



“TEMPTED”

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 4: 1-11

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, February 26, 2023, Lent #1

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

4:2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

4:3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

4:4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

4:5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

4:6 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.'"

4:7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

4:8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;

4:9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

4:10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

4:11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Tempted: A poem in countless jagged parts

You know when a story starts at the end
And backs into the pieces that begin again
And again and again
That's when you know the story is true
That's when you know the story is you
And more than about you, it's about the gall
Of this universe to tell all, to tell
Nothing—to expect us to make sense
From senseless jagged parts and pieces
From millions, billions and uncountable
Shards, the ones that come after, the ones
That come before. The temptation to give up
Before we've started. The temptation that leaves
Us broken hearted and stone cold open
To a world so elegant, ridiculous, so rife
And fraught—overwrought, not, no not
What we thought, not what we were taught,
Bought, sought, hunted, stunted, taken, shaken
And stirred from sleep

This story begins in an attempted escape
From the likes of us—it's the people that
Make the story gory, grotesque, strange
And true... me and you, we're in this
Wilderness tale of the dissemblers,
The dividers, the connivers, the bomb-divers
The weak links and the hijinks and the
Weathering of storms and the laid-claiming norms
We're in it alright—up to our necks, down
In our bowels, toes tipped and minds soused
In the lies that we can't remember not being
Tempted to buy and sell, and forget to dispel
We are dead branches waiting to grow
Waiting to show, wanting, hoping for buds of
Bright futures and sutures to tie off the wounds
Enough about us, the skeleton crew
Remember one came seeking you

Calling me, us—all to something upside down
A world where we can believe in something
A world where God's feet are dusty
From roads traveled in thick nighttimes
Willful pursuit of ... heaven raining down
Into the aquifers of our ordinary, of our
Extraordinary threshold to shed and be new,
Be known, be grown into beings that
See a way into and out of the madness
Of the painstaking pain, of the waning draining
Habits of blame, shame, claimed by
The author of the story, who can't seem to
Stop believing that we can change.

Let's cut to the chase, the temptations
Are real—they wheel and they deal, they
Turn and they twist, they burn and they persist
The dissembler seeks out a weakened soul
Hungry, alone, seeking a way out, inside and
Below, running and shunning, finding, grinding
Into stones appetizing and strange
A voice speaks from the gut, the intestinal tangle
Of if we don't eat we will die.
The tempter, the deceiver, the fake believer
He says the rocks are there for the kneeding,
The baking, the pleading—turn them, yearn them
Let them be bread
“You can't just live on bread” That's what Jesus
Said. Instead of eating well past hunger,
He chooses to stay in the natural order of things
Rocks are rocks. Bread is bread. And bread isn't worth
Dying for, not today, Satan.
How many of us have sold our souls for bread—for the green stuff,
The cash, so brashly telling us the world can be ours
If we just get more, store it, hoard it, use it to get our way
How many of us have been used and abused by it,
Because of it, needing it, craving it, feeling the
Deprivation, seeing the commercialization of what
Makes life worth it, wiling away our worthiness
For a world that was not created to be owned.

Jesus passes the first test—don't sell out to the one
Who tells you the rules don't apply to you.
Jesus holds out for the real bread—he becomes it
Broken and shared—then coopted and ensnared.
Was it worth it, Jesus? I am tempted to wonder.
Tempted to squander, to wander off the path.
I mean, do the math—how many times will we have
To go hungry for comfort, for quick fixes, for feeling
Full and satisfied. This wilderness, Jesus, it is so stark,
Naked and barren, and it doesn't stop here.

The divider attacks the strong, the one
With the clarity, the verity—the true heart,
The loving part—the one that just wants to go home.
The tempter will use your faith against you.
If you believe then prove it—sacrifice yourself
To the cause—take the leaps faith draws, if you
Stand by God's word then this cliff is no
Problem—just jump already, and trust that
God catches the faithful. The dissembler
Knows just where to prick us, then tempt us to
Cut and run. The trickery of it all—
Prove your faith by testing it. Trust God by
Taking the bait that evil dangles before us.
Jesus doesn't bite. He doesn't chew the bread.
He doesn't jump the cliff—he passes on any testing,
Wresting in the Spirit of a picture bigger
Than this devil trading in details meant to confuse.
Don't miss the trick—the actual cut, the
Knife ready to lodge in our backs, the
Way virtue can spin us on tacks, spun around
to think we are good, when we miss the leaps
We do need to make, the trust falls that
Are God's calls—those are the jumps we can
Miss when we forget that faith is not safe,
It is not. It is full of peril and strife.
It can cut, we can bleed. It can hurt to be faithful,
Sometimes it can even kill. But you see
Jesus' skill? He knew plunges are not taken
For reasons so forsaken as trying

