

You may remember the 1988 film by Martin Scorsese entitled “The Last Temptation of Christ,” based on a book by the same name. The film depicts the life of Jesus Christ and his struggle with various forms of temptation including fear, doubt, depression, reluctance, and lust.

The so-called “last” temptation was to live a normal life:  
get married, settle down, and have children.

The thought of Jesus having physical desires outraged conservative Christians who said that was “blasphemous.” But was it? Hebrews says that as a human being, Jesus was tempted in every way, tempted like we are . . . so . . . .(shrug!)?

Whatever the case, the “last” temptation of Christ was certainly the same as these “first” temptations, as I’m calling them, *to reject* his calling from God to be a savior for the world, to free the oppressed, and to liberate captive humanity.

The story of Jesus’s temptations in the wilderness is better understood as a *test* (linguistically speaking, based on the Greek) rather than a fleeting *temptation*.

Temptations come and go, but a test is a decisive moment—a fork in the road that defines moral and ethical choices.

It’s worth noting that his testing occurred  
in the wilderness.  
Alone.  
Without community.  
Mano a mano with the devil.

Notice that the text does not capitalize “devil.” This is because the idea here is not of a shadowy figure or entity or being that is somehow the opposite being of God. No, diablos here simply means the opposition, the tempter, the “other,” the accuser. It’s just like the Hebrew in the book of job, ha satan, the satan, which just means “the adversary” or “accuser.”

And the “tests” came after “40 days.” 40 days should ring a bell. We too are focusing on 40 days of reflection and sacrifice, in our 40 days of Lent. For us, it is 40 days of trial before the triumph of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Biblically speaking, 40 being a period of “trial” or “probation” that symbolizes

testing, judgment, preparation, waiting, or purification.

It's the number before redemption, deliverance, or new birth.

- Rain on Noah's Ark for 40 days and 40 nights.
- 40 years wandering in the wilderness, Moses: Fasted for 40 days and nights to receive the Law.
- Goliath: Touted the Israelites for 40 days before David defeated him.
- And Jesus fasts for 40 days.

And as sort of an aside, though not really. . . If you haven't already, I would encourage you to adopt a spiritual practice to remind yourself about Lent. As I said on Wednesday, this can either be the discipline of giving up something, or the discipline of adding a spiritual practice to your daily life. I'm attempting to do both, giving up mindless social media scrolling (so far, so-so) and pausing intentionally to pray three times a day.

Time only permits a brief look at the three temptations. There are great depths to be uncovered, but let's at least dip our toes in.

Looking at all the temptations, it's important to note that all of Jesus's responses come from *scripture*, and all come from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is, and this is the literal meaning of the word, a "second law," a *deutero nomos*. Moses recites Israel's history in Deuteronomy at the end of the 40 years of Israelite wilderness wandering from a mountain outside the promised land, recounting the law, the teaching, and the Torah, for the people. Moses is saying, "here then, is how you should live."

Jesus is rooted in that scripture, and knows how God intends for God's followers to live, and is able to readily articulate that to the devil. In all three tests, Jesus stands on God's word, and speaks truth to power – even when the devil quotes Psalm 91 in the third temptation. In every case. Torah wins out!

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*Turning now to the temptations,*

In the first temptation, a famished Jesus is offered bread and is tested: will he **feed the hungry**, including himself, and provide relief from hunger pangs to all those who hunger?

Jesus points out that there is more to this life than simply being fed. “Bread” is not enough. We might broaden this to any material items that we want or feel we need.

It’s no easy task to remember that our affection for material goods, even food, is ultimately inferior to God.

The second temptation is **To Rule the World with Justice** - The devil is the ruler of the world, and offers it all to Jesus, in exchange for his soul (!). “Worship me,” says the accuser.

This seems pretty relevant for today doesn’t it, the offer to Jesus of total political power. Seems like it might not be a bad idea, right? Jesus in charge of everything, that would be great? If ever there was a need for regime change from the Roman Empire and it’s oppression and exploitation, this is it!

But Jesus rejects power because it comes at the price of worship of something other than God. It seems that he’s saying that if you are after power, without a sense of compassion, service, and empathy, you are, more than likely, not following God.

