

First Sunday in Lent, Year A

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on February 22, 2026

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 / Psalm 32 / Romans 5.12-19 / Matthew 4.1-11

*May my words be acceptable to God;
faithful to the teachings of Christ;
and inspired by the Holy Spirit;
that we may be blessed by the same Triune God.*

In today's gospel, we're not really seeing a power struggle between the devil and Jesus. We're actually seeing 2 expressions of the exercising of power. Both the devil and Jesus exercise their power in very different ways. They exercise their power in ways that we could learn from. And perhaps this Lent, we can grow by exploring how we exercise the power and authority that we have.

Among friends, the word "power" tends to be viewed as negative. We don't like to think that we exercise power over others. "Power" is something that the people on the national news wield, and sometimes we like it, and sometimes we don't. We, on the other hand, do not believe ourselves to possess any power. We are friendly, and pleasant, and cordial. But in reality, there are power dynamics in every relationship. We each have several spheres of influence. In some of those spheres we have more power, and in others, we have less. We just like to believe that there aren't power dynamics, or we use other words to describe the power dynamics. How those power dynamics play out depend on the relationship and the circumstances. And by-and-large, for the average person, we get along fine...maybe.

As Christians, we know God to be the source of all power. God shares power with human beings and Creation, and we have been given the freedom to choose how we will exercise that power. Those power dynamics that we have in all of our relationships? We can choose to serve our neighbors and be good stewards of the earth. Or we can choose to exercise our power to benefit ourselves. And as Harvey G Cox suggests in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, we can exercise our

power in irresponsible ways and become slaves “*of the forces we were created to command.*” What I think he means by that is that irresponsible exercise of power results in being a slave to one’s desires rather than effecting that which God intended by sharing power with humanity.

Cox writes that power:

is exercised in various ways and with varying degrees of legitimacy. It can take the form of:

- 1. Coercion, in which people are forced by extrinsic means to act contrary to their will;*
- 2. Authority, in which power is exercised by agencies in some way answerable to those ruled;*
- 3. Manipulation, by which people are made to act against their will without realizing it.¹*

We can see these forms of exercising power in today’s Gospel – and with the serpent and Eve in Genesis.

- The devil is being coercive and manipulative with Jesus, who is a part of the source of all power. Like many who claim Christian authority, the devil cites scripture in a manipulative way in order to coerce Jesus to do what the devil thinks Jesus should do.
- The serpent is coercive with Eve, and she acts against her will without realizing it.
- But by contrast, Jesus exercises His power by citing the authority under which all Creation is ruled.

The devil wants Jesus to succumb to His desires and use His powers to achieve His desires. But what the devil doesn’t know – or doesn’t realize – is that Jesus’ desire is for all to join Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. What the devil is offering Jesus won’t result in that.

¹ Power by Harvey G Cox in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. Macquarrie & Childress, SCM Press, 1986

Becoming slaves to our desires through the irresponsible exercise of power is really well illustrated in the Netflix series *Lucifer*², which is centered around the devil taking a vacation from ruling Hell and setting up a nightclub in Los Angeles. He ends up working side-by-side with an LAPD detective to solve some of the city's worst crimes. There's a lot of cognitive dissonance with classical Christian theology, but that's the point of the 93 episodes. Lucifer Morningstar, the devil, is both the antagonist and protagonist at the same time.

But where this is an example of our power getting the best of us is Lucifer's way of gathering evidence and sometimes compelling confessions. Lucifer looks into the eyes of the suspect with all the dapper and charm we Americans have invested into English gentlemen, the whites of his eyes turn red, and in his soothing English accent – *because of course the devil is English* – he asks: *What is it that you truly desire?* The person, under the devil's spell, cannot but answer truthfully. Out come leads for the detectives, who then continue to build their case. But also, out come motivations for the behaviors of the suspects, sometimes leading them to be perpetrators, and other times clearing their names.

Lucifer's power is an example of all 3 types of exercising power: it is coercive and forces the subject to act against their will; it is authoritative because Lucifer is from the Divine Realm; it is manipulative because, under his spell, the subjects don't know what they are doing.

