

## Confusing Ourselves to Death

Mark 1:9-15

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In 1985 educator Neil Postman published an important and much talked about book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman began with George Orwell's book *1984*, with its premise that a totalitarian government overtly controls society and takes away freedom. Postman then contrasted Orwell's vision with Aldous Huxley's book *Brave New World*, in which people voluntarily give up their freedom by medicating themselves and by their addiction to amusement. Postman said Huxley's vision more accurately describes the world in which we live. Furthermore, Postman was writing primarily about television. This was before home computers and smart phones upped the ante.

Obviously I'm playing with Neil Postman's book title with my title of this sermon "confusing ourselves to death," but I do so with purpose. In our reading today, Mark tells us of Jesus' baptism and then Mark says, "Immediately the Spirit drove him into wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days tempted by Satan..." (Mark 1:12). The word "satan" is Hebrew and means "confuser." Satan is the great confuser. Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The word "devil" is Greek, from "diabolos" from which we get diabolical. It also is related to the words "ball" and "dia" which means "around" or "through." Hence the image of a ball bouncing around a room. Both "satan" and "devil" have to do with confusion and distraction.

Some of you have dogs or have seen dogs who love to chase tennis balls. No matter what else is going on, you pick up the tennis ball and the dog starts going nuts. You throw the ball and no matter where, how far, or how many bounces and ricochets, the dog runs crazily until retrieving it and brings it back to be thrown again, over and over and over.

So when the New Testament speaks of Satan or the Devil, it's not simply some deep dark evil persona, and certainly not a red guy with horns. Satan or the Devil is the personification of the Powers of Domination and in these stories, temptation is not to do overt evil but to keep chasing the ball. Instead of tending to God and to what God calls us, Satan confuses us, distracts us, while the things that matter, the life God calls us to, is ignored or we are so busy running here and there that we are too tired to do anything that truly matters. Meanwhile, Evil gets its way.

So Jesus is thrust into the wilderness to come to terms with who he is and what kind of Messiah he is called to be. He goes there to pray and to fast. There is a long biblical history of being in the wilderness – from Moses and the people of Israel to Elijah and beyond. It is in the wilderness where everything is stripped away, all of our normal routines are put aside, our normal distractions are quieted, and our normal forms of security and safety and comfort are gone. In the wilderness we are faced with ourselves and with God in ways we usually keep at a distance or we keep insulated and out of mind and sight.

In the wilderness we face God and we face ourselves, yet we also find ourselves face to face with the Great Confuser.

It's all confusing. There is so much to be done, where do we start? What's our strategy? What are we trying to do? How can we do it? There are people who need us and need our help. At the same time, we need help. Bills to pay, job changes and challenges. Health concerns, our mother called or our son called and they need help. We have two meetings scheduled at the same time so we go to both giving each half time. And we're trying to get out of town or someone is coming into town. We have that assignment due. The kids need to be picked up and taken to practice. But we're also doing mentoring at the school, serving at the food pantry, and we have a beloved neighbor in the hospital. On Tuesday we have a medical test and the car needs maintenance, the hot water heater needs replacing, and ... You know what I'm talking about.

Jesus is trying to figure it all out. All sorts of people were calling him, "Hey, Jesus can you serve on our board? Can you lead our new campaign? Can you speak on Thursday? Come over and join our side." All sorts of causes need addressing. There are the Herodians and their allies the Sadducees in Jerusalem, along with the Scribes. The aristocratic Sadducees run the Temple and they know that they must go along and get along with the Romans and Herod. The Sadducees believe Herod is crass and vulgar but like it or not, he's the king and he's in good with the Romans. Furthermore, Herod did build this great Temple, and has built new palaces, hotels and golf courses all over the country. He believes he will make Jerusalem great again. Then there are the Pharisees out in the villages and they're in charge of the Torah. They are more progressive, smart, well-educated, and believe in reform in the system. Down toward the Dead Sea, there is the Qumran community and the Essenes, who have withdrawn from society in order to be pure and undefiled. After all, if you can't win the culture wars perhaps it is better to simply go off into your own community until an opportune time someday in the

future. Finally, there are the Zealots, who are fed up with business as usual in Jerusalem and Rome and believe it is time to take to the streets, arm yourselves, and get ready for the coming revolution. There is a good chance, the Zealots believe, that if we take the initiative and start the war, God will intervene on our side and throw the Romans out and then they can make Jerusalem great again.

Amidst all of these different groups and different agendas, there are the hoi poloi, which is Greek for literally, “the many,” or the common people. What about them? What was it like to live in a land occupied by the Roman Empire? Here’s an example: According to Josephus, the city of Sepphoris in Galilee was in a region known for some minor rebellions against Rome. Rome decided to put a stop to it once and for all and to make an example. The Roman army came in and destroyed the town, and crucified the 2,000 inhabitants – men, women, and children – everyone. Most of the crucified took several days to die. Josephus says there was one victim who took 2 weeks to die. And part of the horror was that the Romans refused to allow the bodies to be taken down. Instead they were left to rot on the crosses and for the buzzards to scavenge.

