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Church of the Holy Spirit
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Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus goes into the wilderness right after his baptism. The Holy Spirit drives him there. He tries to figure out what it means to be publicly claimed by the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, and Rachel as God's own Son. Forty days later, the devil appears and tempts Jesus with the truth. The devil doesn't tempt Jesus with evil things. Instead, the devil recognizes Jesus' human weaknesses and tries to exploit them. Knowing Jesus is hungry, the devil asks, "Why not make these stones into bread?" Seeing Jesus' frail body, the devil asks if the angels would protect him if he were harmed. Hearing Jesus cry for justice, the devil offers power and authority. Each of these temptations seeks to divert Jesus from his deeper purpose.

The core of these temptations lies in discerning and remaining rooted in God's desires for creation. The devil aims to shift Jesus' focus from trusting God to self-reliance. The true test is whether Jesus will act in alignment with God's will, not simply if he can act.

Similarly, each person will experience hunger, discomfort, and powerlessness at some point, to varying degrees. In times like those, one may be tempted to alleviate their suffering by any means possible. In the story, Jesus' response to temptation highlights that individual needs are met by recognizing that hunger is sated by the gifts God gives all of us, by seeing that God comforts every person, and by hearing the voices of neighbors, strangers, and friends, which amplify the strength of the seemingly powerless in the face of injustice.

When Christians walk alongside Jesus in the Lenten wilderness, it builds spiritual fortitude, strengthens serenity, and defends against the devil's snares. Having seen how Jesus faced temptation, it is important to note that although the devil left Jesus alone today to be waited on by angels, the devil still finds new and innovative ways to tempt us in our daily lives, presenting answers to the needs, desires, and longings in our hearts, souls, and minds that will often benefit us.

For example, while we cannot turn bread into stone, as we saw the devil tempt Jesus, in our own time, the devil's temptation leads us to store more than we need and leave food to rot.

Likewise, angels may not surround people, but the devil convinces us that nothing bad will ever happen. This makes us unconcerned about aging, illness, disability, or disparity. When we are young, we may neglect our health. Sometimes, we do not plan for accommodations in our homes or for end-of-life care.

In the same way, we are not given the option to have absolute authority and political power. Still, the devil convinces us that it is right for us to be willing and able to fight, bleed, and die for our disparate political beliefs.

Ultimately, the devil offers solutions that address immediate problems but do not fulfill God's broader intention for humanity. These offers substitute shortcuts for the faithful, communal response God calls us to make together.

What followers of Jesus learn from these trials and temptations is that God understands our hunger, pain, and despair. God also provides humankind with everything we need to respond to these needs in our community, nation, and world, as well as the gift of time and space to recover from all physical, emotional, and spiritual injury. There are no quick fixes to the end of hunger, suffering, or injustice. Shortcuts are the devil's devices, and usually benefit one person at the expense of another. The devil plays with loaded dice in an all-or-nothing game of chance. From here, we ask how to remain steadfast.

How can we remain strong in faith, hope, and love? This becomes the crucial question for those entering seasons like Lent.

To answer this, Christians walk the way of Lent as preparation for moments of uncertainty, vulnerability, and wondering—when resolve and clarity begin to fail. In those dubious moments, recalling our spiritual practices, prayers, scripture, and traditions allows the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts, words, and deeds. These are the tools that guide us out of the isolated wilderness into the common promised land. God has promised that we will come to live in a nation unlike any other—a kin-dom—where every member is beloved and deserving of dignity, freedom, and peace.

When individuals are baptized, we begin to live in pursuit of that life in the world in which we live. Being baptized does not suddenly immunize Christians from the devil's interference. All baptized folks experience uncertainty. Christianity understands and includes in its structure Lent as a time and space to figure out what it means to become a minister of God's love in the world. Siblings in Christ, as part of the Body of Christ in the world, are bearers of God's holiness in the world. Once baptized, no one is meant to live only for their own needs, but instead to live as a proclamation of our love for God, for one another, and ourselves, constantly pursuing the beloved community God, our creator, desires.

