

“Testing...”

February 22, 2026

The Reverend Stanley J. Jenkins
Market Square Presbyterian Church

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

*But he answered, “It is written,
‘One does not live by bread alone,*

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.” ’*

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”*

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

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen

FORTY is a loaded number in Hebrew Scripture. For FORTY days and FORTY nights it rained during the flood. For FORTY days angels fed Elijah in the desert. For FORTY years the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness before they were ready to cross over into the Promised Land. The number, which indicates a long time, is also associated with wandering, liberation, preparation—and providence.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that in our passage for this morning, Jesus answers each of the devil's temptations with a quote from the book of Deuteronomy, which consists in a long address by Moses to the children of Israel, who—after being liberated from the house of bondage in Egypt—and then wandering in the desert for FORTY years—now stand on the banks of the River Jordan, ready to cross over to the Promised Land on the further shore. On the banks of the river, Moses reminds the people that true freedom requires something of us—it requires a letting go.

The ways of slavery have a way of becoming internalized. We have to learn to let go of the things that keep us from freedom—learn to let go of the things that harm us—things we have internalized. We are told that, in fact, an entire generation of the children of Israel had to pass away before the people were ready to cross over. Friends, as Jesus reminded us when he called us to take up our own crosses and follow him, something has to die within US before we can truly live—something has to be left behind before WE can cross over into new life.

Therefore, during this season of Lent—when we sojourn with Jesus in the desert, when we prepare to enter the Promised Land of resurrection life, liberation life, on Easter morning—let us ask ourselves: What in US must die that we may live? What is it that has to be left behind that WE might cross over?

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness,” we read in the book of Deuteronomy, “in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” This is the passage that Jesus is quoting in response to the devil's first temptation.

The larger context here is the giving of the Law, which Moses reminds the people God has given to them to teach them to live and to grow. “By every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” could just as well be translated as “from the Lord's decrees.”

The Law is not just a list of dos and don'ts—it's a covenantal relationship built on trust. To turn stone into bread when you are famished—just because, in your privilege, you can—to pride yourself on a toxic self-reliance—as if your privilege did not depend upon the subjection of the invisible many—will not lead to life, growth, justice, or equity. It will, in fact, lead to arrogance, exclusion, and hostility. We see this in our own land when the wealthy assume that their privilege is a sign of their virtue—and mutual trust becomes mere contempt.

Sure, Jesus could have turned stone into bread. Sure, he could have fed himself—but what he is saying to the devil, and by extension to us, is that the life abundant, resurrection life, depends on the courage to rely not only on self, but on God's covenantal law, and—because the summary of the law is to love both God and neighbor—because the summary of the law is to learn to live in trusting

relationship—keeping the law, as Jesus taught in parable and deed, means learning to BE neighbors to others—learning to BE people that others can rely upon. The Beloved Community—the Promised Land—requires mutual responsibility. The desert is about learning to let go of our own privilege.

Jesus' response from Deuteronomy to the next two temptations—the temptation to test God's love by throwing ourselves in harm's way to see if God will save us—in other words, to cut our nose off to spite our face—and the temptation to serve and worship the devil in exchange for worldly assurance of our value and worth—in other words, to look for love in all the wrong places—come from the context of the people's testing of God at Massah—and perhaps have something to teach us about the origin of the need for privilege.

We read in the book of Exodus that the children of God were thirsty and they quarreled with Moses, asking him why God had brought them out into the desert just to die. God tells Moses to strike the rock of Mount Horeb—the locus of God's presence and revelation—that water might come out of it and the people drink. “He called the place Massah and Meribah,” scripture tells us—the two names sounding like the Hebrew words for “quarrel” and “test”—“because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah,” Jesus quotes Deuteronomy in response to the second temptation—and, “The Lord your God you shall fear, him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear,” he quotes in response to the third.

What is behind these last two temptations? Isn't it that dreadful fear, that sleepless midnight question: “Is the Lord among us or not?” Are we alone out here? Has he rejected us? Have we been abandoned?

Now, we get down to it. This is perhaps our deepest, most primal fear, right? This fear of rejection is perhaps the secret source of the need for privilege itself, right? When we play peek-a-boo with an infant, the child laughs and laughs—but what happens when the face disappears and doesn't come back? The other side of the infant's laughter is the terrible wail of abandonment.

And if we are abandoned, rejected, are there any forces left to serve other than the forces of darkness—the powers of self and other destruction? What is left other than our hatred of the vulnerable, who reflect back to us our own fears of vulnerability? In the face of this most terrible fear, Jesus, in the desert, in the time of the test, affirms the power to refuse to give in to such despair and violence. We do not have to be ruled by fear.

The desert, the wilderness, is also where we face death itself—endless death—the death where there is no true death, only eternal dying: the eternal rage and violence of the darkness. But in the desert, in the wilderness, side by side with our savior—our Jesus—our God—who in becoming fully

incarnate and fully human has taken on the fullness of our human condition—that there might be nothing within us left unhealed—even the fear of abandonment in the dark—it is here, in the desert, side by side with our savior, that we discover once more the light that SHINES in the darkness and is not overcome—and we discover that that light has been kindled in US and that it is the power to resist, and to create, and build something new.

Friends, let us join our Jesus in the desert once more during this season of lent, practicing, training, preparing to cross over into the Promised Land. Let us leave our fear of being rejected—our fear of being unloveable—our fear of being helpless—let us leave our privilege and everything else that keeps us from true freedom on THIS side of the river—let us die to the darkness that we might live to the light—that we might BE the light—the body of Christ in the world—that we might BE ready for resurrection, ready for restoration—ready to build the Beloved Community—the Promised Land—in our own neighborhood, in our own city, in our own beloved Harrisburg.

Friends, get ready! Easter is coming!

And we have a role to play in what comes next. Amen.