

First Sunday in Lent - February 22, 2026

- Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 - Psalm 32 - Romans 5:12-19 - Matthew 4:1-11

“If you are who you say you are...”

1. I would not be surprised when, if I asked you to give me a visual image of what temptation looks like, you'd refer to some cartoon where the main character had a little devil perched on one shoulder and a little angel on the other shoulder, battling with the owner of those shoulders on a decision to make.
 - a. I figured that image came from the mind of the folks at Disney or Warner Brothers, but would you believe me if I tell you that it goes back to the second century?
 - i. There is a book called The Shepherd of Hermas, that has this reference "There are two angels with a [person]—one of righteousness, and the other of iniquity." (sources below)
 - ii. That idea gets picked up by many other authors, and makes its way to us.
 - iii. It tries to say that, when it comes to decisions, we deal with conflicting interests or forces
 - b. That idea, of conflicting interests at war in us, is actually much older yet.
 - i. We ourselves have examples of times when we were thinking: should I do this or should I do that, when the choices carried a moral meaning (one choice was “good” and one choice was “bad”)
 - ii. If we look at the world that way, then, what we could imagine is that we humans are basically the rope in a tug of war, and forces beyond us are fighting a larger war through us, in us
 - iii. We could look at the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in the garden, and we see it as clear cut: fall for the snake's offer, stay with God's offer. Either or. Ah humans... And as they say, the rest is history
 - iv. We could look at the story of Jesus tempted in the desert as another clear cut story: Jesus, even after enduring 40 days in the wilderness, won't fall for the temptations, because he's JESUS!
 - c. But I would like to suggest there is at least one other way to read these passages
 - i. In this sense, the translation I read today, the Cotton Patch Gospels, by Clarence Jordan, opens a window of meaning for us
 - ii. Just in the Gospel of Matthew, the one who tempts Jesus is referred to in these ways:

1. the tester or tempter (4:3),
 2. Beelzebul the ruler of destructive demons (12:24–26),
 3. the evil one (13:19, 38),
 4. the enemy (13:39),
 5. and Satan (16:23)
- iii. You're probably back to picturing that little devil on the shoulder, with horns and pitched fork.
 - iv. But in a very clever way, Clarence Jordan uses a word I had never considered: The Tempter is the Confuser.
2. We may think of temptation as a decision point: turn left or turn right. But I think temptation can be all about confusing us into forgetting who we really are, into thinking we are something we are not.
 - a. In the story of life, which the Genesis passage tries to summarize, the humans are blessed, loved and trusted by God
 - i. Until, that is, the Confuser starts to make them wonder if that's really true
 - ii. If they're really so blessed and loved and trusted
 - iii. Because, the Confuser argues, the humans don't really need to be dependent on God – they can be independent! You're not accountable to anyone! Every person for themselves!
 - iv. The Confuser is actually arguing that we're not really children of God – sounds more like puppets of God! Cut the cords! Be your own person!!
 - v. And the humans, as we have done from the beginning, we get confused, and we forget who we are, and in the process we get distanced from God (which is ultimately what the Confuser wanted)
 - vi. And it's worse than that.
 1. The Confuser gets us to believe we have a vengeful God we should fear, and hide from
 2. Yet even when we come clean to God and feel God's forgiveness, we can still easily forget that love, that grace.
 - b. It's even more stark in the story from the Gospel
 - i. The Confuser is trying to challenge who Jesus says he is
 - ii. "If you are who you say you are..." "So you say you're God's head man, right...?"
 - iii. What a clever way to try to get under someone's skin, to make them think they need to prove their identity, their worth
 - iv. If you are the One sent from God, then

1. Use your power as you see fit, no need to check with anyone
 2. Push the limits and see if you're really loved by God (remember that at his baptism Jesus hears "This is my Child, the beloved...")
 3. Better yet, switch teams: you'll have so much power and fame you won't have a single worry. Just say you're MY CHILD, not God's (!)
 4. What a stark way to pitch it!
3. During this season of Lent, we are reading passages which focus in on encounters with Jesus, ways which encourage us to have a fresh spiritual encounter with the Jesus we proclaim to follow
- a. In this encounter of Jesus with the Confuser, we come away from the story seeing Jesus as Faithful
 - b. We can see ourselves in Jesus throughout the back and forth with the Confuser, and we see that time and again Jesus remains faithful because Jesus remembers who he is: the beloved child of God
 - c. It makes sense to me, then, that in Lent prayer is such an important part of our journey
 - i. In the midst of confusion swirling around us, of temptation to distance ourselves from God, prayer is that needed check in,
 1. to seek clarity
 2. to unconfuse ourselves as to who we truly are
 3. We are beloved children of God, no matter how the Confuser tries to twist us into a knot
 - ii. Prayer in this way tries to center us, to bring us back to our identity
 1. It isn't an easy fix or a quick answer, but the kind of connection which allows us to be faithful when confusion aims to derail us
 2. It is an overlooked tool, but one at which one doesn't have to be a master of it
 3. Any timid prayer is an honest prayer as it seeks to remind us that we are God's beloved child
 4. Any halting prayer is a faithful prayer as it seeks to follow the example Jesus gives
 - d. If you are who you say you are... that was the hook. Don't get tripped up by it
 - i. Because of course there are days when we don't feel beloved
 - ii. There are days when we wonder if God is ignoring us as we drown
 - iii. There are days when we feel the weight of illness and pain and we forget to even pray

- iv. In those moments we surround ourselves with a community who reminds us who we are: God's child, blessed, loved, and trusted
 - v. Who reminds us with their actions of care that we are not alone in the journey
 - vi. That community gets to be for us the angels Jesus had at the end of this ordeal, that community gets to be the support when our ability to remain faithful feels shaky
4. If we are wavering on who we truly are, and if we are feeling distanced from God and one another, I hope that Lent will be a reminder that we are God's children, blessed, loved, and trusted.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoulder_angel

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02012.htm>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-matthew-41-11-7>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-genesis-215-17-31-7-7>

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story when you experienced temptation.
2. Jesus is faithful in the face of temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). What stands out to you?
3. What has kept you grounded when "the Confuser" (the Tempter) was not successful in tricking/confusing you?