This understanding shapes Christian choices: Christian choices are best made not for individual benefit, but for the benefit of all. As ministers, our calling is to represent Christ and witness to God's love through actions that create reconciliation and embody God's intention for community.

Through the sacrament of baptism, we are named and claim the affirmation of our faith, our covenant to learn, worship, build community, serve God and our neighbor, and deny Satan and all the forces of evil and wickedness in the world. The sacrament of baptism is the outward and visible sign of the call to be ministers of the Good News. When congregations form and parishes grow, it is in part because, beyond God's call to bring a community together, the members of the laity are empowered and commissioned to engage in ministry for, by, and with others. As such members of the Body of Christ, we never take action alone. All of our decisions impact the health, happiness, and survival of others, and we recognize this, being aware that we are part of the whole of creation. Baptism is a lifelong covenant that transforms us spiritually. We are called by the Holy Spirit and adopted into the household of God, and incorporated into Christ's body in the world. Believing in one God, one faith, one baptism as the basis of the Church in the world means that we are forever changed by the outward and visible sign of God's invisible grace. We do not opt in and out of being a Christian; it is who we are through and through. From the moment of baptism, we are ministers of the Gospel, and we are called to do the work God has

given us to do—for, by, and with one another. All of this informs how we live in community with both God and our neighbors.

When the devil appeals to our selfish nature, we need to say no. Our thoughts, words, and actions speak volumes. Yet, it seems more often than not Christians from the mainline denominations—the TEC, ELCA, Methodists, Presbyterians—subscribe to the St. Francis of Assisi attributed teaching that we "should preach Christ at all times and, when necessary, use words". But we forget that words are sometimes necessary. Claiming and naming and using the gifts that God has given us—acknowledging that they are not personal property but intended for the good of all people—is part of what Jesus shows us when facing temptation. This perspective broadens our responsibility beyond the self.

The needs we face are common human experiences. Jesus teaches that no one person's needs are more important than another's. As the body of Christ, the Church is equipped to answer God's call to feed the hungry, welcome strangers, and clothe the naked. The task becomes impossible only when we focus on ourselves instead of the shared call to collective action.

There is no distinction between them and us; rather, in its brilliant diversity, humankind reflects the vastness of the image of God. In glory and brilliance, every person is endowed with gifts, talents, skills, and blessings for the benefit of all of creation. All division, hatred, bigotry, oppression, and injustice are a result of the devil pitting us against one another and telling us that there is not enough, and tempting us to keep what is God's gift to us as personal, private, individual, and ancestral treasure. God has given Christians the responsibility to be good stewards of these gifts, to be a blessing to one another, and not to give in to temptation, but to be reconciled to one another, as is our mission as ministers of the Good News, members of CHS, and beloved siblings of Christ. Recognizing this reiterates our collective mission.

We begin by giving thanks and sharing within the church, learning to love those close to us so we can extend that love outward. Christianity calls for resilience and compassion, not competition. Our journey, despite temptation, is guided by faith that leads to enduring comfort and peace for all.

The devil lies. But the lies aren't far-fetched; they are far too believable. We walk during the season of Lent alongside Jesus in times of famine and feast, discomfort and comfort, suffering and redemption, to give ourselves an awareness that we do not need to go our own way. Day in and day out, wherever we go, we are never left to our own devices. The answer God gives us to every kind of temptation, especially the ones that seem at first blush to be a reflection of reality, is: no. The Church embodies Christ in the world. Christians respond to the devil by saying we are hungry and deserve to be fed, so let us feed one another. We are suffering and deserve to be comforted; let us bind one another's wounds. We are denied dignity and deserve to be seen; let us open our eyes and witness one another's belovedness.

We deny the devil's lies and believe God's promise, and we seek to pursue it through our free will. We wander in the wilderness of Lent into the paradise of Easter, walking the way of ministry, preaching Christ at all times, because we know the truth.