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The Third Temptation of Christ: The Long Way ‘Round
Matthew 4:8-11
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I came across a graphic novel years ago called the Red Son, where Superman landed in the Soviet Union rather than the USA. It explored how different everything was when Superman was a champion of socialism, and the rise of the USSR as the dominant political structure of the world, as the US fell into chaos and confusion.

This week, we ask a similar question. What would happen if Jesus, instead of following the will of his Father, followed the word of Satan?

We just came from the second temptation, where Satan calls Jesus' identity into question. Does your daddy really love you? Will he really protect you? Let's find out! Satan was telling Jesus to do all of the same stuff, but on Satan's terms, forcing God to act in a different time frame. He would still be miraculously delivered from death. He would still become an object of worship. But he would not be submitted to God. It would be Jesus calling the shots.

Jesus' answer shows that his identity cannot be shaken. So Satan concedes the ground. Fine. You are God's son.

So he hauls Jesus up to a high place.

High places play a prominent role in Israel's story. All the way back in Genesis, the people built the Tower of Babel, so that they would be able to meet with a god. Before King Saul, there were altars set up in the high places around Israel so that people could worship. Once the temple was built, these high places became places of really awe full practices — the people of Israel, discontent with the necessity of worshipping in Jerusalem at the temple, began to offer their own sacrifices in their own ways in their own places. And not all of them were to Yahweh. They even began to sacrifice their children in burnt offerings to Molech.

The summary of all of this, is that the Israelites were used to climbing hills in order to look for divine help. It is not an accident that as Jesus climbs the hill, the deity that he finds at the top asking him for his worship is Satan.

And this is the heart of Satan's offer. You've met with your dad at your baptism. He's anointed you as a king. But look at the fine print! Trouble, fighting, arguments, whipping, crucifixion? Yuck! His idea of a crown is a circle of thorns digging into your flesh. His idea of enthronement involves whips, nails, and brokenness. It is to die a grisly death for a bunch of ingrates and rebels. How about I make you a counter offer. Yahweh's offer in the valley is only one choice you face. Choose me, up in the lofty heights of the mountain side, and I'll give you everything that Yahweh promises you, without the pain,

suffering, and time investment. Why go through all of the next three years, when you can have it now.

Let's arrive at a win win.

You get what you want. I get what I want.

What would have happened had Jesus taken this offer?

We could have the glory, without the cross. How tempting that sounds to us. It's like an endless dessert buffet, without the veggies. And you never feel sick. We would have a very religiously powerful Jesus. He would have the blessing of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Zealots would have loved him. Rome itself would have thought twice about him.

But we wouldn't have the leper who understands the will of God. We wouldn't have Peter's mom healed in her home. The Bleeding woman called a daughter of God. The paralyzed man called a son of God. We would have Zealots and Pharisees and priests instead of fishermen, prostitutes and tax collectors telling the story of the Messiah.

Most importantly, we would not have the cross. And where would that leave us?

We would have a world with the shell of religiosity, but without the substance behind it. We would have the miracles, the shows of power, but we would still be stuck in the consequences of sin. We would still die. We would still be separated from God, and each other.

Instead of the Kingdom of God, we would have the Kingdom of Satan. Instead of Jesus, the suffering, servant King, we would have Jesus, the puppet king.

On one hand, this is the least subtle of the temptations. After all, it seems pretty straight forward. How is this even going to temp Jesus? This is the same play that Satan has used for thousands of years — Hey Eve! Adam! Are you sure that you want to do this God's way? His way seems good, sure, but don't you think he's holding out a better, easier way? Wouldn't you be better off with all of the info and then you decide how to proceed? I'm telling you, God only has his interests in mind, not yours. He's not thinking about how this affects you. You should be like God, knowing everything, and making an informed choice.

On the other hand, this is the most subtle of Satan's temptations. Because he calls into question the very goal of Jesus' ministry. If he is simply to become a king, he could do that easily. Call a few angelic legions, blast Caesar with lightning, and go all Godly wrathful smiting on the religious leaders.

But that isn't the goal at all. Jesus isn't interested in inheriting the kingdoms of the world. He is interested in pillaging them, and ushering in the kingdom of God. The goal of God

is no smaller than redeeming all of creation. There is no short cut to get there. Evil needs to be confronted, and dealt with finally.

It might look like the easiest temptation for Jesus to avoid, and for us too. After all, if somebody in red pajamas with a pitchfork tells you to worship him, that's probably a pretty easy pass. However, the subtlety of this temptation snares me every day.

It's the temptation to take the short cut. To find the efficient way rather than the relational way. It is the easy way, rather than the hard road of character growth, suffering, and self-discipline.

We want to do the least amount of work in order to get the goal.

This is the exact opposite of God. Look at this map. Here is the shortest route between Egypt and Jerusalem. It could have been a straight march. But it wasn't. Enter 40 years of wandering. Here is their travel itinerary instead.

The people's goal was to take the land, settle down and live. God's goal was to have a righteous kingdom of priests to go in, and minister to the land and the peoples who would remain.

God would rather take the long way round, because it offers the greatest chance for long term success. It will accomplish his will of redeeming all of creation, not just cornering the market on power.

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."
2 Peter 3:9.

Okay, so fine. God isn't being slow to be cruel or to have a laugh at our expense. And let's say that we are even willing to concede that what God is doing by taking the long way round is actually for the benefit of not just creation, but also me.

How can I survive? How can I endure? I need the fast way out because right now life hurts! Or it's going to get even worse in the near future! And, to rub salt in the wound, I don't have any superpowers.

We can't ignore temptation, because it is usually a twisting of a God-given need. Tempted by addiction? We were created in the rest of God, and therefore, we did not need a temporary escape from daily life. We have Sabbath rather than the numbing of TV, food, drugs, alcohol. . . What hunger is temptation revealing in you, and what will truly satisfy, rather than the cheap, quick fix, that Satan offers. It is putting temptation in its proper perspective.

But how do we do this?

By doing what Jesus did in the wilderness. What he did in the early mornings, in the Garden before his crucifixion, in the hardest, darkest night of his soul — he took his eyes off of his problem, his enemy, his tempter, and he put his eyes squarely on God and he prayed. He let the prayer wash over his soul until he could endure: “Not my will, but yours.”

Sure, we don't have superpowers.

But we know a guy.

Just like Jesus on top of a mountain, when we are faced with the long, hard journey, or a short cut to shadow satisfaction, what fills our mind, and our vision, is the easy exit. Ten thousand times a day, we get the message, “Happiness is in having. . . money, sex, power, beauty. . . And our soul drowns in these messages.

So we need to change the input.

Mark Clark, a pastor in BC does an amazing sermon on Psalm 3. It took him 45 minutes. So let me summarize.

More than half of the psalms are lament, or complaint psalms. They follow a pattern in which the Psalmist, despite being hemmed in on every side by enemies, evil, and sin, deliberately looks at God. And he lets the scriptures of God, the message of God, the story of God, wash over his soul over and over and over, until all he can see is not the shortcut, but God.

This is how Jesus confronts Satan. He looks at all of the kingdoms of the world, and he sees the shortcut. And then he replies: But God. And then? Angels.

If you are in a hard place right now, I want to encourage you. There is no truly satisfying shortcut. But, make the Psalms your go to prayer. Meditate on them. Soak in the message of God, the story of God, the experience of God. Spend more time in prayer and meditation than you do talking to other people about your struggle. Pray that you would know God's provision. Let the message of the Psalms wash over your soul, nourishing, weeping, angry, and then submissive, surrendering problems too big to be borne to a God capable of taking them, and rest.