

**“Temptation Reflections”**  
**by Rev. David J. Wood**  
**1st Sunday in Lent: February 22, 2026**  
**First Congregational Church Camden, Maine**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered,

“It is written,

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

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.*

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written,

*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him,

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
*Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.*

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

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Our reading from Matthew 4 is the reading heard in churches all across the world for this 1st Sunday in Len. Lent, as one author put it, is “An Outward Bound for the soul.” I like that. It is a time to venture out, to pay attention, to listen closely, to break new ground...to engage the struggle that is the spiritual life. To not fear the wilderness.

Like many of you, I have been dipping in and out of the Olympics. For me, the highlight was watching Alysa Liu win her gold medal. She exuded pure joy....to the point that winning seemed beside the point. As you know, after winning world championships at age 13...at age 16 she “retired.” Unheard of! Who does that? And, according to all the experts, whoever does that will never come back...no matter how hard they try. She did come back, two years ago. An incredible story. In an interview on 60 Minutes, when she was asked about why she chose such a challenging pathway, she said, “I love struggling – makes me feel alive.”

There is a deep connection between the experience of “struggle” and the spiritual life. As someone put it, “The life of faith is like jumping off a cliff and building wings on the way down.”

The 40 days of Lent...map on to Jesus experience of 40 days in the wilderness...clearly a jumping off point for Jesus.

This is an experience Jesus had at a pivotal moment in his life...recorded in three of the 4 Gospels...could only have been recounted by Jesus. And deemed by his Disciples to be important enough to be passed on to us ...which means even though this story is unique to Jesus...he had the unique relationship to God (Son of God)...it is intended to be formative to and for our own lives as well.

It is recounted for our encouragement.

Did it really happen...or was it more like a dream...did he imagine it? The best answer is: Yes. Hav you ever had a dream that felt so real and so true to life that it was as if it actually happened? It stayed with you. It was real.

No question, that it was a deeply spiritual, mystical encounter...  
One moment he is in the wilderness suffering from hunger;  
the next instant, he is in the center of Jerusalem, on the pinnacle of the Temple; and then he finds himself on a high mountain overlooking all the kingdoms of the world.

All the marks of a mystical vision...and, as anyone who has had such a vision will tell you, nothing is more real and true and formative.

Evil is personified as Satan in this episode...not because evil is a person...but because evil is always encountered as something deeply personal. I think the personification of evil also serves as a way of communicating that evil not something simply born in us that arises from some deep, dark, corrupted place in our hearts...it is in some sense beyond us...originates outside of us...to which we are vulnerable but not powerless to resist or overcome.

I think the right way to name this whole episode not “The Temptations of Jesus” but “The Temptation of Jesus”: these temptations are three versions of one temptation. They are ways for Jesus to avoid the human condition... to transcend, supersede, lay aside his humanity...

- Humans cannot turn stones into bread
- Or Rule over all the kingdoms of the earth
- Or survive a great fall.

Satan does not question his mission, his destiny...he simply offers a alternate pathway to accomplishing it.....a pathway that offered the guarantee of a good ending, no risk, no unknowns, complete control.

To accept this offer, to walk that pathway would be to avoid suffering...death...(which human beings cannot). To take that pathway he would avoid being stuck the passage of time (as mere humans are)—you can have it all in an INSTANT.

Satan was simply offering an efficient means to accomplish your desired ends...faster, easier, sooner, with a LOT less pain. After all, it's all for a good cause, the highest, most noble cause of all. Surely such an justifies these means.

Also, before we move on, I want highlight a couple of things.

- Satan quotes Scripture...that's worth pondering. Proof texting is not proof of truth.
- When Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and says that he has the power to give them to Jesus, Jesus does not dispute that claim. Any offer of political power to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth...should set of alarm bells. How many Christians have chosen to trade the power of love for loveless power?

One of the reasons we don't read this story well...is that We know the end of the story. It's easy to assume that Jesus did too...to imagine Jesus is somehow above the struggle. I think that can cause us to miss the gravity of this episode in the life of Jesus.

The best way to read this episode in the life of Jesus is to imagine that he did not know the end of the story. There is a struggle that is depicted here that is real, and deep, and in some sense, ongoing..."the Devil left him until an opportune time."

Everything that follows would indicate that Jesus struggled to the very end...prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane..."if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." In the midst of his dying on the cross, he cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Each time, in the face of each temptation, **Jesus declares his fidelity to God**...and to whatever way God has for him. He will not reach for the low hanging fruit

And don't miss this: in doing so...**Jesus chooses solidarity with us**...With his humanity...with our humanity....he embraces the human condition and he refuses escape it...even to the point of death...in everyone of these temptations he is offered a way out of the human condition...each time he declares emphatically, "No!"

He casts his lot with us. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews writes, Because he has known the vulnerability of our human condition, he is with us in our moments of testing and trial. He walks with us, makes a way for us. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Maybe Lent is the season to take the risk coming to terms with our humanity — to know God here in the midst of the flesh of our daily lives..

Whenever we find yourself in the wilderness,

We will feel alone...but we are not isolated...Our way is not unknown...there is One who knows this way, cast his lot with us...one who makes a way out of no way.

Whenever you find yourself in the wilderness,  
Know you're in good company. Jesus meets us there...Not to make us less human but to make us wholly human...to make us whole. In Jesus, we come to know God as the ONE who meets us in the midst the reality of our human condition...not to save us from it...but through it.

In his memoir, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*.  
Richard Selzer recounts an encounter he had in the midst of his surgical practice...

Selzer walks into the room of a patient recovering from a very delicate surgery he has just performed. The young woman's face has been permanently altered from the surgery...her mouth is now twisted in palsy...a tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth has been severed.

The surgeon had no choice...to remove the tumor embedded in her cheek required that the nerve be cut.

The woman's young husband is in the room by her beside. They are so taken with each other Selzer is hardly noticed.

As he looks on, he wonders to himself, how what he has done will impact the love they so clearly have for one another.

The young woman eventually notices Selzer and turns her face towards him and raises the pain-filled question,

"Will my mouth always be like this?"

"Yes," Selzer answers gently...but plainly and directly.

"it will." He goes on, "It is because the nerve has been cut."

She nods and is silent...in that moment it was as if everything hung in the balance.

The young husband makes the first move...

He smiles, draws nearer to her and says,

"I like it...it's kind of cute"

Unmindful of Selzer's presence, the young husband then bends to kiss her crooked mouth...and as he does, he twists his own lips to match hers...

to show her that their kiss still works.

"I hold my breath," Selzer writes, "and let the wonder in."

...I hold my breath and let the wonder in....

And the Word became flesh...for us and our salvation. Amen.

