

February 22, 2026 Lent I
St. John's Tappahannock
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Matthew 4:1-11 The Temptation of Jesus

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 The Fall

Psalms 32:1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven and when sin is put away

Romans 5:18 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive

Part I - Intro

In the gospel of Matthew, the baptism of Jesus precedes the temptations in the wilderness. The words that were heard by all present confirmed that he was indeed the Messiah, the one who was to come. These words were, “¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved,^[a] with whom I am well pleased.’”

And the next words begin our gospel reading today. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” One wonders why Jesus did not just get right to preaching and healing as he does, beginning right after this wilderness event, [Matthew in chapter 4:23]? All three synoptic gospel writers indicate Jesus’ baptism is followed by his wilderness journey. Was it was a test, a foreshadowing of what he would face in the next three years, a temptation to walk away from his very difficult mission of overcoming very understandable fears as he stood up against the worst of what humanity can be unchecked: oppressive, hateful, and death oriented – or was it preparation for that very work, so there would be no naivety about what was to come. Well he did overcome the empty promises of the evil one, despite his physical weakness from fasting for 40 days, and he did so *by turning to the Word of God*, [and no doubt strengthened by the affirming words spoken by his Father in heaven at his baptism]. So there is

already a great lesson for us today, we too can always turn to the Word of God in any situation for help.

The devil used very basic human needs to try to destroy this Son of God: the need for provision, protection and power.

Provision

When the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' Jesus, with the Torah engraved on his heart, responded with Deuteronomy 8:3 - It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The manna from heaven, or the Word, is to form us toward worshiping and serving God, and loving and trusting God as a child would trust a caring parent, in all things.

The word manna harks back to the 40 years in the wilderness of the Israelites after Moses freed them from slavery under the Egyptians. God provided them with manna since they were not used to surviving in the wilderness.

According to Moses, if the Israelites had immediately entered that land of “milk and honey,” they would have misinterpreted the abundance as a result of their own efforts, rather than a grace filled gift of God.

Moses insists, it is God who is the true source of *every* good gift, from the luxuries of milk and honey to a simple loaf of bread. It's because of God's loving, covenantal promises that these good things come, not the might of our own hands (Deut 8:18).

In the Lord's prayer we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” The Aramaic version of this petition is, “Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.”

So Jesus, before he begins what must have been in the human aspect of his nature a daunting task, was given a way to trust God, day to day, for everything from the food he needed to the words that would be necessary in every situation. We all

have these concerns – how am I going to provide for my family? How am I going to face obstacles along the way? Trust God in all things, and immerse yourself in the Word.

Protection

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Psalms 11:12

⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” That is from Deut. 6:16.

Jesus is brought up to a pinnacle overlooking the holy city, as if towering over the law and the prophets, and the evil one cleverly tries to humiliate Him by suggesting what Jesus knows to be true, that the angels would bear him up, as it says in Psalms 11:12, which is what the devil quoted.

Jesus responds, “*Do not put the Lord God to the test*”, which comes right after the presentation of the 10 commandments in Deut. 5. If for no other reason, to feel the power of these *excerpts* alone which Jesus said in today’s gospel, I am going to read the words from Deut. that immediately precede and follow “*Do not put the Lord God to the test.*”

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.^[a] ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. [⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem^[b] on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates].

¹⁰ When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹² take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³ The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. ¹⁴ Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, ¹⁵ because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth.

¹⁶ Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. ¹⁷ You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. ¹⁸ Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you, ¹⁹ thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the Lord has promised.

²⁰ When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ ²¹ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴ Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case.

So Jesus’ short yet powerful responses from scripture were like the gold that is formed slowly and carefully by the shifting tectonic plates from the depths of God’s inner being, out of which our covenant relationship has evolved, since the

beginning. For in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Power

Next the evil one turned to humanity's need for power.

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." Deut. 6:13

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

As we just heard when I read from Deut. 6, Fear God, in other words, Respect God.

The Israelites were surrounded by many different cultures and religions when they settled in Canaan, and there were to remember "We are to worship only the Lord your God, serve only him."

We are to also to try to identify what other things we make 'gods'

When we prioritize other things, and find that we are blocking God from acting in our lives, we sense the need to realign.

God recognizes our propensity to serve smaller gods, and forgives us. Yet we are to respond with a transformed heart and new dedication.

In Psalms 32 we read – "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven and when sin is put away." When we repent, we are forgiven and we too, like God, are practice forgiveness, as we say in the Lord's prayer, if we expect to continue to be forgiven.

Part II

I would like to address just two more points from our readings today. One is what I like to call the **perfect formula** of Romans 5:18

¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹ For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

This is also expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 as follows.

- a. In Handel's Messiah, we hear these words expressed in Part III, a duet and chorus ()
- b. The music of the first section is slow, sad, and inspires fear
- c. ***Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead***
- d. But then the music changes, it is upbeat, full of light and hope
For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive
- e. I call this the perfect formula because it explains how Christ's sacrifice on the cross made up for the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden.
- f. It highlights the contrast between the mortality inherited through "Adam" (sin) and the resurrection and immortality promised through "Christ".
- g. It also gives us reason to have gratitude because, "Jesus' love is at work bringing good out of all our mistakes and defeating all our sins so we can thrive." (Thomas Merton, 8th day of Creation, p. 77)

Part III

Today, by reflecting on Yahweh's initial claims on us because of his love for his people in sending Moses to free the Israelites from slavery, in gifting us with the commandments by which we can thrive, in sending his Son Jesus Christ in whom we both have life in Him now and into eternity, and by reflecting on his temptation

in the wilderness, we now also have tools to resist temptation. We are strengthened in our traditions and ready to renew and refresh.

Today and every Sunday in Lent we will pray the prayer of humble access, before receiving communion, to remember that we should always be grateful that God is the source of all goodness. God's grace, not our efforts alone, is the source of our blessings in the midst of our complicated lives.

As we begin to get a foothold into Lent, we are invited to reflect on the season and what it means for each of us: this is a 40-day journey of listening, fasting, repentance, and preparation for the great mystery of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Now is the time to begin our Lenten soul journey - and so, as a first step, to examine our priorities.

And now we close with a poem by Wendell Berry, who manages to say all that we have said about facing our fears, and turning them into respect God, in a few simple stanzas.

"I go among the Trees" by Wendell Berry

*I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.*

*Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.*

*What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.*

Closing Prayer

O Lord, help us to find time to live for a while in your peace, among the trees, or wherever we find ourselves. Remind us of your grace, mercy, and love. And, filled with these gifts, lead us ever forward in sharing them with those around us. Help us to hear our song at last, our song which is your song, and to sing it with you. In Jesus' name. Amen