give to you all this power and glory ? if you worship me.? ?

During Jesus? ministry, messianic hopes were rooted in power and glory. Jesus? response shows a different plan for salvation: ?You shall worship Yahweh, your God, and him alone shall you serve.? God has a passion for freedom, but also a unique way to achieve it. Jesus was convinced true freedom could only be accomplished by people committed to weakness, not power -- the weakness that comes from giving ourselves to others, not dominating them.

The third temptation -- to jump from the parapet of the temple and land unharmed -- cuts to the heart of Jesus? faith. We?re always pulled to do the spectacular, to act in ways that will get people?s attention. No wonder Jesus replies, ?You shall not put Yahweh, your God, to the test.?

In the eyes of the world, even Jesus? resurrection wasn?t a noteworthy event. Only his followers were convinced it had taken place and later testified to it. We?re expected to imitate Jesus? dying and rising in the most ordinary situations of life, relating to people known only to their families and friends, doing things for them that would never make the evening news. It?s these unnoticed, dedicated few who are changing the world for the better.

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