

# Confronting post-modern devils

*A sermon on Luke 4:1-13 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 February 2016*

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## Message

Whether we think of the devil as a personal being or as a metaphor, our call to put our trust in Jesus to strengthen our resistance to the temptation of expedient short-cuts is the same.

## Sermon

We recently had some conversation on our church email list about a new icon that is being painted for us by our generous friend, Patricia Begg. The conversation was about what to include in it and what to leave out. It is the Easter icon, sometimes titled “The Resurrection”, and more traditionally titled “The Harrowing of Hades”, of the land of the dead. There are many different versions of this icon in the tradition, and they include more or less detail. Patricia favoured a greatly simplified version that removed the background mountains, most of the people, and the image of the defeated devil in the abyss, so as to focus all attention on the central image of Christ rising from the land of the dead lifting humanity, represented by Adam and Eve, to new life with him. As you can see from the picture of the work in progress, the majority opinion of our congregation went the other way, and wanted them all included. It was a majority, but it wasn’t a total consensus, and I have a theory about the meaning of the different opinions, and my theory also relates to the ways we interpret a story like the one we heard just now of Jesus being confronted in the wilderness by the satan.



You may have heard people say that our generation is experiencing a shift from a modernist worldview to a post-modern world view. If nothing else, it means that in any diverse group of people like us, there will be differences in the ways that we view the world and interpret reality. My theory is that our reactions to the details in the icon roughly reflect these differences. I’m about the right age to be influenced almost equally by both which mostly just means that I am confused, and in a discussion like the one about the icon, I am easily swayed back and forth by the arguments from both poles.

Modernism was born of the massive shift in perspective that came about as science showed us that the earth was round, and orbited an obscure star in an isolated galaxy, and that life had evolved over millions of years, and that most illnesses were caused by bacteria or viruses and not by demons. Although there are still groups who responded to these earth-shattering realisations by clinging ever more desperately to a pre-modern literal reading of every detail of the Biblical stories and defending them against the “threat” of scientific inquiry, most Christians in the modernist era embraced the new ways of thinking. A lot of Christian theology set about “demythologising” the Bible; that is deciding what elements could be dismissed as simply reflecting the flat-earth worldview of the biblical writers, and set aside to allow us to focus on the “pure essence” of the message of Jesus.

Now the ongoing conflicts with those who were clinging to the pre-modern literalist approach has meant that sometimes, when a scientific modernist mindset encounters a story like the one we heard tonight, we almost instinctively begin by thinking “Well of course I’m not like those crazies who believe in a personal devil who pops up in the wilderness – the story is just about Jesus confronting difficult options, some of them very tempting but wrong.” And sometimes, having established that we don’t believe what the crazies believe, we forget to go much further and really dig into what God is wanting to say to us through this pre-modern imagery. This reaction can become even stronger when we consider a visual representation like an icon. The visual medium seems more clearly to imply a literal reading of what it depicts. So this icon that depicts Jesus entering the land of the dead, where he meets and raises to new life people who have been dead for hundreds or thousands of years, and furthermore depicts a devil chained and falling into the abyss, can seem like a lot of naive foolishness that plays into the hands of the fundamentalists. If you are my age or older, and your education was dominated more by the sciences than by things like philosophy and literary theory, there is a fair chance that you are recognising yourself in these responses.

If you are older than me but your natural habitat was among philosophers and social or literary theorists, then you probably got a head start on the post-modern worldview, but most people younger than me are now thoroughly shaped by it. When it comes to listening to the biblical stories or considering an icon, the post-modern perspective is not really a rejection of the modernist perspective, in fact in many ways it simply takes it for granted and has already moved on. While the modernist is still thinking “do we really believe in a land of the dead and a literal devil or is it all metaphorical?”, the post-modernist is looking at the same picture and saying, “That depicts what my life often feels like. How do I embrace the hope being expressed here?” It is not that they are falling for a literal reading of the details. It is more that they can’t see any point asking whether it is literally true. It is true to the way they feel, to the way they experience life, and that’s why they respond positively to it. So, some of us responded to the question about the icon by saying, “Ooh, I don’t like seeing those things depicted like that, because I think they are just metaphors.” And others, more of us in fact, responded by saying, “Of course they are metaphors, but I really relate to them, so I’d like to see them all in the icon. And maybe a few more.”

Tonight we are celebrating the journey of a number of people into life of God and into the membership of our church. We have enrolled two people in our catechumenate and six people into the final forty days of the catechumenate after which they will be accepted, by reaffirmation of their baptismal vows, into the membership of our church. This is exciting and encouraging stuff. Many churches will be doing something similar today, so why is it that the lectionary compilers, in their wisdom, choose to make sure we listen to one of the accounts of Jesus being tempted by the satan on this Sunday every year? After all, in the Jesus story, this occurs shortly after his baptism, not during his preparation for it. Well, that’s true, but Jesus himself often suggested that his impending death was a baptism too, or perhaps that it was the completion of his baptism. And in our baptismal rites, we make that connection too, recognising that Jesus is calling us to follow him through the deep waters of suffering and death and on into the promised land of resurrection life. So one of the reasons that the ancient church developed the catechumenate was to give both the candidate and the church the time and the means to check each other out. What the church was looking for was whether the applicant had developed the disciplines and attitudes and resilience to see them through the tough journey ahead. Michael Hardin points out that in many indigenous cultures, the initiation rites that prepared people for leadership as elders or shamans or

healers frequently involved a tough survival test in the wilderness. He suggests that the story we heard tonight is that same thing for Jesus. Having completed his apprenticeship, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he wrestles with some horrendously difficult questions about what sort of person he is going to be on the road ahead.

Now it doesn't matter whether we view this story through pre-modern, modernist or post-modern eyes, the challenge is the same. Whether you think the temptations are being thrown at you by a literal prince of evil, or whether you think that is all an anachronistic metaphor, or whether you just know what it means to wrestle with integrity challenges and other temptations and can't see the relevance of trying to sort out exactly where they came from, the challenge is the same. Whether it is a literal devil or our own psychological frailties or the strong current of cultural pressure, you will constantly face similar temptations to those that Jesus faced. Will you take short-cuts to attract attention and win fans? Will you compromise your integrity to gain power and gratify your ego? Will you try to manipulate God into being and doing what you want?

When our catechumens reach the end of their initial journey of formation and ask us to baptise them into the life of God and the membership of the church, we won't be asking them to give us answers to questions about the ontology of satan or the biology of resurrection or the geography of heaven or hell. They will probably be all over the place on those questions, just as we were about the icon, and that's absolutely fine. What we will be looking for is whether they have developed the spirituality and resilience to follow Jesus on pathways of faithfulness, integrity, and tenaciously inclusive love and mercy. In the ancient church, the questions asked when deciding whether to baptise a catechumen were things like "Does she visit the sick and the poor? Does she welcome the refugee and the outcast? Does she pray for those who persecute her?" We are aiming to follow their example. God and God's love and mercy are so much bigger than the fickle constructs we put on our attempts to interpret reality. And when you know yourself totally immersed, bathed and soaked in God's love and mercy, then those temptations, wherever you think they come from, will become a whole lot easier to recognise and to rise above.