

If I Were in Charge
March 6, 2022

This past Wednesday was a big day. We celebrated Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season. But Wednesday was also the birthday of Dr. Seuss. So in honor of Dr. Seuss, I'd like to read a short excerpt from one of his children's books, *If I Ran the Zoo*.

"It's a pretty good zoo," said young Gerald McGrew.
"And the fellow who runs it seems proud of it too."
"But if I ran the zoo," said young Gerald McGrew,
"I'd made a few changes. That's just what I'd do."

The lions and tigers and that kind of stuff
That they have up here now aren't quite good enough
You see things like these in just any old zoo.
They're awfully old-fashioned. I wanted something new.

... And then Gerald McGrew dreams about how he'd have a zoo with a 10-footed lion, an It-Kutch, a Preep, and a Proo, a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker too (and so on).

The book ends with young Gerald McGrew coming out of his daydream, staring at the zookeeper, saying, "Yes, that's what I'd do. I'd make a few changes if I ran the zoo."
Dr Seuss. *If I Ran the Zoo*. New York: Random House, 1950.

We love to think about how things would be different if WE were in charge. Not only would zoos have more interesting animals, but our towns, cities, states, countries, and world would be better off if we were in charge.

But what if we were really given the opportunity, to be in charge?

Jesus gets that opportunity during his time in the wilderness. Just after his baptism, when he is told that he's the son of God, Jesus goes out to fast in the wilderness, where he stays for 40 days. While he's there, the devil pays him a little visit to tempt him.

"You have this power as the Son of God," the devil says. The million-dollar question is, "How will you use that power?"

Of course, the devil has a few ideas. I'd like to look at these 3 temptations and consider how they might look today, in literature or popular stories.

First, he says, "Go ahead and turn some of these stones into bread. You must be starving!" Here is the temptation for Jesus to feed himself, to take care of his human needs, to be self-sufficient. If Jesus turns stones into bread, he will never need to buy food again. Imagine the time and money he could save, just turning rocks into bread whenever he got hungry.

The temptation to be self-sufficient, which in our day is achieved by being rich. If you have enough money, you don't need to listen to anyone or do anything you don't want to do. I know

there are a lot of rich people out there who just squander their money on mansions and yachts and fancy cars, but you and I would be different, right? If we were multi-billionaires, we'd use our wealth to help people, right?

I'm reminded of the 1992 song by BNL "If I Had \$1000000," in which the speaker uses his riches to buy fancy ketchup, take a limo to the grocery store, buy exotic animals like llamas or emus, all to try to buy his way into the heart of his love interest. Being rich, being self-sufficient doesn't always bring out our best selves, does it?

Barenaked Ladies. "If I Had \$1000000." *If I Had \$1000000*. Reprise, 1992, CD.

Jesus, knowing that self-sufficiency is not the goal, rejects this temptation from the devil. He knows that we are meant to be reliant on God. "One does not live by bread alone."

So the devil tries temptation number 2. "I will give you authority over all the kingdoms of the world... because that authority is given to me."

Here is the temptation for Jesus to be in charge. To be in authority. To be powerful. And to be honest, I think Jesus would make a great ruler. He'd certainly be better than any earthly ruler we've had in the past couple thousand years. It's tempting.

This time, though, we hear some wisdom not from a pop song, but from the epic book series *The Lord of the Rings*. In the novels, a gold ring has been forged that gives the wearer absolute power. And even the most pure-hearted, just, selfless characters are tempted to put on the ring, to use its power to transform the world into a better place. But they know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And so many protagonists reject the ring and the lure of power, because ultimately that authority will not work for good.

J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1955.

Similarly, Jesus rejects this offer of authority from Satan. For one, Jesus refuses to achieve this goal by bowing to the devil, but second, Jesus seems to reject the idea of coercing people into following him. To force someone to follow Jesus' way of love is not, in fact, loving, and so those who would be Jesus' students must come to him of their own free will.

The third and final temptation of Jesus is invulnerability. "You are God's son," the devil says. "Jump off the roof of the Temple, and God will save you. You cannot be hurt because you have God's protection." Jesus could live a protected life, with angels constantly attending him, making sure he is safe and unharmed. In fact, the angels protect him from every harm, including aging, so what's to stop Jesus from living forever?

It would be like the book *Tuck Everlasting*, in which characters drink from a spring that prevents them from ever being hurt and stops their aging. What a dream! What a life! To never have to fear pain or old age!

But of course, to live forever, to be invulnerable, is more of a curse than a blessing, as the characters of the book discover. Vulnerability is a gift, because it gives meaning to each fragile moment of our existence.

Natalie Babbitt. *Tuck Everlasting*. New York: Scholastic, 1975.

Jesus rejects the temptation of invulnerability as well. God does not exist to protect Jesus, even though he is his son. And of course, Jesus embraces his vulnerability and humanity in fasting for these 40 days, and he will ultimately choose vulnerability on the cross.

So the devil leaves Jesus...until “an opportune time,” which turns out to be the end of Jesus’ life, when he finds himself again wrestling with his fate before he is arrested.

So we have three temptations from the devil: self-sufficiency, power, and invulnerability, or invincibility. Jesus rejects them all.

The kicker here, though, is that Jesus ultimately gains all of those qualities in his death and resurrection. Jesus returns to God, and the Trinity is self-sufficient. Jesus claims authority in heaven and earth, and billions of people today follow Jesus. And of course, Jesus attains eternal life that never ends.

Not only does Jesus to seize these qualities for himself, but he offers them for everyone who follows him. We can be self-sufficient to an extent when we live in God’s love; we claim an authority the world cannot take away in our devotion to Jesus; and we have life that continues after death.

It’s tempting to grab power and independence and riches for ourselves. It’s tempting to think that if we had those things, we could make the world better. The paradox is that in giving up those qualities that we are tempted to pursue, in following Jesus in humility and reliance on God and self-giving love, we gain more than we ever could have before.

I’ll close with a song. I had fun thinking about all the songs and stories of people who say, “If I were in charge, the world would be better.” But it’s good to remember that God alone is in charge, and that is a blessing.

This is my Father’s world.
O let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong
seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world, why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King, let the heavens ring!
God reigns, let the earth be glad!

Maltbie Davenport Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World.” Public Domain. <https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/this-is-my-father-s-world/>

Amen.