

And it Was Good

by Madeleine L'Engle (first published 1983, text excerpted from the 2017 edition)

Madeleine L'Engle, best known for the children's novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, also wrote prose and poetry for adults. *And it was Good* is the first in a trilogy of reflections on Genesis and the Creator. It was written in the early 80s in the context of the Cold War. In this excerpt (pp24-30), L'Engle, a devout Episcopalian, looks at how Jesus' use of Scripture, and the relationship of the Creator to Jesus, can be a model for how we "remove the barnacles of tradition and prejudice" when we encounter God ourselves. One note since we are reading starting at chapter 2: instead of using either masculine or feminine pronouns to refer to God, L'Engle uses "el", which is the Hebrew word for "god, deity".

Who is this el, this Creator? Who was it to whom Jesus was always referring, and to whom he was always faithful? Who was it to whom Jesus prayed?

There are so many preconceptions encrusting our idea of the Father to whom Jesus turned in prayer, in joy, in anguish, that it is almost impossible to remove all the barnacles of tradition and prejudice which have accumulated over the years, and see and hear el freshly.

Each time I come to the story of Jesus' baptism it hits me with renewed force. After his baptism, during which the Holy Spirit descended upon him, that same Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. That never ceases to shock me. It was not an evil spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness. It was not a fallen angel. It was the Holy Spirit. And this story is as crucial to the New Testament as the Exodus is to the Old.

Jesus insisted that his cousin, John, baptize him. And though John proclaimed he was merely the forerunner of one whose sandal strap he was unworthy to unloose, he did as Jesus asked. And as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And there came a voice from heaven saying, "*You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*"...The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and then the same Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Why? Why tempt us? Why tempt Jesus?

It was at the moment of his baptism that Jesus was recognized as Messiah, the Promised One. If, as Jesus, he was fully man as well as fully God, there had to come a time of recognition of his vocation. And vocation must be tested. That is why, in a monastery or convent, there is a period of postulancy, of novitiate. Is this vocation real? Its reality must be tested.

So Jesus fasted. And he prayed. And at the end of his long period of fasting, when he was weak with hunger, the tempter attacked. "If you're really the Son of God," he urged, "turn these stones into bread."

And Jesus wouldn't. He could have, but he wouldn't. He simply quoted from Deuteronomy: "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.*" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest pinnacle of the temple and suggested that he jump off, just to prove that he really was the Son of God. And the devil, being very clever, and knowing Scripture better than most of us,

quoted the Psalms: *"He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you, and in their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."*

And Jesus knew that if he jumped the angels would hold him up and he would not be hurt. And since he knew Scripture even better than Satan he quoted Deuteronomy right back: *"It is written: you shall not tempt the Lord your God."*

But Satan, still hopeful, took him to a high mountain, and because Satan was an angel, even if a fallen one, he still had great power and used it to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth in a moment of time. And he said, "I can give you all this." And he could. And Jesus knew that he could, for Satan is the prince of this world, and in the world he has proven far too often how powerful he is. He said to Jesus, "I can give you all this, and all the world's glory, without any suffering on your part, for it is mine to give."

And it was. And it is. But Jesus said, "Get away from me Satan." And again he quoted: *"You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."* And the devil left him, and angels came and ministered to him.

One by one Jesus turned down the world's great temptations. Satan still uses those three; he doesn't need any others; we still fall for the same ones, over and over again. When we pray, *"Lead us not into temptation,"* we are asking the Holy Spirit not to test us as Jesus was tested, for we have seen that we are not immune to all that Satan offers us, as individuals, as churches, as the establishments of science and medicine and education and any other human establishments we can think of. We fall into one or another of the temptations, often deluded into thinking that what we are doing is for the best. We want short cuts to the Kingdom. We want it to be easy. We want to be pleased with ourselves -- which is very different from loving ourselves. And so we heed the temptations. But Jesus didn't, because his whole being was rooted in his Father, the God who created heaven and earth and saw that it was all good.

It is impossible to understand the New Testament without a firm grounding in the Old. Jesus quoted again and again from the Hebrew Scripture (and not just when he was getting rid of the devil). The writers of the gospels assumed that those who heard them would be familiar with Hebrew Scripture. The quotations are not credited or cross referenced because as part of daily prayer they were a familiar part of living. The god of the Old Testament is the God in and with and through whom Jesus lived, the God he refused to tempt, the God he served, even unto death.

I tend to stray from that God. All my false preconceptions get in my way, and these preconceptions surely please Satan, for they turn me from the Creator to the tempter who is much more "reasonable" and who, in worldly terms, has more power. Power is what Satan offers us, whereas God keeps pointing out that we serve best in our weakness, so that we can acknowledge that it is the creator choosing to work through us, his fragile creatures. It is God who has made us, and not we ourselves. But because we enjoy feeling powerful, we accept Satan's offers.

And look what happens. Just turn around. Watch the news on TV. Read the daily papers. Walk along a city street. And so as I turned to Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1, I tried to read without all the preconceptions which have been built up over the centuries - a task I understood was not completely possible, but which could nevertheless be attempted.... Knowledge is always open to change; knowledge, not wisdom. If it is not open to change it is not knowledge, it is prejudice.