

---

## *The Ultimate Temptation is to Doubt Who You Are*

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The First Sunday of Lent, Year C**  
**Luke 4:1-12**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan  
and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,  
where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2)*

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, a season of meditation and preparation for the Feast of Easter; and "as always" the gospel assigned for today recounts the encounter of Jesus in the wilderness with the devil, and with temptation.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story—but none of the gospel writers was actually there. It was only Jesus and the devil—"diabolos" they called him. No other witnesses, except the wilderness.

What exactly happened out there, I don't know, though I have heard hundreds of explanations; and I myself have offered plenty of explanations. In fact, most of us have our own ideas about what temptation is. Even Mae West—the great theologian (!?) but probably more known for her way with men—had an opinion on it. She said, "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it."

This morning, my questions are these: What is temptation? And why, oh why, does the Spirit actually lead Jesus into the wilderness so that he can be tempted? The gospel writers disagree on a few of the details, but the general gist is the same: It was the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, with whom Jesus had just been baptized, it was the Holy Spirit, who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted.

And, yet, it would be Jesus who later taught his disciples to pray like this: "Lead us *not* into temptation." Surely most of us recognize that line. It's from the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil."

One of the true opposites of Mae West, the great feminist Rita Mae Brown, rather agreed with some of this sentiment. She said, "Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself."

No matter how we might make light of temptation, we also ask, "How can Jesus teach us to pray like that, and yet also let himself be led, into temptation?" No matter what other explanation we have of other details, we still have this startling truth: Jesus was led into temptation.

There, in the wilderness, the devil challenged Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Well, there's nothing wrong with bread. The temptation is to feel like you should always get what you crave. That first temptation was for Jesus to exploit his power and position. The devil said, "If you are the Son of God, make bread supernaturally." Today we might say, "Command this water to become a cup of Starbucks coffee." There's nothing wrong

with bread, or with coffee. But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Each of us has some position, some power, even the very least of us. That position and that power can be good things. But each of us is tempted to use that power for our own appetites. What do we want at the moment? Do we really need this or that? The tyranny of the urgent tempts us to exploit our power for something less than God.

Sure, Jesus was hungry. He had fasted forty days and forty nights. But he didn't need food in that time of anxiety. He did not need a new car, or a new set of clothes, or a new house, or a new church, or a new loaf of bread, or a new cup of coffee, or a new something else. Those are all good things, but Jesus was learning who truly was, without needing some exploitation of outward power in order to prove it. He would live in the quiet confidence of who he was *without having to prove it*.

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of this world. And he said to him, "All this glory and authority I will give you, if you will worship me."

There sure are a lot of kingdoms in this world. Many of us participate in them. We volunteer in all sorts of wonderful organizations. We belong to neighborhoods and political parties. We are loyal to companies and businesses and schools. We belong to cities and states and countries, and we pay taxes to them.

These are kingdoms, and "once again" they are very good ones. But none of them is worthy of our ultimate worship. Jesus says, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'" Jesus needs no further authority than the self-authority and identity that he has already. He does not need to envy something, or someone, else.

That is the great commandment. When our ultimate devotion is to God alone, then we do not need any more authority or glory. We have enough already.

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem itself and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple (that's like Satan putting Jesus on the top of a great city skyscraper!). The devil said 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.'"

I especially like this particular part of the interchange between Jesus and Satan, because they sound like two wise Jewish rabbis debating each other, or two biblical scholars debating each other, or maybe even two friends debating each other.

They are both using scripture! After Jesus has quoted scripture as a reason not to turn stones into bread, the devil uses scripture to test Jesus. Yes, the devil can certainly quote scripture; "it says right here that "God will command his angels concerning you, and they will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone."

That's the Bible! Should we always believe those who quote scripture? Scripture, too, is a good thing. But there are some people who worship scripture more than they worship God. There is such a thing as worshiping scripture more than God. Jesus did not let even that temptation mislead him.

And this third temptation is larger than that. This third temptation is to turn the tables. This temptation is to tempt God. Let's just see whether God really likes me. Let's just see whether God will protect me. Let's just see.

Oh, if it's not God we are testing, then we are sure testing one another, aren't we? We are sure testing each other's love. Let's just see if she loves me. Let's just see if he notices that I have changed. Let's just see if they really care.

The trust of others is surely a good thing. But sometimes our temptation is to put that trust of others to the test! Who are you putting to the test? Your spouse? Your lover? Your family? Ah, your school, your church, your country? Watch out: chances are the person you are putting to the test is the very person who loves you the most.

Jesus said, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

So, given these various temptations of Jesus, what is "generally speaking" temptation?

I believe that, ultimately, temptation is anything that urges you to be false to yourself. The word "devil," is "diabolos" in the Greek, which means "to accuse." In fact, it originally means something like separation. The meaning of "diabolo," "devil" is "to separate from." Surely the devil seeks to separate us from God. But, in an equally powerful way, a devil is someone, or something, that seeks to separate us from our true selves.

The devil is asking Jesus to question his true self: *"If you are the Son of God, do this. If you really are the Son of God, do that."* The devil was asking Jesus to question himself. Are you really who you say you are?

The ultimate temptation is to doubt who you are.

The Lord's Prayer is like a psalm, like a psalm prayer. In the psalms, we pray without filters. We pray emotionally, earnestly, that we not have to enter troublesome situations, that we not be put to shame. We do not want to grieve, or to suffer, or to be in pain. We do not want to question ourselves, or to be led into temptation. In the Lord's Prayer, I believe Jesus is acting like a psalmist: Jesus is teaching us to be honest in our prayer. Be emotionally honest. "Lead us not, oh please do not lead us, into temptation."

But the Spirit of God does lead us into wilderness places, where we are indeed tempted. The Spirit will lead Jesus again to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays, "Father, , remove this cup from me!" But the Spirit leads him to suffering.

And, in our time, the Spirit of God will lead us to places where we will question ourselves, where we will question who we are, where we will question our identity. We will be tempted to consider all sorts of possibilities. Those temptations, whether about bread or exploitation or worship, whether about money or sex or power, will ultimately be about one thing, and one thing only: being untrue to our true selves.

God wants us to be true to ourselves. And the only way to know who we are is allow ourselves to be tempted, to be tested, to be refined, through the age-old process of self-reflection and self-analysis, and God-reflection and God-analysis.

The great Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said "The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little." To settle for too little. We should never settle for anything less than who our true selves are. The greatest temptation is to conform to a world, or to a set of expectations, that is not who we are.

So, I leave us this morning with two more quotations from the feminist, Rita Mae Brown, She said, "The reward for conformity is that everyone likes you except yourself." She reminds me of St. Paul there, who said, "Do not be conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2).

But the better line from Rita Mae Brown is this: "I finally figured out the only reason to be alive is to enjoy it."

Let's be alive this Lent, as Jesus was alive. Not alive to desires which tempt us away from who we truly are. Let us be alive to our true selves.

In Lent, it will take prayer and self-reflection, even fasting and self-denial. We will have days of wilderness. But the more we learn who our true selves are, and the more we are alive to our true selves, then the more we will also learn who our true God is, and the more we will be alive to the God of mercy and grace, the God of truth.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*