

Church of the Divine Love Sermon Sunday February 22, 2026

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” That’s the first line in today’s gospel (**Matthew 4:1-11**) and my first thought is, Well, that’s not fair. The Spirit and the devil in cahoots? What are we supposed to do with that? Maybe it’s an opportunity to reconsider the wilderness and temptation. Maybe there is more to temptation than a test of our faithfulness, morality, or will power. After all, **St. Anthony said**, “Without temptations no one can be saved”. What if we saw the wilderness as a classroom and the temptations as our teacher? What if temptations are necessary to our self-knowledge and growing into wholeness? Maybe that’s what is happening in today’s gospel. How many temptations does Jesus undergo?

Three, right? That’s the obvious answer. It’s what we’ve been told or come to believe. It’s what we just read in today’s gospel. First, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. Second, he was tempted to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple into the hands of angels. And finally, he was tempted to fall down and worship the devil. Three is not an incorrect answer, but I wonder if it might be an incomplete answer. What if there is a fourth temptation? What if the fourth temptation is a universal temptation that runs through and underlies the other three? And what if it’s the temptation that you and I are always struggling with? What if all the other temptations are just variations on this fourth one? One of the things I’ve recognized in my life is that my temptations aren’t really between me and someone or something else. My temptations are almost always a struggle between me and myself. The fourth temptation is the temptation to betray ourselves. I betray myself before I betray you or give in to any other temptation. And I think that’s what Jesus is facing in the wilderness. Here’s why I say that. Immediately before today’s gospel Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River “and a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” (**Matthew 3:17**) “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” (**Matthew 4:1**). Son, beloved, well pleased. That’s who God declares Jesus to be. Jesus hasn’t done anything to earn or prove himself to be those things. And that’s true for you and me too. Son or daughter, beloved, well pleased. That’s who we are regardless of what we’ve done or left undone.

The way Matthew tells it Jesus goes from river water to desert sand with nothing in between. There’s no lunch with family and friends celebrating his baptism. He doesn’t teach or preach about what just happened. And he doesn’t perform any miracles. Instead, he entered the wilderness with the father’s words clinging to him like wet clothes. He goes from baptism to temptation. “The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God...” With those words the tempter has raised the possibility, a doubt, that Jesus is not the Son of God. That temptation will follow Jesus to the cross where “those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ... “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” (**Matthew 27:39-40**). “If you are the Son of God ...” That’s not a question between Jesus and the tempter, Jesus and God the Father, or Jesus and those who deride him. It’s a question between Jesus and himself. No one else can answer it for him. And no one else can answer it for you and me. It’s a question

each of us must answer for ourselves. That's the fourth temptation. It's the temptation for Jesus to doubt that he is the Son of God and prove himself by turning stones into bread. It's the temptation to doubt that he is God's Beloved and prove it by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple into the hands of angels. It's the temptation to doubt that God is well pleased with him and seek approval and recognition from another by falling down and worshipping Satan, the deceiver.

I've never been tempted to turn stones into bread but I have often been tempted and tried to prove myself, haven't you? And haven't there been times when you did or wanted to do something to remind and assure yourself that you are beloved? And how often do we betray ourselves trying to seek another's approval or recognition? In what ways is the fourth temptation active in your life today? What are the temptations with which you struggle? What is tempting you today to doubt that you are a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased? Our responses to the temptations of life, whether "yes" or "no," tell us something about ourselves. They offer information about who and whose we believe ourselves to be. They reveal where we place our trust, how we see the world, and our way of being towards others. In facing our temptations, we discover our true hunger and emptiness. We find out where it hurts and see the ways in which we act out of our wounds. We discover our weaknesses and our deepest longings. For forty days, followers of Jesus have practiced giving something up or taking something on not to prove anything, but to gain more of Christ. Lent invites us to face our sin, our limits, and our mortality without fear, trusting that God meets us in our weakness. In a moment of time when our world often avoids pain and rushes past reflection, Lent slows us down. It teaches us that resurrection doesn't bypass death, rather it comes through it. In Jesus, new life is possible on the other side of what's broken, buried, or unfinished.

With each temptation we learn a little more about ourselves. That is important information. It's diagnostic and it offers an opportunity for healing and wholeness, a new life, and a new way of being beloved children of God. When I am in touch with my deepest identity and value, I usually remain true to myself. But when I'm disconnected from my true identity and value, I often betray myself. And that's exactly what Jesus will not do. He stays true to himself. He doesn't magically overcome his temptations; he uses them to clarify and deepen his life. They are less a choice about what he will or will not do and more a choice about who and how he will be. What if that's how we approached our temptations? It would be tempting to say, Well he's Jesus, and I'm me. He's got an advantage I don't have. That is just another betrayal of ourselves. Jesus doesn't say no because he's smarter, better, or more holy than us. He says no because he refuses to violate or betray himself. He will not turn away from himself or run from his life. He makes a choice about who he wants to be, what matters most to him, and how he wants to live.

Let us ask for the grace of a Lent that leads us to greater attentiveness to God and to the least among us. Let us ask for the strength that comes from the type of fasting that also extends to our use of language, so that hurtful words may diminish and give way to a greater space for the voice of others. Let us strive to make our communities places where the cry of those who suffer finds welcome, and listening opens paths towards liberation, making us ready and eager to contribute to building a civilization of love.

Amen.

