

## **Our Hearts Are Restless**

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**Luke 4:1-13**

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I don't understand why Presbyterians aren't better at Lent. On paper, it is made for us. Austerity. Avoiding ostentation. Frugality. Prudence. Thriftiness. Self-Denial. Calvinist guilt. We really should be better at Lent than we are. It's like a 40-day retreat or 40-day self-improvement project, a chance to work on us, to focus on us. To give something up to take something on. I get it, we are to imitate in these forty days we imitate Jesus own spiritual struggle in the wilderness that we read about here in Luke. I just don't think we are very successful to not turn every religious celebration into more than a religious celebration of ourselves. In short, 'hey God, look what I did.' I'm a good faster or I'm a super Christian.

In an interview more than a decade ago, Presbyterian pastor and writer Eugene Peterson was asked about the spiritual life and being saved in particular, and he had this to say: One of the things we are being saved from is from ourselves. 'One way to define the spiritual life is getting so tired and fed up with yourself you go on to something better, which is following Jesus.' He continues: 'we've all met a certain type of spiritual person. A wonderful person. Loves the Lord. Prays and reads the Bible all the time. But all he or she thinks about his herself. Not a selfish person. But always at the center of everything. 'How can I witness better? How can I do this better? How can I take care of this person's problem better?' It's me, me, me, disguised in a way that is difficult to see because the spiritual talk disarms us.'<sup>1</sup>

Too harsh? Well, what about this? The English writer, philosopher, and armchair theologian GK Chesterton once observed that the 'man who knocks on the door of the brothel is looking for God.' St. Augustine would understand. Probably because he did some brothel knocking in his earlier years before converting to Christianity and also because of his own theological observation wrapped in his prayer from the aptly named autobiography, *The Confessions*, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. I think we would settle for more immediate forms gratification as GK Chesterton vividly reminds us, but ultimately we are happy to fill the God-shaped whole in our souls with whatever we can get our hands on. Craig Barnes puts it this way: 'When my friends and I were leaving college, we thought the key to finding our blissfully fulfilling vocations was knowing ourselves. So we threw ourselves into lots of personality

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, 'Spirituality for All the Wrong Reasons,' interview by Mark Galli, *Christianity Today* (March 2005), 45.

inventories, guidance counseling, and books like *What Color Is Your Parachute?*—all in the hopes of unlocking the internal mystery of ourselves...we chased fulfillment like it was the Holy Grail.<sup>2</sup> Nothing, Barnes observes, is more frustrating than ‘freedom without calling,’ and no matter what great or misguided choices we make, none of our choices ‘can satisfy our soul’s yearning’ or fill up the God-sized hole we all carry in our hearts. Nothing else can fill us no matter how fulfilling until we attend to our primal need, ‘to glorify and enjoy God,’ or in Augustine’s words, to find our rest in God. Well, that is easier said than done. There is no instruction book. No three-step methodology. No magic formula.

And it is interesting to me how quickly we focus in on the 40 days of fasting in the wilderness as the central part of this story of temptation rather than on the actual temptations Jesus faces on our behalf and liberates us from. The devil said to him ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ If you are the Son of God, become self-sufficient and make everyone in the world self-sufficient. In one snap of the finger you could solve world hunger and alleviate the need in every human being to ever have to ask for help or rely on anyone else for daily sustenance ever again. Isn’t this our secret dream. To never have to ask for help. To never need someone else. To be able to provide for all our needs by ourselves. Instead, Jesus reminds us what a lost cause, impaired humanity, and lonely existence it is to be completely self-sufficient and he refuses to give into what seems to be a completely reasonable and attractive temptation. It is a gift to be a dependent creature, not an impairment. It is a gift to rely on others, to need the love and support of those around us, to occasionally have to say, can you help me? Surely, you’ve heard the illustration about heaven and hell that both places have a lavish banquet of the finest foods you could ever imagine. And both places have 6-foot-long forks to eat from the delicious spread. In heaven, they learn to feed each other and in hell everyone starves to death because they can’t imagine not being self-sufficient enough to manage on their own. Jesus shows that our true humanity is to be dependent creatures, not only on God, but on each other, and to try to be anything else is to risk throwing our true humanity away. Theologian and professor James KA Smith reminds us that it is in the Christian community, the body of Christ where we practice such dependency, ‘a community of practice whose members own up to the fact that we don’t always love what we say we do—that [sometimes] the ‘devices and desires’ of our hearts outstrip our best intentions.’ And to come to worship together, where we sit with other flawed, stubborn, mortal, and dependent creatures, we reject the non-human temptation of self-sufficiency for a community that confesses its neediness before God and tries to love each other. Worship is where we practice that, risk that, and sometimes fail at that. But Jesus shows us that is what it means to be human, to be dependent creatures and to

