

“Always Faithful”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Lent I – March 1, 2020

**Matthew 4: 1-11**

Somehow, it is March 1. Somehow, it is the First Sunday of Lent. Less than three months from now it will be Memorial Day. Sorry – I just got on a roll and am looking forward to summer!

No matter how much we yearn for the march of time to slow down, the calendar continues to push forward at what feels like a relentless pace. Even though we will likely have at least one more winter-like spell of weather, when the calendar turns to March, we mentally believe that Spring is here. It seems like only yesterday that we were taking down the Christmas decorations, doesn't it?

We can feel that same whiplash in the church, as well. It was less than ten weeks ago that we celebrated the birth of the Christ Child on Christmas Eve. Now, we are at the beginning of the Season of Lent. Just as the four Sundays of Advent help us prepare for God's gift of love in Jesus Christ, these six Sundays of Lent help us prepare for the passion, death, and resurrection of God's only son. While we might yearn for time to slow down, as the community of faith we have been given this gift of time to prepare through self-reflection and examination how our lives have been transformed through God's love in Jesus Christ.

What does the Season of Lent mean to you? How do you observe these forty days in your faith each year? Some people will sacrifice something – a specific food or an activity – as a way of recalling God's blessings in their lives. Other people will add an experience or activity to their daily routines during Lent – a spiritual practice or mindfulness activity, for example – as a way to center themselves on God in a new way over these forty days. I would invite you to do something intentional in this Season of Lent, so that you might draw closer to God's love and embrace what we will experience during Holy Week.

Our scripture today is the direct reason we observe forty days in the Season of Lent. We read that, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights” (4:1-2). Just as our Lord spent forty days in the wilderness, we are called to spend forty days examining ourselves in light of his love. It also recalls the forty years of wilderness exile the Israelites experienced, when they were famished and depended on God's providence and care for survival. As we will see in this passage from Matthew, the connections between the old covenant in Israel and the new covenant in Jesus do not end with the number forty.

To begin, verse two is not very long, but it definitely packs a lot of context into this familiar story. We read that Jesus is led into the desert and

fasts for forty days and nights, “and afterwards he is famished.” My first reaction is, “I’d be famished after one day, much less forty!” Jesus has lived through forty days of physical and emotional agony. Rather than being able to find relief and strength with food and sustenance, instead he is met by “the tempter,” who sets before him three temptations. It’s one thing to face the devil on a full stomach. It’s quite another to face him in a vulnerable, weakened condition.

But what are these temptations that Jesus faced, and how might his responses give us strength and guidance for the temptations we face in our modern world today? I read a reflection on this passage by Amy Zietlow, who is a Lutheran pastor in Decatur, Illinois. She described how when she was a supervisor at a non-profit organization, she found it helpful to use what’s called the skill/will matrix when evaluating other staff. For example, in my role as head of staff, I along with the Personnel Team am charged with the task of assessing other staff as to how they are fulfilling their job responsibilities.

So, let’s say I am evaluating Lisa here – Lisa just got nervous, I can tell! Using this skill/will matrix, there are two factors that intersect when considering her job performance. One factor is her ability to learn and achieve the skills necessary to do her job. As her employer, we can offer training and coaching to her, so that if there are areas where she doesn’t have experience, she has the opportunity to learn those skills that are needed.

The second factor is her motivation or will to do her job. She might be the most highly skilled person to do her job, but if she lacks any motivation to utilize those skills, then they are wasted and not useful to her employer. This skill/will matrix helps measure where these two factors intersect, and how that then leads to understanding how someone is best suited or not suited for the position he or she is called to.