Rome used crucifixion like lynching was used in America against African-Americans. It was to instill terror among the people and remind them who was in charge. The Sepphoris story is about 2000 men, women, and children being lynched at one time.

Think about our country’s school shootings and the trauma that continues forever in the lives of the survivors. Think about the fear and our children wondering will we be next? Terrorism in our day in our context is not an army marching in and killing everyone. We are terrorized by shooters with AR-15’s

walking into our school, our churches, or wherever they want. We are terrorized because of the Gun Empire – the National Rifle Association, the rich corporations, and their army of lobbyists and big money buying off elected officials who are supposed to work for us. In Jesus day it was the Roman Empire. Today it is the Gun Empire.

For Jesus Sepphoris was important. This story about Sepphoris happened when Jesus was a small boy and it was located 3.5 miles across the valley from Nazareth. It is highly likely that carpenters and workers from Nazareth were given the job of cleaning up Sepphoris, removing the crosses and what remained of the dead bodies, and then were given the job of rebuilding the city a few years later. It is likely that Joseph worked daily in Sepphoris. And perhaps a young adolescent Jesus worked there during the time it was rebuilt as a Roman city. Some of the ancient stories say even that Sepphoris was the hometown of Mary.

Josephus records that for decades, the people of Galilee would tell and retell the story of Sepphoris and what would happen if anyone rebelled against Rome. The trauma and horror remained in the people's memory for generations. And no doubt, Jesus either saw some of this or at least, heard the stories (from Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, p. 51-52).

So what do you do with all this if you were Jesus? Zealots hate and plot and devise ways to assassinate a Roman here and there and harass until someday when the Messiah might come and lead a full-blown rebellion. And Herodians, Sadducees, Pharisees, and the rest all sought to do and believe that their way was the way of God. Everyone quoted the Bible and everyone said, "In God we trust" as they also said, "Caesar Dominus," "Caesar is Lord." In the meantime, people

still had to eat and have shelter. And in those days, there was no profit, no money, no savings. All that and more went to Rome and what was left went to Herod. Malnutrition was rampant in Jesus' day. Most everyone was poor.

So according to Matthew and Luke, the Great Confuser comes to Jesus and says, "Everyone is hungry. Children are malnourished. If you are really the Messiah, all you have to do is command all of these stones and rocks to be turned into bread and you can feed everyone. Plus, Jesus you can always feed yourself. No more of living on the edge, not knowing if you or your mother and brothers are going to eat tonight or go to bed hungry." And Jesus answers by quoting Scripture: "It is written in the Bible, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the Confuser takes Jesus up on a high mountain and shows him in an instance all the kingdoms of the world, and says, "All power and authority over these kingdoms and empires belong to me and you can have it all if you'll worship me. Jesus, you can make not only Jerusalem great again, if you'll just bow to me. You can avenge Sepphoris and make sure it never happens again." And Jesus again says, "No." And again he quotes the Bible, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Let me make a quick aside here. I think it is clear this the temptation that the White American evangelical church has decided to give into. Let's sell our souls for political power.

Finally, the Confuser himself quotes the Bible and even takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. "If you are the Messiah, jump off the steeple and become the greatest religious leader of all-time. You can have the biggest

church in history. People will come from around the world to hear you. After all, the Bible says, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’” (Ps. 91:11-12). But Jesus says “no” a third time, “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The Great Confuser or the Great Distractor is able to keep us from centering our lives in God and then working from that center. Instead, our lives are fragmented, our brains are distracted, and our souls shrivel and die. Over time we simply become part of the same distracted and confused world addicted to speed, full of fear and anger, empty of empathy, in which violence seems the only way to resolve things, help us feel safe, and allow us move to the next new thing. We are exhausted, overcommitted, and burned out. No longer able to resist we become part of the Domination System that destroys and diminishes and disintegrates. The Powers of Evil do not have to put us in prison to control us, they just keep us distracted and busy and confused enough that we are powerless to resist. Therefore Evil wins. Or as Walter Wink says, “We are slowly changed into the likeness of the beast” (Wink, *The Powers That Be*, p. 181).

Jesus went into the wilderness to pray and fast for 40 days, center his life in God, so that he would have some clarity about who he was and what he was to do. Lent is our 40 days to do the same.

When my dear friend Charlie Johnson was in seminary, he and another seminary friend were assigned to pick up Father Morton Kelsey from the airport. Kelsey was an Anglican priest and teacher of prayer, a deep practitioner of prayer, and who was to deliver lectures at the seminary. When Kelsey got into the car, they

made polite conversation and Kelsey asked the seminary students what they did. Charlie told him he had just taken his first pastorate, a little country church in Western Kentucky, the West Point Baptist Church of Matanzas. Kelsey turned all the way around from his front seat, looked Charlie in the eye, and said, “Young man, evil is all around you. You will not survive without daily contact with the risen Christ.”

Austin Heights, we live in hard times. There is much to grieve, and there is much fear, hatred, anger, violence, and injustice. Evil is all around us. Good intentions and hard work are not enough. We will not survive without daily contact with the risen Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.