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, ‘You Can be Whatever You Wish, and other myths,’ in *The Christian Century* (May 23, 2018).

come together to have our hearts and our lives not made self-sufficient, but to be recalibrated and directed toward the One who made us. 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.'<sup>3</sup>

And the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'to you I will give their glory and all authority...if you worship me, all this will be yours.' Who does not want world domination or at least to dominate a significant portion of the globe? Isn't that what Russia is trying to force the Ukraine to acquiesce to? Isn't that what everyone aspires to, from Alexander to Constantine to the King of Rock and Roll to the King of Pop, from Michael Jordan to LeBron James, to dominate your peers, to be known as the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time, and the best there ever was. To quote Ted Williams, all I want is when I walk down the street, people will stop and say, there goes the 'best who ever was.' Who wouldn't want to aspire to that? Apparently, Jesus. Because he turns it down and quotes scripture back to the scripture quoting devil: 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' Or to quote Martin Luther King, Jr., from his Drum Major Instinct speech: Jesus gives us a new norm of greatness...the one who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's his definition of greatness...and by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't need to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.'<sup>4</sup> Again, world domination and unfettered power may be alluring and irresistible, but Jesus rejects it because it dehumanizes us. And instead he offers us a way of greatness that exalts our humanity and bestows it on every one of us.

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here' and God will raise you up.' What is wrong with showing off the special powers? Why would Jesus refuse to save himself and prove his divine superpowers? After all, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God, right? Why not prove his divinity by a show of force? I promise not to bore you with an academic debate, but one of the discussions and conversations in New Testament studies and in theological conversations is related to the technical term: 'deification.' To try and make a long story short, is the point of our mortal lives to participate in immortality and eternity through the divine life or is the point of life to become the creatures, the human beings God has intended us to be, to the best of our ability? Maybe we can do both, and that is a bit of a false debate between communion

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<sup>3</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 30, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'The Drum Major Instinct,' in *A Testament of Hope*, 265-266.

with the divine and creaturely flourishing before God, but I think here in this third temptation, Jesus rejects one form of existence in favor of the other, because again, showing off our spiritual powers or believing we are to become divine and transcend the limitations of our humanity is not what it means to flourish as a human being before God. Jesus rejects our desire, that began with Adam in the garden, to transcend our limitations, and the mortality and fragility of our humanity. To flourish as a human before God is not to long for supernatural powers or even to believe that the whole point of faith is just to save ourselves and tend to our own spiritual needs apart from anyone else's. To go the way of Jesus is to dismiss certainty in our own spiritual powers as arrogance and self-justification. It is to entrust our lives to God and acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves and that faith is never about showing off what a special an inside track we have with God. Once again, Jesus rejects that.

So where does that leave us this Lent and beyond? Going about our lives and not trying to do better or be better or work for something better? I don't think that is the answer either. Perhaps it is about our efforts to receive a humanity that delights in being a dependent creature before God and in the building up of our neighbors, receiving from God and offering back to God a humanity that prefers human flourishing to human displays of domination, it's about receiving a humanity that cares less about showing off our own spiritual powers and more about experiencing awe, wonder, and curiosity in the presence of God's. C.S. Lewis, in ways that may be pretty on point for our world today puts it his way in rather stark terms: 'If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.'<sup>5</sup>

Christ rejects a humanity the prefers self-sufficiency, a humanity that seeks to transcend all human limitations, a humanity that wishes we were all divine. To that end, may we all discover our true humanity once again this Lent. Amen.

Benediction:

As you go out into the world, may you become truly human, not by becoming more self-sufficient, but more reliant on God and on each other. May you become truly human by finding freedom in your God-given limitations, not by trying to transcend them. May you become truly human, not through special divine favor, but by relinquishing the need to prove a divine bond. And as you go....

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, written in 1948.