



March 6, 2022: The First Sunday in Lent
The Insane Temptation of Magical Religion
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O LORD: *May your Word only be spoken, and may your Word only be heard: in the Name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.*

I have a confession to make: I struggle with the temptation of thinking that I can control God. I have this fantasy that, if I pray in the right way, engage in the various disciplines of prayer, worship, meditation, contemplation, almsgiving, spiritual reading, fasting, working for justice, taking care of my body, tending to my relationships, then God should see to it that my life should unfold without undue struggle. Isn't that insane? But it's honest truth, if I am real with myself.

In my prayer, study, and wrestling with the Gospel this week, I came to this realization in a refreshed way. In the language of the passage, I would say that my temptation, from the Devil, or from that part of my psyche that seeks to do me harm, is to believe in magical religion. Magical religion is believing that through religious or psychological incantations, charms, obsessions, rituals and legalisms, I can try to control events or produce effects in my life that are pleasing to me, or to others. In the words of Wayne Oates, this is "when religion gets sick, when we imagine that our religious behavior produces outcomes that are predictable, that the risks of the future have been, charted, precautions taken, and we are safe." (Lawrence Hart, *Alleluia is the Song of the Desert*, p. 44). I'll come back to magical religion in a minute.

We always begin the season of Lent with a Gospel lesson describing the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell the story little bit differently. Matthew and Luke spell out this episode in Jesus's life with some specificity, each laying out three particular temptations that Jesus faced. And the way the Church has laid out the seasons of the Church year, with Lent as a season of reflection and introspection that prepares us for the joy of the resurrection, Jesus' temptations in the wilderness are a beautiful and challenging way to reflect on our temptations, in light of Jesus' own real, not performative, struggles.

Jesus and the Devil engage in verbal and spiritual combat over three "if/then" statements:

If you are the son of God, then:

1. Command this stone to become bread
2. Worship me and I will give you all authority over the kingdoms of the world
3. Throw yourself down from here and God's angels will protect you.

You'll notice that they battle one another with passages of Scripture, which says something about how well Jesus knew his Bible, and how important Scripture was to the early Church. You may also notice that Devil is trying to trick Jesus into practicing... *magical religion* that seeks to manipulate God.

Jesus has no interest in magical religion. He will not take shortcuts that seek to manipulate God, undermine his mission, or belittle the power mortals receive when we acknowledge our temptations and try again with God's help to be faithful. If tests reveal what we are made of, then these tests show what Jesus is made of. He will not compromise with evil. He will not undermine God's mission for him.



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Interpreters have looked at these three tests in various ways. The first test is the temptation of the quick fix. Or maybe better, it's Jesus' temptation to avoid his humanity. Jesus says to the Devil, I will not use special powers to negate for myself the basic human needs that all humans have.

The second test is the temptation is to misuse power for his own glory, to put something other than God in the place of God, to invest heavily in his ego, rather than in his relationship to God.

The third test can be as seen as the temptation to avoid vulnerability. The Devil in effect says to Jesus, you have the power to avoid suffering. Why don't you use it? Jesus responds that he will not use his powers to avoid his own suffering, to avoid vulnerability. He will not try to manipulate God into showing God's presence, power, and caring on his terms.

Aren't these temptations we all struggle with – the temptation to choose the quick fix, to choose the way of our ego rather than of humility, to choose to avoid suffering? Jesus, and we, learn from these tests what Jesus is made of—of humility, of strength, of courage, of faithfulness.

We note also that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit, after his baptism; and that he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. The Greek word for “led” has the sense of “laying hold of,” of “grabbing on to.” I resist the idea that God intentionally leads us into wilderness situations where we are tested to learn what we are made of. But maybe God does, because maybe God wants us to know that with the Holy Spirit, we are able to endure the suffering, and experience the joy, that is the fullness of life that is God's desire for us.

The challenge to us is to resist the temptation to think we can manipulate God to our purposes, to resist the temptation that we can avoid hard choices and still be faithful, to resist the practice of magical religion. Just as the text tells us that the Devil left Jesus until an opportune time, so can we be sure that we will be tempted again. And we will fail. As our 2nd Baptismal promise says, “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and *when* you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” (p. 293, *Book of Common Prayer*.)

But we trust that the Holy Spirit is with us in our struggles with temptation and gives us the strength to persevere. While God never promises us no struggles, God promises to be with us in our struggles.

And speaking of struggles and perseverance:

We are watching together with the whole world the horror of the unfolding invasion of Ukraine. Not only is there war with weapons on the ground and in the air, there is a war on social media, a war of disinformation, a war for the hearts and souls of human beings. The microcosm of Ukrainians, Russians, and those rushing to help, is distilled into an intense mixture, and therein are the temptations with which we all struggle. We are challenged to resist the evil of harming another person, yet to resist even more the temptation to remain passive in the face of evil. We fight the temptation to resist the easy way;



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there is the challenge to remain steady and constant in the struggle over the long haul; especially there is the challenge to resist the temptation to despair. There is no room in any of this for magical religion. Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century Protestant reformer, wrote something which I have on the wall in my office. It gives me comfort, hope, and courage, when I reflect on our struggles with temptation:

“This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being but becoming; not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory; but all is being purified.” (Martin Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles.*)

Amen.