

“A Test of Identity”

Matthew 4:1-11

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: God of the wilderness, you meet us in the quiet and the dry places. Let the words of your mouth be our daily bread. May your Spirit guide our feet as we follow Jesus. Amen.

Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness happens right after his baptism. As he comes up out of the Jordan River, a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, my Beloved.” It’s a powerful moment. Clear. Affirming. Empowering.

And then—almost immediately—the Spirit leads him into the wilderness, where the devil presents him with three tests.

The first test goes right to the heart of identity. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.” In other words: *Prove it*. Do something impressive. Show what you can do. The devil is pushing Jesus to base his identity on *what he can do* rather than *who he is*.

Jesus is hungry. He hasn’t eaten for forty days. This would be the perfect time to show off his power. But Jesus refuses. He answers, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,” quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy (8:13).

We often misread the first temptation as a choice between the physical world and its values and the spiritual and its values—bread in one hand, the Word of God in the other. But that’s a false dichotomy. It isn’t about choosing “spirit” over “matter.” As Thomas Long suggests, Jesus isn’t saying that feeding the hungry is a *bad* thing; “it is just not the *only* thing.”¹

The church’s mission is much broader. It encompasses all of life and the whole community. But the devil tries to narrow that mission down to a few and to personal needs only.

Long warns that a church can fall into that trap. We can forget why we actually exist. We can drift from being a community of faith into simply

¹Thomas G. Long, “Matthew,” *Westminster Bible Companion*, Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 37.

being religious consumers, seeing the church only through personal preferences. The sanctuary then feels more like a service provider than a worshipping community. We start sounding like customers:

“I’m bored; entertain me. I don’t like the program ministry; change it for me. Make it the way I like it.”

But when we come only to receive, rather than seeking to serve, we lose sight of the larger mission God gives us

The second temptation is about trust. The devil takes Jesus to the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem and throws Scripture back at him.

The devil says, in effect: “Oh, so you want to live by every word of Scripture? Fine. I can quote Scripture, too.”

Then, he pulls a line from Psalm 91: “God’s angels will protect you. They’ll catch you so you won’t even dash your toe on a stone.” It’s a dare. The devil is saying, “If you really believe God’s Word is trustworthy, then prove it. Jump. Let’s see if God actually saves you.”

Jesus refuses. He fires back with another scripture: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16). In other words, trust doesn’t demand stunts. Trust doesn’t say, “God, prove yourself to me on my terms.” Real trust rests in God’s character and promises, not in dramatic proof.

But let’s be honest—the devil has a point. If Jesus truly lives by every word that comes from God’s mouth, why not prove it? After all, there *are* places in Scripture where God says, “Try me. Test me.” We see this clearly in the book of Malachi:

Bring the full tithe to the Temple..., and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Mal. 3:10).

So, why doesn’t Jesus prove God’s word? Because testing God this way comes not from trust, but from the **lack of it**. There’s a difference between trusting obedience and suspicious testing. One says, “God, I will trust and obey.” The other says, “God, perform for me or I won’t follow you.” Jesus chooses trust without manipulation.

The third temptation drops all subtlety. It's no longer a whisper—it's a direct bribe. The devil promises Jesus all the power and glory the world can offer.

“I'll give them all to you. Just give me your loyalty.”

By the way, have you ever noticed what dictators and the devil have in common? They have the same playbook. They both offer power, but only if you promise them your absolute allegiance. But Jesus offers something entirely different—the power of love through humble service to others.

In Jesus' third temptation, the shadow of the Roman Empire is in the background. The devil offers him a place at the top of a rigid social pyramid—a world where a privileged few control everything while many are pushed aside. Every age has known systems like that. But Jesus refuses. He answers with Scripture: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Deut. 6:13). Instead of choosing power, he chooses obedience.

Professor of Preaching Ronald Allen notes that Jesus' reply to the devil reveals what God's reign is really like. God, says Allen, cannot be reduced to an image or controlled by human power. God is not a tool to prop up our ambitions. God's reign is not about control. It's about compassion. Justice. Mutual care. A community where all can actually flourish.²

History shows what happens when God's people chase the wrong values. When we trade faithfulness for convenience. Justice for comfort. Truth for advantage. When ancient Judah turned to other gods and adopted their unjust, exploitative values, the result was defeat and exile.

We still face that pressure today—the slow drift toward numbness and indifference, normalizing the very things we should be questioning. Scripture warns us that when we trade God's values for lesser ones, we don't just lose our direction—we lose ourselves. We lose our souls. We lose moral clarity.

I have to be honest: I'm haunted by the silence. Where is the moral outrage from our churches over the Epstein case? We're talking about the systematic abuse of women. Trafficked. Sold. Raped. Clear, undeniable

² Ronald J. Allen, “Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11,” in *Working Preacher*, February 26, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-matthew-41-11-6>

evil. Many were minors at the time—these could have been our own daughters.

We have no problem taking to the streets for other causes—as we should—yet when it comes to this, the silence is deafening. Is it perhaps because there is a tendency to view sexual abuse and trafficking as isolated moral failures rather than systemic injustices that require a collective response? Is it also because those implicated are influential figures—leaders we may admire in politics or business—making it much more difficult to reconcile our convictions with the uncomfortable reality of their actions? Or is it because many religious institutions have struggled with their own internal sexual abuse scandals and have lost moral integrity and authority? Whatever the reason, it reveals a subtle, modern temptation: the urge to look away when the truth is too uncomfortable, or the cost of speaking is too high. We have traded our prophetic voice for the safety of the status quo.

But Jesus saw right through the temptation. He refused to let anyone or anything—not power, not safety, not even life itself—take God’s place. In a world that often chooses convenience over conscience, He keeps calling us back. He calls us back to wholehearted worship, faithful living, and communities shaped by love, peace, justice, and generosity. He reminds us of the ultimate command: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

So in the end, the three temptations focus on one issue: **identity**. Twice, the devil says, “If you are the Son of God...” pushing Jesus to prove himself on the world’s terms. Jesus refuses the trap. He does not need to prove his worth. He rests in complete trust in God, in total dependence on God alone.

Like Jesus, we all face times of testing. We all have wilderness seasons. Dry stretches. Hard choices. And when those moments come, it’s easy to think we’ve been abandoned. That is exactly what the enemy wants us to think—that we are no longer God’s beloved.

But remember: the Spirit did not leave Jesus at the edge of the wilderness. The Spirit led him through it. And that same Spirit is with us, helping us face whatever is in front of us.

Today, as we begin the Lenten journey, let us reflect on the promise in the classic song "Bridge Over Troubled Water." It speaks of a friend who stays

when times get rough—someone willing to lay themselves down just to carry you through.

That is exactly who Jesus is for us. He doesn't just watch our struggle from the shore; he becomes the way through it. To help us settle into that truth, let's listen to this version of the song, performed by Sophia, Leila, and Sam Pascual.

(Play video)

The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus was tempted in every way we are. He felt the same pull toward comfort, the same hunger for power, the same thirst for authority—yet he never gave in (4:15).

What an encouragement! In Jesus, we have a friend who can sympathize with our weaknesses because he himself experienced the full range of temptation. He faced the storm himself. When our waters are troubled, he is the bridge. He gives himself to bring us through.

Thanks be to God. Amen.