

FEBRUARY 22, 2026

Scripture Reading Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVue)

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. **2** For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

3 During that time (the Satan) came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.”

4 But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say,
‘People do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, **6** and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say,
‘He will order his angels to protect you.

And they will hold you up with their hands
so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”

7 Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. **9** “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.”

10 “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say,
‘You must worship the Lord your God
and serve only him.’”

11 Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON “Look for the Resister” Rev. Kathy Tessin

The country music song from the late 1980’s, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places,” helped encapsulate the theme of the blockbuster movie it came from, “Urban Cowboy.” Most of you remember that film (even if some of you youngsters had to watch it on a classic movie station!) A young man named Bud, played by John Travolta, moves from his small home town to the big city to take a job his uncle helped him get in an oil refinery. Living with his relatives, bored and lonely, he begins to go regularly to a bar that has cheap booze, dancing, and a mechanical bull that people compete by riding on it. He finds a girlfriend, Sissy, played by Debra Winger, and they marry. But their immaturity leads to a break up, and they begin to look for the love that is now missing again in their life,

looking for it in drinking and other relationships that are pretty unhealthy. In the end (of course!) the young man wins a fight and gets back his wife, and they ride off in their pickup truck into the night. They've returned to a place of love, hopefully, with more maturity.

The Christian scriptures offer many images of where love can be found. As we listen to God, especially in the teachings of Jesus Christ, we discover that the love in the form of righteousness, healing, forgiveness, and grace, aren't found in human values and inclinations. Unfortunately, our first human inclination is to look for wholeness and happiness in places that only offer fleeting good feelings, temporary satisfaction.

In this Lenten season, as we look at Jesus' walk toward Jerusalem over the next 40 days, let's take some time to reflect and reassess where WE are in searching for meaning and purpose. We'll move through the stories of Jesus to find where real meaning comes, where unending love is found. So, let's start looking for love

Today's Gospel reading gives us a critical moment before the ministry of Jesus begins: his temptation, or testing, in the wilderness. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew sends a very specific message to the readers of this book: Jesus is the new "Moses," Moses came through the waters of the Red Sea into a new life free of Egypt's enslavement. And Moses was tested alongside the complaining, hardhearted, weary Israelites during the 40 years in the wilderness. They were tested by hunger; tested by attacking tribes that didn't want Israelites to move into and settle on their lands; and tested by the desire to be in control and have things their way. So Jesus' time in the wilderness makes a connection of the Jewish stories of old to Jesus' emerging role as leader and savior of God's people.

There's also an echo of another story in Jesus' experience: We hear some of the themes of the story of Job, and the role of testing in refining and *affirming* faith, as Job finds the trust needed to get through extremely difficult challenges in human life. The story of Job begins with the tempter, Satan, challenging God that Job's righteousness and faithfulness would crumble in the face of the overwhelming loss of all of the gifts God had given Job. In this story God agrees to not intervene, and a whirlwind of loss overcomes Job's life: loss of property and means of wealth, loss of all of his children, and finally loss of his own health. In his grief, his suffering, he questions God: "God, why are you letting this happen to me? It's not because I'm wicked, it's not because I haven't been loyal to you and you alone! Because I have. So why, God?" And God's response is – it's not

yours to question me, Job. I have my purpose, I have my plan. Yours isn't to question – yours is to trust. Put in his place, Job repents of his temporary doubt. And he is rewarded, with a return to health, family, wealth. But throughout his testing, Job resisted denying God; he resisted following the temptation to buy into the excuses his friends were whispering in his ear. He ended with a return to wholeness, most especially in his relationship with his God. In the end we see the song of the psalmist fulfilled: “steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.”

And so with Jesus in his time of testing in the wilderness. Jesus *resists* blaming his Father, *resists* using his power as God to alleviate the uncertainty and suffering his human body and soul experienced in those 40 days. And in his *resistance*, he gives us a model for how to find love in our own human experience.

Temptation isn't just from an outside force; it's also embodied within us, in our own human inclinations to make ourselves like God, to have our own way, to remake the world in our image. With that caution about just who Satan is and what it represents, let's unpack the three tests Jesus was faced with in the wilderness, remembered best as the three P's: provision, protection, and power.

The first test Jesus experienced was all about Provision: how do we get our human needs met, from where do we get our daily bread? In Jesus' desperate hunger, Satan, or the inner human voice inside Jesus, was tempted to use his God-powers to make himself bread, instead of waiting for the time and place God would provide. Jesus was tempted to reject God's provision in an uncertain time and place in the future, and take matters into his own hands for himself. He resisted this temptation by using Scripture to counter the human urge that he is faced with, using the knowledge of God's will that comes out of extensive time and deep understanding of what the Scripture says to focus on. He is tested to provide for himself; he resists that temptation by relying on God's provision.