How does this relate to our passage today? Zietlow writes: *The devil uses the skill/will matrix, at first focusing on God’s ability to meet Jesus’ needs: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Even though Jesus is famished from fasting, he knows that God’s ability to feed his belly was never in question. Jesus acknowledges that God has the skill to work a stone-to-bread transformation, but Jesus does not have the will to ask.*

*The devil then moves beyond God’s ability to God’s willingness. Jesus is placed on the pinnacle of the temple and asked, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” Surely, God is not only able but also willing to save you. Jesus doesn’t take the bait – he won’t test God’s willingness.*

*The devil then turns away from God’s ability and willingness to Jesus’ own. The devil focuses on the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Jesus is taken to a high mountain. The devil expresses his ability and willingness to give Jesus all the kingdoms and splendor Jesus sees in exchange for his faithfulness.*

*This is the crux of things. God's ability was never really in question for the devil, only the willingness of Jesus to shift loyalties. Jesus responds that he is only willing to worship God.*

*In the wilderness, Jesus assesses the devil's skill and will, as well. The devil has the skill for faithfulness to God but not the willingness. Perhaps this insight guides Jesus to look first for willingness in his disciples. Returning to society, Jesus promptly calls an inner circle of followers, none of whom rates high in skill. However, unlike the devil, they all rank high in willingness. Jesus begins with their willingness and then develops their skills on the road (The Christian Century, February 26, 2020, 19).*

Following Jesus as his disciple is not necessarily about achieving the greatest Biblical knowledge, or mastering the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church, or creating the perfect Church School lesson, or saying exactly the right thing to someone who is grieving or hurting. Those skills and abilities are great – but if they are not matched with an enthusiasm for faith, they are wasted for the building up of God's kingdom. The church has often felt tempted by the world's expectations that the ideal Christian is one who is masterfully skilled in knowledge and technique. But Jesus reminds us – in this passage and in his earthly ministry – that what matters most to him is a willingness to take up his cross and follow him. Perhaps we need to hear that over and over again when we are inviting others to follow our Lord – you don't have to be perfect, you only need a willingness to learn, to be molded, and then to follow.

Last weekend, I was at Wabash College for a reunion with my colleagues from the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program, a program I participated in 11 years ago. I am forever grateful for both your encouragement for me to have that experience, and for friendships from that program which will last a lifetime. Our keynote speaker was Miroslav Volf, a theologian who is on the faculty at Yale Divinity School. He spoke to us about the importance of rediscovering what it means to lead a flourishing life, in contrast to what our modern world tempts us to believe we should strive for in life. In other words, we are called not just to live a good life, but to live a flourishing, worthy life which God has called us to.

In his book, For the Life of the World, Miroslav Volf writes: *The first temptation (of Jesus) was the most fundamental. "Turn these stones into bread," the tempter taunted Jesus, who was famished after a forty-day fast in the wilderness. Jesus resisted, responding, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (4:4). Jesus is quoting the Hebrew Bible here. These words came first to the children of Israel as a summary of the main lesson they were to have learned in the course of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land. Bread was what they needed in the wilderness. That much was never in doubt; that trust, as insistent as a growling stomach, they didn't need to learn. But they needed more than "bread," and that truth, not as obvious as physical hunger but as real as the possibility of missing their human purpose, they did*

*need to learn. All humans do, perhaps especially we moderns. We have made our greatest temptation into the chief goal of our lives and the main purpose of our major institutions: to create and enjoy ever more sophisticated varieties of "bread." Living by bread alone, we fail our humanity* (*For the Life of the World*, Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, BrazosPress, Grand Rapids, Michigan, © 2019: 33-34).

How are we called to turn away from the notion that all we need is more of this world's bread to be satisfied, and instead turn to the source of all that we need, "every word that comes from the mouth of God?" How can we resist the temptation to place God on our side of the social, political, or economic argument against our adversary, and instead always remain faithful so that we "do not put the Lord our God to the test?" How will we turn aside from self-serving, worldly allegiances, and instead profess our total allegiance to the one who alone we worship and serve?

In the face of temptation, Jesus was always faithful in his willingness to God. May he be our example and our strength to face the temptations of this world, so that others might be welcomed into this journey of discipleship.

Thanks be to God. Amen.