This seems to me to offer a sharp critique to our fellow Christians who so badly want political power, and frankly are gaining that power to enact their version of Christianity in our nation today.

Christian nationalism throughout history, since the time of Constantine in the 5th c. has proved problematic, and the reason is that the Christian faith does not mix well with power.<sup>1</sup> It doesn’t mean we don’t act and advocate politically and vote, but if Jesus himself eschewed absolute power, should not his followers?

Power and faith are a bad combination.

From Constantine’s forced baptisms,  
to the Crusades and the killing of Jews who were labeled “infidels,”  
to Puritan New England’s Witch Trails,  
to the capital riot on Jan. 6

by those erecting a cross and flying a flag with Jesus’ name on it,  
political power always has corrupted Christian faith.

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<sup>1</sup> As the late Tony Campolo famously said, you can mix horse manure and ice cream. If you do, the horse manure will not be that affected, but the ice cream will taste like, well, horse manure!

And you know that I have mentioned things happening our world when I preach. To be clear: Jesus doesn't avoid Politics; *he avoids POWER. Because seeking only power is idolatry. (Repeat!)*

I mean,

- If Jesus was avoiding politics, he wouldn't have said anything that would have caused the people of his hometown to throw him off a cliff.
- If Jesus was avoiding politics, he wouldn't have said anything that would have caused the religious authorities to want him killed.
- If Jesus was avoiding politics, he wouldn't have said anything that would have caused the Roman authorities to decide to execute him as a criminal.

And what was true for Jesus is true now: when it comes to worship, ***POWER IS EASIER TO WORSHIP THAN JESUS.***

The final temptation is whether or not Jesus will **Serve God Faithfully.**

Jesus is tempted with a test for survival, a test to see if God is really present with him. "Throw yourself down from the temple" says the accuser. Jesus responds with something like,

"Don't be stupid," a manufactured test is not necessary  
since Jesus already knows that God is near.

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Augsburg University professor Laurie Brandt Hale recalls her four-year-old son's reaction to the story of Jesus' temptation. After hearing it in children's worship, he asked, "What do you know about the devil?" Instead of launching into a theological lecture, she turned the question back on him.

"Well," he said, "the devil talked to Jesus. The devil was mean."

As he continued, he leaned in and whispered dramatically, "If we were in a store and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another with candy, the devil would say, 'You should take some!'"

Hale was struck by his understanding that temptation is about response. She asked, "And what would you say back to the devil?"

With a sweet grin, he answered without hesitation, "Oh, I'd say, 'Thank you!'"

Isn't it easier to say thank you to the temptation to take care of ourselves and our needs, and our comfort than it is to follow Jesus, stand on God's word, and speak truth to power?

When some moral or ethical test comes our way, isn't it easier to "go along," to, in effect, say "thank you" than to follow Jesus, stand on God's word, and speak truth to power?

When the rich and powerful ask us to bend the knee to their self-serving values, their indifference to the plight of regular people, their discrimination of the different and disregard for disabled,

Isn't it easier to shrug and say thank you  
than to follow Jesus, stand on God's word, and speak truth to power?

When the highest official in the land asks us to applaud lies, name-calling, and cruelty, isn't it easier to say "thank you"

than to follow Jesus, stand on God's word, and speak truth to power?

When our nation supports ruthless murderous dictators, picks fights with our allies, and pushes toward autocracy, isn't it easier to say thank you

than to follow Jesus, stand on God's word, and speak truth to power?

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In closing, scholar Sharon Ringe places the temptations of Jesus in the contexts of the greater work for the kingdom:

“Though he refused to turn stones into bread,  
he does feed the hungry.  
Though he refused political power,  
the proclamation of God's *empire of justice and peace IS the focus*  
of his preaching and teaching.  
Though he refused to jump off the temple  
to see if God would send angels to catch him,  
he goes to the cross  
in confidence that God's *will for life* will trump  
the *world's decision* to execute him.”

May we go this week, and follow Jesus,  
Standing on God's word,  
Speaking truth to power.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.