So the first test was about Provision. The second test was about Protection: the ways we're kept safe and secure and the trust it takes to rely on God to protect us when everything around us feels out of control and chaotic. In this test, Jesus is also tempted to test God, and create a situation to prove God will take care of him. It's pretty dramatic – he hears Satan whispers to prove it by throwing himself off of a building. And in response to Jesus' use of Scripture in response to the first test, a word of Scripture is used by Satan to rationalize this second temptation that challenges God. But Jesus turns it right around, firing back from the Book of Deuteronomy: do not test God. Just like Job's questioning of God's plan, Jesus was urged to question God's intent, questioning God's

promises and forcing God's proving his protection. And – it was an implied challenge to the test Jesus would ultimately go through – his betrayal, his torture, his execution, a challenge to have God call it off, to save him from “falling” when he goes to Jerusalem. Jesus resists challenging God's purpose, resists demanding God show caring and protection on human terms. In that resistance, Jesus declares again his total trust in the Lord.

The final test of Jesus escalated the challenge. It was about Power. Jesus was tempted in his weakened state to turn away from God, and turn instead to other ways of feeling in control, in power. We're told Satan tempts Jesus, showing him the world and offering it all to him. But here's the thing – Jesus was one with God, his Father. So Jesus already had the power to have the world: to topple the corrupt governing systems that oppressively taxed the Jewish people, to make Rome bow to him, to take over the rule of God's people in an earthly way. Jesus didn't need Satan to give him that – in his oneness with the all-powerful God, he could grasp it for himself. And again, Satan knew what was waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem. This temptation is again luring Jesus into the possibility that he could use his power to stop his coming suffering and death. But Jesus resisted the temptation and took the way of humility and servanthood, declining to use the power he already had, and he took the hard way, the way to through the cross.

In these three tests, with the means of Provision, Protection and Power being dangled in front of him, Jesus returns to the Word of God and the will of God to resist the temptation hardwired into the human side of his incarnated life. He resists doing something to make things turn out easier, resists taking human control of the situation. In resisting, he was also rejecting the way of this world. In Jesus' response, he resisted human solutions, and used the Word of God as his guide throughout his time in the wilderness. And he would continue to lean on God's Word throughout his life and ministry.

What are the ways we're tested? How do we resist the temptations that life constantly throws at us to take matters into our own hands, to store up treasures here on earth for protection, and to comply and be complicit with forces that oppress and harm others to fulfill a lust for control? It's a constant battle, and the reason Jesus taught us to pray in the prayer he gave us: “and lead us not into temptation.” Rick Warren's 40 Days of Prayer, the video series we're spending time with in the Wednesday Adult CE class, examined the Lord's Prayer in our last two session and unpacks what temptation is more extensively – it's more than the temptation to have another bite of dessert, the temptation to skip

the walk and sit on the sofa scrolling through cute cat videos. He points out that it's not just things we shouldn't do, but it can be the denial of things we SHOULD do. Rick also nudged us to resist the temptation to do the easy thing; to do just what's best for me; doing what's unimportant first; procrastinating – failing to get to important, necessary thing; ignoring someone else's need or pain because we think we don't have time, or don't know what to do. With Rick's list, we see we ALL are tempted daily. In our human existence, we are tested daily to do and say and feel the right thing.

Today, we looked at Jesus as the Resister. So, how is resistance connected to finding, and demonstrating in ourselves, God-love? We see pretty clearly in Jesus' testing the futility of looking for earthly solutions for our deepest, most challenged moments. We see the futility of looking for love in the things that only provide temporary satisfaction – seeking empty highs, tempting fate with our recklessness, and in mindless adoration of earthly idols. Rather, as Jesus demonstrates, it's in our resistance to the evil that lures us away from staying consistently connected to God that we demonstrate love of God, and find true communion with God. And one of the ways we keep from succumbing to temptation is to choose love over hate, even when it isn't the popular thing, the easy or convenient thing to do. It may seem contradictory, but we see it in Jesus' time in the wilderness: when we resist the easy way, we give up our resistance to God's loving provision, protection and empowerment.

Looking for love in the example of Jesus Christ, we see Jesus as the Resister to anything that keeps him from the love of God, resistance to anything that keeps him from focusing on God's will. So as Christians following Jesus' example, we also develop resistance to the testing of our allegiance to God alone by the spiritual habits we engage with, especially reading deeply of the Word of God. Our testing doesn't just happen for 40 days. It's our human existence. But resistance starts as Jesus modeled: Working on our inward heart. Basing our actions on God's Word alone. Loving and providing for all our neighbors, all of God's created beings, as much as ourselves. Letting go of earthly means that give the illusion of protection and power. That inward shaping steadies us to live a human life with its joys and sufferings, its hope and pain. And in that life, we see love. Love as resistance turns us away from that which is not of God. We resist the ways of the world when we turn fully to the love of God, and in turn loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We began this morning thinking about a country music song. Song is often how we best remember things. So let's look at another song. Hal Hopson is a

composer who wrote beautiful lyrics set to the tune of an old English melody. The words were a paraphrase of the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 13. He titled it "The Gift of Love." We also know it by its first line:

Though I may speak, with bravest fire,
and have the gift to all inspire,
and have not love, my words are vain,
as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control;
our spirits long, to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
by this we worship, and are freed.

In our forty days this Lent, continue to work on your inward love, letting it guide you, and free you from the chains of earthly temptation. Amen.