

Setting Our Imaginations Free

Luke 4:1-13

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First Central Congregational UCC

17 January 2016

The story I am about to read is usually read on the First Sunday of Lent. But I'm reading it earlier in the year because of my plan to move through the Gospel of Luke. So, listen to this story of the temptation, a story intended to set our imaginations free.

[Read Gospel]

A few years ago a number of prominent books of theology were published on the topic of Christianity and race. A common feature of those books was that modern Christian theology was inherently Euro-centric, inherently white and had participated in the colonization, enslavement, and oppression of black people. In some ways that conclusion is not startling. Ponder it for only a moment and it becomes quite obvious.

One of those books was *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* by Duke Divinity School professor Willie James Jennings. In that book, Jennings discusses the temptation of Jesus. He writes, "From within the urgency of need and facing the exhaustion of energy and life without sustenance, Jesus faces the fears of all peoples." What Jesus is tempted with is "the hopes, dreams, fears, and desires of all people."

To grasp the seduction of the temptations we must realize that Jesus is being offered what most of us want. First, he's tempted by self-sufficiency. Obviously we desire that. How many of us spent two dollars on a Powerball ticket this week and dreamed of the possibility of becoming an overnight billionaire?

Jesus is also tempted with power and authority. Though not all of us are ambitious, it would make our lives easier if most people agreed with us. Or if we could easily enact our own vision of the way the world ought to be. Imagine being offered the chance to rewrite the laws to make them the way you think they should be. Maybe not to benefit yourself, you aren't that selfish, your laws would try to bring about justice and peace and abundance. Yes, we daydream of a world where our visions come true.

And Jesus is tempted with the desire to prove that he is safe and secure, that God is watching out for him and will prevent any harm to befall him. So many people are afraid. I know the fears of being a new parent who gets up in the middle of the night to check on my sleeping son just to make sure he's okay. Of course we desire some guarantee that no harm will befall us, that we will be safe and secure, and that life will be tranquil.

Jennings is correct, these are our temptations, expressions of our desires and fears. And this story is there to remind us that we have all succumbed to these temptations repeatedly.

But the point of the story is not to make us feel guilty. Instead, the story opens our eyes, makes us aware, and liberates us for new possibilities.

Jennings writes,

The narrative draws us to the awful condition of our collective weakness, yet the wilderness struggle and victory anticipates a possibility: a people joined to the body of Jesus who can overcome the temptations of evil.

Succumbing to these temptations—of self-sufficiency, power, and security—have led so many times in human history to violence, to oppression, and to the racism that Jennings critiques in his book. The role of the temptation story in the wider narrative of Jesus is to open our imaginations to new ways of being.

For Jesus is God's agent upon the earth offering salvation and inviting us into a new hospitality in the family of God. A family that blurs all the borders and transgresses all the boundaries. It is a new communion shaped by Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

We can't be self-sufficient—we must learn to rely upon other people. We can't hold all the power, our vision is not the only one—we must share and work with others in a network of mutuality. And we cannot secure ourselves by walling ourselves off from people who are different from us. We must be vulnerable and open to the rich blessings of a diverse community.

In his 2002 song "Sunday," David Bowie concluded:

All my trials, Lord
Will be remembered
Everything has changed

I have one theology book that discusses David Bowie. The book is one of the strangest in my library, while also being serious, rich, complex, and profound. It is a work of queer theology with the title *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* written by a British theologian, Gerard Loughlin, who's a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The cover is an image of Jane Fonda from the film *Barbarella*. When I saw the book in the clearance bin at the Cokesbury bookstore in Oklahoma City, I just had to pick it up, curious what the book was about. Then, on the back, there was a quote from Stanley Hauerwas, the most prominent living American theologian which simply said, "Absolutely brilliant." His quote is why I bought the book.

Occasionally some visitor to my office will see the spine of the book and the bold words "Alien Sex" leaping out at them and ask me, "What's that?"

There is a chapter in the book on the David Bowie film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. I've never seen this movie, but the character Bowie played, an alien appearing in rural Kentucky, is discussed as a Christ figure.

Bowie himself is viewed as a queer persona, crossing borders and liberating society from the burdens of normativity. That was a theme in many of the obituaries and eulogies this week. One article I read said, "He was a freak and a weirdo and a provocateur and an innovator and an icon." Others lauded his role in sexual liberation and how his gender-bending presentation

contributed to the liberation of persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

Just last week, on his 69th birthday, Bowie release a new album, *Blackstar*, which I downloaded and listened to throughout the week. The album is described by one reviewer as “a meditation on love, loss, death, connection, and disconnection.” Clearly the album’s themes were the final message of a dying man, though the public was unaware until he died that he had been battling cancer.

I was personally most drawn to his 2002 album *Heathen* which arrived just as I was undergoing changes in life—I’d finished grad school, moved out of state for the first time, bought a brand new house, began my career in ministry, and was buying furniture and appliances and decent skilletts.

In the final song, “A Better Future,” Bowie sang:

Please don't tear this world asunder
Please take back
this fear we're under
I demand a better future

Please make sure we get tomorrow
All this pain and all the sorrow
I demand a better future

Of course his great anthem was the song “Changes” which may itself be the best description of his almost half-century of artistic contribution to music, film, fashion, and more. In the song we are encouraged to “Turn and face the strange.”

In his boundary-crossing Bowie was an agent of liberation who set our imaginations free. And we identify in that an aspect of the Gospel message—that our salvation is to be found in a new community, shaped by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, which transgresses boundaries and invites all people to join together in a beloved community.

Let us overcome the usual fears and temptations and join in God’s vision of a better future.