

Sermon preached at OCC, 9 March 2025

God of signs and wonders, who speaks the world into being, speak again your words of life and death. May your word be ever near us, on our lips, and in our hearts. Transform us as we hear your word this day, that we may respond with faithful praise. Amen.

Luke 4:1-13

The Third Way Against Temptation

Imagine lying on a dental chair, the drill whirring in the background, a bright probing light shining down. It's an unsettling experience, but then you notice *Our Planet* playing on the TV screen above. The vivid colours and breathtaking landscapes calm you, momentarily distracting you from the treatment. Yet, as you watch, you're reminded that *Our Planet* doesn't only show beauty - it also reveals a brutal reality of prey and predators, the endless cycle of life and death. This is one way of life: the natural order. Then, there is another way - the human way - where we seek to control, manipulate, and shape the world to suit our desires, even at the expense of nature itself. But today's Gospel reading presents a third way: the way of Jesus, who resists both the blind instincts of nature and the unchecked ambitions of humanity by choosing complete trust in God.

Temptation reveals who we are and what we are vulnerable to. In today's passage, Jesus, led by the Spirit, enters the wilderness to be tested by the devil. The wilderness - a barren, hostile place - stands in stark contrast to Eden. For Adam and Eve, temptation exposed their frailty, leading them to grasp for control. But for Jesus, temptation affirms his identity as the Son of God and marks the beginning of his ministry. Was the Fall entirely bad? Opinions may differ, but one thing is sure: life outside Eden became a journey of character formation, learning through trials and errors to draw closer to God. Today, we will reflect on three key ideas - the cycle of life, human desires, and the third way - the Jesus way, which reveals what it means to be truly anointed by God.

The Cycle of Life

Let's return to *Our Planet*. In one of the episodes, titled *The Frozen World*, a mother polar bear and her cub traverse a newly formed ice field. The landscape, altered by rising temperatures, provides both opportunities and threats. The flat ice field makes it easier to spot prey but also makes it impossible to hide. For now, they adapt - but their survival is uncertain.

The melting ice is a reminder of nature's fragile balance, life's inevitable cycles of gain and loss, birth and death.

When Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread, he is appealing to this very cycle of life - our basic human needs. Hunger is natural, a force driving all living things. But Jesus refuses to operate by instinct alone. Unlike animals bound to their survival, he declares, "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4). His response invites us beyond mere existence into something more profound: trust in God's provision.

Karl Jaspers, an existential philosopher, describes moments of suffering, guilt, and death as boundary situations - experiences that force us into deep reflection and transformation. Biblical history is full of such moments - Job's trials, Israel's exile, and Christ's Passion. These are not just hardships; they are opportunities for spiritual awakening. Jesus' time in the wilderness is one such moment, revealing that true life is not about avoiding struggle but about finding God's presence within it.

Human Desires

Temptation often exposes our hidden desires - our longing for power, control, and recognition. The devil's second and third temptations go beyond mere survival; they touch on the allure of influence and security. If Jesus is truly the Son of God, why not use his status to rule the world or prove his divine protection? In ancient times, a son represented his father's authority, and kings were sometimes called sons of God in the Old Testament.¹ A Messiah with limitless power could provide endless food, rule all nations, and perform signs that would leave no doubt about his divinity.

Yet Jesus resists. Unlike Israel, which often failed to trust God in the wilderness, Jesus remains faithful. Where Israel demanded signs and control, Jesus embraced obedience and surrender. The Israelites ignored Jeremiah's warnings and pursued war against Babylon, believing they could shape their own destiny. Yet the results were defeat, destruction, and exile. Time and again, human desires clash with divine wisdom. Jesus, however, follows a different path - not one of coercion but of humility.

¹ Psalms 2:7; 89:26-27; 2 Samuel 7:14

The Jesus Way

During our children's story time, the question was: "What do you think was the hardest temptation for Jesus?" Hunger seems like an obvious answer. But the greater challenge lies in the temptations of power and self-preservation. Bread satisfies for a moment, but power and invincibility promise lasting security. Yet Jesus rejects both, choosing instead the way of trust, dependence, and humility before God. If so, what does it mean to follow Jesus' way against temptation in daily life, and how does this apply to modern struggles with control, power and self-reliance?

Lent is a season where we, too, are invited to walk the path of humility. In the wilderness of life - away from our comforts, our illusions of control - we are confronted with our deepest vulnerabilities. Will we, like Israel, demand immediate answers? Or will we, like Jesus, trust in God's timing and wisdom? We walk this journey for forty days, learning to see beyond our hunger, desires, and fears. We look up at the stars and feel the earth beneath our feet, reconnecting with the wonder of creation and the presence of God.

May God lead us through the wilderness and bring us to the Promised Land. May God guide us so that by following the Son, we may safely navigate the trials of this world and walk toward life everlasting. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns in the world and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.