

## **Sermon: The Ring of Power**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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**Scripture: Mark 1: 9-15**

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<sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." <sup>12</sup> At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted<sup>[a]</sup> by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. <sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

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All three Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the account they give of Jesus' life have him being baptized in the Jordan River and then sent out into the wilderness for 40 days just before he begins his public ministry. Jesus does not *choose* to go out into the wilderness, they are clear, he doesn't just wander out there, but all three say the Spirit led him out there, Mark's account being the strongest in saying the Spirit DROVE Jesus out into the wilderness. The Greek word for "driving out" which is used here is the same used when Jesus drives out the evil spirit from the man in the synagogue. Jesus is driven into the wilderness... almost as though it is required based upon what just happened and is a must for what is to come.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke go into more detail than Mark does. They are the ones who say that there were three temptations that Jesus endured from Satan in the desert. But Mark contains the whole scene in one sentence – "At once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness for 40 days, being tempted by Satan and he was with the wild animals and the

angels tended him.” That’s it from Mark. But really it’s all that is needed to get the point that all three writers were making - that something was needed there in the gap between Jesus’ encounter with God at his baptism and Jesus’ encounter with others in his public ministry and what was needed apparently was a time alone in the wilderness where he would wrestle with the tempting presence and power of evil.

Whether there were three temptations or more and whether there was an actual intelligent presence of evil engaging Jesus out there or a wrestling in his own mind and heart, the point of it remains – Jesus was tempted with power, position and privilege – I mean, he was just proclaimed the Almighty Creator’s one and only beloved son - and Jesus had to choose to relinquish it all. He was tempted in the wilderness to grab hold of that power and use it as he saw fit and he relinquished that desire, that drive, that urge there and then and then time and time again in the coming years of his ministry he would spurn the power given him. Jesus was filled with all the Divine Presence and Power possible and Jesus had to choose over and over again the path of powerlessness.

There are two scenes in the movie “The Lord of the Rings” based on JRR Tolkien’s trilogy of the same name that do a great job of cinematically representing the heart of the struggle of Jesus in the wilderness. This is in no way by chance as Tolkien was a Christian and the Lord of the Rings in many ways is a retelling of Jesus’ story. A quick and inadequate recap for those who aren’t familiar with the Lord of the Rings - there is a ring of power forged by the Dark Lord Sauron which gave him power to rule over the world by tempting anyone who had it to claim the great power for their own which would inevitably corrupt them and lead them into the darkness where they would be controlled by Sauron.

The ring is lost for many ages after the defeat of the Dark Lord Sauron, but as he begins to rise again and violence and evil begin to take hold of Middle Earth, the ring comes to a Hobbit named Frodo Baggins through his uncle Bilbo. The wizard Gandalf learns about it and convinces Frodo that it must be destroyed or Sauron will take over and only the innocence and purity of a hobbit like him has the capacity to hold the ring of power long enough without being corrupted to bring it to the only place it could be destroyed which is in the lava of Mount Doom where it was forged and basically exactly where Sauron is. It is Frodo's journey through Middle Earth walking directly into the Dark Lord's lair to destroy the ring of power that is his great quest, his Christ-journey through the wilderness to that ultimate point of relinquishing power.

So there are two scenes where the good wizard Gandalf and the good elf Galadriel are both tempted by the ring, because Frodo offers it to them because he's terrified of this burden he must bear alone. The scenes reveal the struggle in dramatic cinematic form, the temptation and the struggle that Jesus faced in the wilderness. First there is Frodo and Gandalf – the archetype of purity and the archetype of wisdom, both present in Christ in the wilderness as he grapples with what must be done with this ring of power...

SHOW VIDEO OF GANDALF AND FRODO – up to 1:40

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpOF1NHowdQ>

That is the temptation of Christ – “You cannot give me this ring. I would use it from a desire to do good but through me it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine.” Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to claim the power, to

own the power, to be the power that is being granted him. It's subtle. God gives him the power and Jesus must receive it but not take it. The devil in the scene suggests Jesus grab hold of the power that is already given and must be held lightly enough that it can be relinquished at the drop of a hat. But Jesus will not take the bait. "You cannot give me this ring, Frodo."

The other scene is the one where the Elf Queen Galadriel faces the same temptation as the threat increased for Frodo and images of a future of suffering become more real. Jesus struggles within himself on both sides, again purity and wisdom struggling with desire, ego and power...

SHOW VIDEO OF GALADRIEL AND FRODO – start at 0:55 to end of clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeQDTj1UIIA>

To bear the ring of power is to be alone and this too Jesus would discover as he returns from the wilderness. He passed the test, he overcame the temptation to grab the power for himself, even with the desire to do good for others, and the angels there tended to him... for he would need tending too, because as he begins his public ministry it is the beginning of his diminishment as well, year after year, experience after experience, where all the power he wields to heal and to confront and to challenge and to teach, leads him step by step to his own diminishment even unto the point of his dying on a cross. As he fades into the west, God grows in the lives of those around him, which is still happening to this day.

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The temptation of Jesus was to allow power to corrupt his God-given purpose and he remained true.

Where are the points of power and position and privilege in our own lives that give a foothold for evil to enter or at least the less-than-good? How might we be called to relinquish power for the sake of the greater good, for the sake of another.

I want to end by proposing one place as an example and I'll speak out of my social station as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual male. We are in a kairos moment right now when in order to realize justice for those who have long been denied justice in our country, we who have held and controlled the power need to be willing to relinquish it – at least at times - to step aside, to renounce the goodies that come along with our privilege and our position, to allow others to have a fair shake and a fair share. There are many of us who are deathly afraid of that and want to reclaim and not relinquish the white man's dominion, which is our temptation in the wilderness of this kairos moment right now.

But there must be others of us, enough of us, who are willing to walk away from the ring and intentionally diminish into the west while others rise. How do we do that? Who is willing? Jesus Christ must be our example, our strength and our courage for the task ahead. Amen.