But for Christians, this tactic that Lucifer uses about 3 or 4 times each episode has deep significance to how we exercise the power that God, society and those around us have given us. Cox suggests that the improper use of power leads to being a slave of the forces we were created to command. We have been created to have command over a vast array of resources: natural resources, financial, human, capital. We have been created to have command over time, travel, family

² www.netflix.com/title/80057918

systems, interpersonal relationships. So, if we use our power to satisfy our true desires, we become slaves to those purposes:

- If your true desire is to have more time, you are probably a workaholic.
- If your true desire is to have a perfect family, you probably have a dysfunctional and miserable family.
- If your true desire is to be popular, to be loved and to have lots of friends, you probably are surrounded by a lot of shallow relationships.
- If your true desire is money, you become a slave to money, even at the expense of your coworkers, subordinates and family.

We've all seen it, not just in the national news, but surely, almost every one of us knows someone who has been a slave to their deepest desire that is money, popularity, perfection, time or something else. And the quest for that has consumed them and influences how they use their power.

We have seen and known people in all of these situations. And Lent is a time for us to reflect on how we might be using our power to foster our desires. What we *should* be doing in Lent is trying to better understand what a responsible use of power might be. How do we share in God's power for God's purposes? And if we use power responsibly, will our desires be fulfilled in the end through God's grace?

What makes the work of the character of Lucifer so compelling as a Christian is that his coercive, authoritative and manipulative power is grounded in the truth – the truth that those whom he encounters don't want to hear. He draws the truth out of people, their own deep truth that leads them to use their power irresponsibly. Lent is our time to explore the deep truths that lead us to use our power irresponsibly, and we can do that *without* the coercion and manipulation of the devil. Jesus bore the coercion and manipulation of the devil for us. Instead, through fasting, almsgiving and prayer, we discover those deep truths and endeavor to use our power *responsibly*.

We all have some degree of power – power is not reserved for those in the national news. And far too often we claim that the power we see in the national news is power that corrupts or is corrupt. Exercising our power is not a bad thing, but, yes, there *is* the irresponsible use of power *and* there is the responsible exercise of power. From an ethical perspective, Cox reminds us that:

Not to share in power means not to share in the life of the community.

He's right because we all have spheres of influence that go far beyond our own needs. Our needs are just one of many within our communities. Cox continues:

Since sharing in the community is an indispensable ingredient of human life, misusing or being deprived of power reduces human beings to something less than humanness.

So, we have a responsibility to exercise our power responsibly. Looked at from a different angle, today's gospel illustrates that power should be exercised for the good of the people. The devil clearly wants to use his power to influence Jesus, but also for Jesus to use His power for Himself. The devil *could have* asked Jesus to turn stones into bread for those starving in His midst. The devil *could have* asked Jesus to show His power by saving those who are falling through the cracks. The devil *could have* urged Jesus to exercise His power and authority *with* the people in those kingdoms so that all may experience the Kingdom of God ... which is what Jesus wanted and still wants in the first place.

What can we learn from this? How can we be like this? How can we be countercultural and not chase after our own power or prop up the powerful? But instead, serve and resource as servants to others?

We have all – each one of us – used our power for both good and for bad, in good ways and in bad ways. We have abused our power or used it poorly at home, among friends, at work, at church, within the community. That's human nature. But we can learn from ourselves just as we can learn from scripture. Scripture is

telling us that power is not to be used solely for ourselves. Can we have the courage to do the inward reflection during Lent to see where we have wrongly or poorly used our power and how we might use our power in the future?

When and where we are able, we the good people of St Stephen's Episcopal Church can use our power and privilege to steer the unsuspecting away from the serpents. We can give bread to those who have nothing else but rocks, we can help those who are falling, and we can be in and among the community to use our power and privilege to ensure that the community resources are shared equitably. That can happen through our physical labor, our dollars, our votes, and our social action. That's the biggest source of power and privilege that we have within the wider community of San Luis Obispo.

Your fasting, almsgiving and prayer during your Holy Lent does not always need to require you to punitively deny yourself of your indulgences, require you to write large checks to your favorite charities or require you to flop to your knees at the mention of every world concern. Your fasting, almsgiving and prayer can help feed the hungry with good things. It can help our community resources get to those who need them most. It can assist others in doing the same.

So, let's not spend Lent sewing fig leaves into loincloths for ourselves. Let's learn how to use our power responsibly so that all may know

the Free Gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.