To prove that God exists.
God doesn't need us to prove God's
Existence. God needs us to exercise some
Persistence when evil has us in the grip.
We can abandon ourselves when God needs
Us to stay tuned in to the bodies God gave us.
Tread carefully with the sire song of
Respectability. God is not a respecter of persons,
Nor systems built on stacking persons on top
Of persons. Our respectability is missed opportunity
If you ask God which cliff is the launching pad
Not the one that puts you above the fray, or above
The day when you have to start over again.
We are tempted to skip humility, you remember
Humility—your ability to be just like me, just like the rest of us
Stumbling along on paths rocky and long.
Humble thyself and the second temptation of
Christ can be the soul food America needs faster
Than the drive through on a busy day.
Humble pie is on the menu.
And Jesus is standing by for our order.

There are pieces so broken,
Shattered and strewn, we can't
Pick them up. We can't put them together
Again. That's not the assignment
Rebuilding is not the call. Some pieces
Are lost to the winds because that's
The way winds and pieces move together
To clear the birthing bed for the labor
Of transition. The intensity of a way opening
That had once been closed.
In God, nothing is lost. In birth, death's edges
Are the tightrope to life's cost.

The final temptation, is sad but true.
There is a way for life to be made new.
We're tempted to give up on God when
We're closest to the promised land.
Just over that mountain, and another

Switch back or two may be too much when we
Forgotten the who—the God part, the part where
We believe in something together.
The final temptation says take this short cut,
Save yourself some trouble, put on a band
Aid and ignore the infection—skip that tedious
Healing inflection, and grab for the power—
the power is worth stealing.
Just look at all the ways it can fix it—
All this can be yours for the taking—for the making
Of your very own house of cards—built on sand, built
On shards—built on the backs of people you need
not remember—they are less than, other than, they
Probably deserve it. Just forget about them and remember
Your nature. You are self-interested, you are consumer—
You were built to take what is yours—to be
Predatory, exploratory—the writer of your own
Story. This third temptation is about conquest—
All this taking and pillaging—it's at the devils' behest.
It's his request, it's his pounding of chests—his
War cries, his alibis—the devil convinced the church
To say God commanded it—that lands be seized—and
That God would be pleased.
This fever dream manifests in this destiny
We are now mired in—of hunger, of plunder,
Of dying in droves—of the 1% with $\frac{2}{3}$ of the wealth,
Of \$81 billion spent incarcerating, the new
Jim Crow is the oldest trick in the book.
Do the math—the Devil's third temptation is the one
Human beings said yes to and found ways to dress up, too.
In whiteness, in religion, in maleness—all stool pigeons
For the real deal the devil has managed to hide—
It's not our souls that were bought, it's our self-understanding,
Our ability to look in the mirror and see God's face
Peering into the place where redemption is
Waiting to be born. That's the temptation we
Have before us today—to not look in the mirror,
To not see what we see—to not trust God with
The place that we just so happen to be.
The temptation not to accept that we are here

Not to rebuild, but to finally face up to the fear
That somewhere on the path the temptations
Took hold, and now we are left with the ruins
Of a world old, but not forsaken.

We must see the temptation, the tempter,
The one who seeks to temper our resolve
With fears and with distraction, with delusion
and inaction.

We stand on the edge of what could become of us all
If we find the clarity, the courage—to know what needs to fall,
To unravel, and where we need to travel—to find
our God-given home in the glory of
Love's story to make us all true
To a life lived in common with
Bird song and regrets, with secrets
written in stars that show us first light,
That show us how to love the night,
The times when we can't quite see.
Just when we are tempted to give up
On each other, or maybe even give up on God,
That's when we hold fast
To this story of Jesus walking in our shoes
He made the path for us to walk
And that, well that, even in this strange land
Is Good News.

Thanks be to God.