

I was an early adopter of podcats. I remember when Steve Jobs first talked about them at MacWorld in 2007, and I was quick to get on board. I had one of those white iPods with the touch wheel you would use to scroll through your content. I loved that thing. When I cook, wash dishes, drive, go the gym, go to the bathroom...basically, any moment I have to myself, I'm usually listening to someone else's voice. And I've noticed in the last couple years that pretty much everyone else is doing the same. When I go for a walk, if I'm at the gym, or at the grocery store, most people have their ear buds in and are listening to something. Who will you listen to? Now you may not be a podcast person, but you still you are surrounded by voices, voices that want to influence you, inspire you, scare you, shock you, control you, and perhaps above all, sell you something. There are voices all around us, and there are voices within us. Who you listen to shapes your life.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, which means we are following Jesus into the wilderness where he is tested by the devil. And if that seems strange to you, it gets weirder still. Matthew tells us that Jesus is led there by the Spirit. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "Lead us not into temptation," yet in this story, God leads Jesus straight into temptation. What do we make of that? This is difficult for us to understand, but understand it, we must. We often think that if God loves me, then God will protect me from struggles and temptation. Yet here we see the exact opposite. It is because Jesus knows exactly who he is that the Spirit leads him to a place where he is tempted. In fact, just before this story is the baptism of Jesus, where he heard those precious, precious words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We heard the same words on the Mount of Transfiguration last week, just before Jesus heads to Jerusalem and the cross. In both instances Jesus hears with stark clarity his unassailable identity—he is the Beloved. God is so pleased with him, and because of that, not despite it, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

There is no greater test that any of us will face than **the test of our identity**. Who do you think you are? Are you a beloved child of God, or are you on your own, alone in a cold cosmos? This is the test that Jesus faces, as do we. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record a version of this story, which means it was important to the early Christians. The only person who witnessed these events was Jesus himself, which means he either told his disciples about it after the fact, or perhaps more likely, the Gospel writers used what they know about human nature to creatively interpret something we all face—the testing of our identity, and our struggle with the ego.

In 2015, Ewan McGregor starred in a film called, *Last Days in the Desert*, which is a creative interpretation of this story from scripture. In this film, McGregor plays both Jesus and the devil. The temptation is portrayed as an internal conflict, a dialogue with himself, that Jesus is having over the kind of man he's going to be. When things get hard, will he trust that he is the beloved of God, or will he believe that God is toying with him for some inscrutable purpose? The temptation comes down to these questions: is God good, and God be trusted? The genius of the film is we all have that internal conflict, don't we? That's what the story of the garden is all about—can we trust that God loves us and wants what's best for us, or do we need to take life into our own hands and bend it to our will? Here's another way to ask the question, do we live in a benevolent universe, or are we all on our own? Who will you listen to?

[Slide 3]

It's at the end of a 40-day fast in the wilderness that the devil comes and says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus answers, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

After 40 days of fasting, Jesus is hungry. I bet he was. What better to tempt him with than bread? Is it wrong to eat? Of course not. It's one of our most basic needs, to eat and be fed. One of the first things a newborn does is look to her mother to be fed. We all need to eat. Jesus teaches us to ask God for our daily bread, and he will spend an awful lot of time serving and eating food in his ministry. It is good to eat. That's not the issue. The question is, how will Jesus use his power, which is a question we all face. Temptation always takes something that is good and invites us to misuse it. Why not indulge your appetites? We live in a time where we have near unlimited access to bodily indulgences that would make the kings and queens of old look upon us with envy. How many times have I said to myself, why shouldn't I have this? You work hard. You deserve it. Where so many times, I have given in, Jesus does not. He succeeds where we fail. Jesus knows that God is his provider; therefore, he need not satisfy his own impulses but instead trust God with his most basic needs.

[Slide 4]

The second test is to throw himself down from the Temple, so that God might save him. Behind this temptation it is the assumption that if Jesus really is the beloved son, then God would never allow him to be hurt. Sound familiar? When something bad happens to us, aren't we all tempted to think, "God must not love me?" Jesus knows better, and we need to know it too. James Finley says God is the one who protects us from nothing but sustains us through everything. An incredible statement. If we think following Jesus means we will be protected from pain and suffering, then our faith will not last. But if like Jesus, we know that our suffering does not in any way alter our belovedness, that's a faith that will endure. I don't need to preach to you on this point. You all teach me. How many of you have lost loved ones, have or are battling cancer, yet you are still here. Thank you. When we suffer, we are tempted to think God doesn't love us anymore, yet so many of you have taught me that God protects us from nothing but sustains us in all things. Thank you.

[Slide 5]

The final temptation is to power:

The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Power tempts us all. As we look at the world in all its myriad problems, how many of us have thought, I could run this so much better? How many of us have had to bosses who don't have a clue yet somehow have advanced to a position they have no business holding? We're all given choices every day to preserve our power or do what's right. I'm not sure you can do both. Jesus will not forsake what's right for the sake of power, but many of us do.

In the end, this story is not about how to resist temptation. Whether it is indulging our bodily impulses, thinking God will protect us from harm, the temptation to seize power by corrupt means, in various ways, we've all failed the test. The point of this story is not that Jesus resisted temptation, and you should too. **The point of this story is that because Jesus passed the test, it's safe for us to fail.** That's the good news. We are all tested in various ways throughout our lives, and the point is not so much learning how to resist temptation as much as it is learning how to deal with our failure. Because we all fail, not just once but time and again. But here's the good news—in God's family it's safe to fail. Just like Jesus, we are God's beloved children too. Our failure doesn't change that. Nothing can change that.

Who you listen to shapes your life. Like us Jesus was surrounded by voices telling him who he is, yet he listened to the one voice that mattered, the voice that said he is God's beloved Son. Who will you listen to? However you choose to recognize Lent, whether you fast or pray, whether you fail or succeed, may you know what Jesus knew, that you are and will always remain God's beloved.