

Matthew 4:1-17

In her 2004 book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” She was not commenting on the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, but she might as well have been. Every one of the three temptations that the devil presents to Jesus is some form of temptation to certainty. And every time, Jesus rejects it.

The temptation is Jesus’ vision quest after being baptized by John the Baptist. Choosing to go get baptized is an indication that Jesus wanted to commit himself to the project that John was doing. But once having made that commitment, he needs to discern how he will carry it out, how he will embody the vision that John has articulated. So he goes off into the wilderness alone and fasts for 40 days, and after that significant length of time, he’s ready to make some critical decisions, decisions that the devil presents him with.

Jesus would become known as someone who provided food miraculously, and who offered foretastes of the kingdom of God at meals. But before any of this, the devil asks why he should not, while all alone, conjure bread out of stones, and Jesus rejects the proposal. Life in God’s realm is more than being able to do magic to relieve one’s needs. Similarly, the devil places him at a high place, the pinnacle of the Temple, and dares him to confirm that he is dear to God by jumping—surely the angels will dive to save his life, and he will know for sure that he is ultimately safe from any harm. But Jesus rejects this gambit as well, saying that it is forbidden to put God to the test. Why is it forbidden? One presumes because the motivation for testing God is to obtain certainty. That’s not on offer, apparently. And then finally the devil proposes that Jesus fall down and worship *him*, and in that way win all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and Jesus dismisses him once and for all. Owning and controlling all the

kingdoms of the world is not worth the price; better to be penniless and owe all your devotion to God even if that means you can't stop a foreign invasion or prevent global financial collapse.

Then, having dismissed the devil, Jesus heads back out to civilization only to learn that John the Baptist has been arrested and obviously his movement and its followers are in mortal danger. What does Jesus do? He makes his home in Capernaum, in the territory of Naphtali and Zebulun, of which it is written, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."

Now, we really have to pause and appreciate these geographical allusions. Naphtali and Zebulun are long gone. I mean, Capernaum *is* where they were, where those two tribes of Israel were traditionally located, but nobody had used those names for the area for 700-some years, since Isaiah had written about people in darkness seeing a great light. And why, I hear you ask, is that? Because, of course, between 740 and 722 BCE, Assyria had invaded Israel, including Naphtali's and Zebulun's territory, had killed or displaced the residents, and had replaced them with captive peoples from elsewhere. The human beings who had been Naphtalites and Zebulunites lost their identity as people of the covenant. Isaiah, or some follower of his, saw this tragedy coming, warned about it, grieved it, and then asserted that nothing is over and done until God says it is: ⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Isaiah was saying that even when no trace of the covenant was left, God could still bring it back.

By quoting Isaiah, Matthew is pointing out that Jesus' contemporaries, living in Capernaum, are in the same kind of darkness. (By the way, I read that when the New Testament quotes the Hebrew Bible, it's not a prooftext, but a hyperlink, and I love that.) They are also

under the domination of an empire that constantly seeks to put itself in the place of God as the object of their devotion and the focus of their decisions. It is into that darkness that Jesus plunges when he has left the certainties that the devil had offered him.

It is useful at this point to pull out Walter Wink's insights about what he called the Domination System, embodied in this case by the Roman Empire. Wink reminds us of the Myth of Redemptive Violence, and says that power structures legitimate themselves by use of this myth. The Myth of Redemptive Violence is that order can only be achieved, chaos can only be held off, by means of violence. That's what makes it redemptive, that although you break things and kill people, the outcome will supposedly be peace. The gods favor those who conquer. Conversely, whoever conquers clearly has the favor of the gods. Ours is neither a perfect nor perfectible world; it is theatre of perpetual conflict in which the prize goes to the strong. Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion, and they form the solid bedrock on which the Domination System is founded in every society.ⁱ

By diving into the darkness in which the Domination System has put Jesus' people, diving into it *without* the tools of certainty that the devil had offered him, Jesus is rejecting the myth of redemptive violence. He is venturing right into the jaws of the machine, if you will, having chosen *not* to fight it with violence. Instead, as we know, he will absorb the violence willingly and die, which is what his followers are also going to have to do, if they reject the myth of redemptive violence. Nobody wants to die, but it's the only way to get to resurrection.

A couple weeks ago, when the days were even shorter than they are now, Margaret Renkl wrote a column about darkness in the *New York Times*.ⁱⁱ It was titled, "Falling a Little Bit in

Love With the Dark.” She comments on how much more light we want every year, from Christmas lights to the LED motion-activated lights that people use for home security, and she wonders if this resolve to snuff out every shadow of night might be linked to the metaphorical darkneses of our age. When political figures and algorithms capitalize on fear, we respond by setting up more lights to ensure our greater safety. The irony of yard lights, she points out, is that when you illuminate your yard your eyes adjust to the light, and you’re less able to see what may be just beyond it, in the shadows.

After Halloween, Margaret Renkl collected discarded pumpkins and put them in her yard for the critters to eat. “Every morning, she says, “I walk down to look at the impromptu fencescape, delighting in each new sign that a raucous feast has been unfolding in our backyard after dark.” She loves the idea that it could be an assortment of creatures feasting--squirrels, chipmunks, groundhogs, birds and turtles by day; mice, deer, opossums, skunks, raccoons, foxes and coyotes by night. And she is not going to put up a camera to find out which beautiful mysteries are out there in the dark, living their hidden lives so near her own unshadowed life. She does not want that certainty. The wild creatures may be plentiful and various, or they may have been reduced to one or two possums, the others crowded out by light and buildings and civilization. She says, “I am teaching myself to rest in uncertainties, to revel in the secrets of darkness. I welcome the hungry creatures, cold and wild, that find their way in the dark to this unexpected bounty, but I don’t need to know who they are. Let them live out their lives in mystery. Let the cold nights hold them. Let the cold nights hold me, too.” The light that she *could* shine into her yard would not be useful.

Margaret Renkl deciding to let the cold nights hold unknown creatures and her

unknowing self is like Jesus turning his back on certainty and walking straight into the “theater of perpetual conflict.” The certainty that we always instinctively reach for is a kind of self-defense, and sort of a delusional self-defense, like yard lights that just make the dark harder to see in. Jesus rejected the delusional self-defenses that would simply replicate violence, that would make the dark harder to cut through. Repentance is re-orientation away from the myth that violence or coercion will yield reconciliation, which is a seductive certainty. Instead, Jesus walks into uncertainty—and right after this reading, he starts calling disciples and inviting them to walk into uncertainty as well.

I didn’t read Anne Lamott’s whole quote, but it’s a good one, and I’ll close with it in its entirety: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within, for the sense one was born with, the sense, for example, to go for a walk.”

Let us pray: Almighty God,

your Son fasted in the wilderness, and faced human temptations.

Give us courage to face and name our own temptations, and to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit. You know us better than we know ourselves; may we know you and grow closer to the vision you have for us, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever; Amen.

ⁱ <https://onemansweb.org/gasping-for-air-in-the-kingdom-matthew-412-23.html>

ⁱⁱ : <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/19/opinion/winter-solstice-dark-light.html>