

**First Sunday in Lent
February 21 & 22, 2026
American Lutheran Church
Rev. Lisa Hackler**

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

There is something humbling about this story.

When we hear about the temptations Jesus faced — forty days without food, the temptation to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down and force God to rescue him, to gain the kingdoms of the world without the suffering of the cross — it all sounds dramatic, almost epic.

But honestly...

if I were fasting forty days out in the wilderness...

the devil wouldn't need to offer me kingdoms.

He'd probably just have to show up with a box of Fiddle Faddle...

and I'd be done for.

Which is humbling. Because it reminds me how little spiritual strength I really have on my own.

Now, when we look at the Old Testament stories about Israel in the wilderness... the people weren't much different than me. They get a little hungry...and suddenly Egypt starts looking good again. They start saying, "At least in Egypt we had food." Never mind that they were slaves in Egypt.

Never mind that God had just brought them through the sea. Hunger and uncertainty comes around; And trust becomes hard.

So, they complain. They grumble. They start longing for the past. Moses leaves them unsupervised a little while to go up a mountain and they build a golden calf. Now maybe we've never crafted a golden calf, but if we're honest...we understand the doubt that sets in when we are facing hard times and the yearning for a god we can control.

Because when life feels uncertain — illness, loss, disappointment, fear about the future —trust becomes hard for us too.

And that's what makes the beginning of today's gospel so striking. Jesus has just been baptized. The heavens opened. A voice declared:

“You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

If there were ever a moment when life should go smoothly after that... this would be it. But the very next thing we read is:

“The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.”

The Spirit led Jesus! This was not punishment. Not failure. But testing.

And immediately we learn something important:

God's beloved are not exempt from struggle. In fact, Scripture shows the opposite. From Israel... to the prophets... to the apostles... to Jesus himself...

God's work of saving humanity unfolds right in the middle of difficulty. Each temptation Jesus is presented with by the devil is really an invitation to stop trusting God.

Turn stones into bread — rely on yourself.

Jump from the temple — force God to prove protection.

Take the kingdoms — avoid suffering and take control.

But Jesus refuses. Where Israel failed... Jesus is faithful. Where we fail...

Jesus is faithful. And this is where the gospel becomes very good news.

Because Jesus is not just showing us how to resist temptation.

Jesus is doing something for us. He is the perfectly faithful human we could never be. His obedience becomes our righteousness. His trust becomes our hope. His victory becomes our salvation. So yes, Jesus is an example. But more importantly...Jesus is our Savior. Because the truth is — we will fail. We will doubt. We will worry. We will grasp for control. We will sometimes trust fear more than God. And when that happens...our hope is not in our own strength. Our hope is Christ. It is by Jesus' strength that we stand. It is by Jesus' faithfulness that we endure. It is by Jesus' mercy that we are held.

To me, trust has never felt like trying harder. It feels more like floating. If you've ever been in water, you know what happens when you panic. You thrash. You fight. You try to save yourself. And that's when you start to sink. But if you lean back...if you let go...if you allow the water to hold you...you float. The water that could drown you... carries you.

Faith is like that. The less we wrestle for control...the more we discover God is already holding us. And that brings us back to baptism. Because in baptism... water does two things. It drowns. And it saves.

Our old self — the self that tries to control everything — is drowned with Christ. And a new self rises. A self held by grace. A self carried by mercy.

So, when temptation comes — especially the temptation not to trust God — we do not save ourselves through effort. We lean back into grace. We trust the One who holds us.

And notice how this story ends... after the struggle... after the temptation...after Jesus says no thanks to all the temptations. The angels come and minister to Jesus. Not before but after.

Which tells us something about our lives. God does not promise we will never enter wilderness. But God does promise we will not be abandoned there.

So when life feels uncertain...when fear rises...when trust is hard...remember this:

You do not have to save yourself. Lean back. The grace of God is deeper than your fear. The mercy of Christ is stronger than your doubt. The Spirit is holding you even now.

The water that could drown you...will carry you home.

Amen.