

*Hebrews 4:14-16*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

*February 26, 2023*

*First Sunday of Lent*

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT  
THE WILDERNESS  
“Tempted and Tried”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In October 1970, 25-year-old Tim Rice and 21-year-old Andrew Lloyd-Webber released a double LP “concept album” called *Jesus Christ Superstar*. A *Time Magazine* review of the album said: “What Rice and Webber have created is a modern-day passion play that may enrage the devout but ought to intrigue and perhaps inspire the agnostic young.”

My church youth group wasn’t full of “the agnostic young,” but we certainly were intrigued and inspired by *Superstar* and listened to it endlessly.

As I was working on my sermon this week, I listened to the *Superstar* soundtrack. While *Superstar* focuses on the **last** week of Jesus’s life and today’s sermon text tells about Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness just **before** he began his public ministry, I noticed some powerful similarities in their messages. In particular, two songs sung by Judas and Simon Zealot describe the central message of the musical and of today’s gospel story: “Who are you, Jesus Christ?”

Near the beginning of *Superstar*, Judas sings “Heaven on Their Minds,” and pleads with Jesus: “Listen Jesus I don't like what I see. All I ask is that you listen to me. And remember, I've been your right-hand man all along. You have set them all on fire. They think they've found the new Messiah. And they'll hurt you when they find they're wrong.”

Later in the musical, between the Palm Sunday parade and Pilate’s dream, Simon Zealotes tries to convince Jesus to make his move as the liberator of his people. With the Palm Sunday crowd in the background singing, “Christ, you know I love you; did you see I waved? I believe in you and God, so tell me that I’m saved. Jesus, I am with you; touch me, touch me, Jesus! Kiss me, kiss me, Jesus!” Simon Zealotes appeals to Jesus:

*Christ, what more do you need to convince you  
That you’ve made it and you’re easily as strong  
As the filth from Rome who rape our country  
And who’ve terrorized our people for so long?  
There must be over fifty thousand  
Screaming love and more for you  
And every one of fifty thousand  
Would do whatever you ask him to  
Keep them yelling their devotion  
But add a touch of hate at Rome*

*You will rise to a greater power  
We will win ourselves a home!  
You'll get the power and the glory  
For ever and ever and ever  
Amen! Amen!*

In contrast to the crowd's raucous cries and Simon's impassioned plea, Jesus answers,

*Neither you, Simon, nor the fifty thousand  
Nor the Romans, nor the Jews  
Nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the Priests, nor the scribes  
Nor doomed Jerusalem itself  
Understand what power is  
Understand what glory is  
Understand at all, Understand at all.  
If you knew all that I knew, my poor Jerusalem  
You'd see the truth, but you close your eyes  
But you close your eyes  
While you live, your troubles are many, poor Jerusalem  
To conquer death you only have to die  
You only have to die.*

Some of you will remember that Jesus Christ Superstar was quite controversial when it was released in album form, then made its way to the silver screen and to Broadway. But, did you know, the Rev. Martin Sullivan, the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and former Archdeacon of London in the Church of England, wrote the liner notes for the *Superstar* album? In part, he wrote, "'There are some people who may be shocked by this record. I ask them to listen to it and think again. It is a desperate cry. 'Who are you Jesus Christ?' is the urgent enquiry, and a very proper one at that... The singer says 'Don't get me wrong, I only want to know.' He is entitled to some response.'"<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is the traditional gospel reading on the first Sunday of Lent. Immediately before the temptation story, we hear about Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River. At the end of *that* story, a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) Remember, Matthew is writing a retrospective story. As the readers and hearers of the gospel, we know Jesus is the Son of God, right from the get-go. We can assume that Jesus knew he was the Son of God, because he surely heard the voice from heaven after he came up from the waters of baptism. But the question that Rev. Sullivan asked in his liner notes and that Judas asks in the title song *Superstar* is the question of this temptation story: "Jesus Christ, who are you?"

Indeed, who is Jesus Christ as he begins his public ministry? Is he the kind of Messiah, Son of God who will use his status and his power and his privilege and his position to turn stones into bread when he's famished? Is he the kind of Messiah, Son of God who will use his status and his power and his privilege and his position to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple in downtown Jerusalem in order to

wow the crowds, so that “every one of fifty thousand would do whatever you ask him to”? Is he the kind of Messiah, Son of God who will use his status and his power and his privilege and his position to inherit all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, but at the high cost of selling his soul to the Devil?

Or is he the kind of Messiah, Son of God that is described in the “Christ hymn” of Philippians 2:5-11, which is our Affirmation of Faith this morning. Listen to those verses from *The Message*: “Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.”

In her 1996 sermon, “Remaining Human,” Barbara Brown Taylor compared Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness to Adam’s temptation in the Garden of Eden: “As far as I can tell, what Adam and Jesus are both tempted by is the chance to play God. In Adam’s case, it was the chance to break out of his dependence on God and know both good and evil for himself. In Jesus’ case, it was the chance to feed every hunger, to be superman, to control all the kingdoms of the earth. God never offers those things, incidentally – Satan is the only one who offers them, with a thousand strings attached.”<sup>2</sup>

Ah, you might be saying, I’ve never been tempted to turn stones into bread, never been led to the highest point of the temple in downtown Jerusalem and tempted to jump off so God’s angels could save me, never been offered the chance to rule over all of the kingdoms on earth if only I would bow the knee to Satan. Well, neither have I – and I don’t expect I’ll ever be tempted in those exact ways. So, what does this story have to do with you and me on this first Sunday of Lent?

Well, have you ever used what you have been given by God to meet only your own needs? Have you ever bargained with God – “Lord, if only you’ll deliver me from this situation, show me the way, do this for me, then I promise I’ll \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank)”? Have you ever pigeon-holed your life, keeping some areas separate from your faith? Have you ever devoted yourself to *anything* else in life with the allegiance and passion that is reserved only for God? Yeah, I thought so. . . because I certainly have.

In his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, Douglas R. A. Hare writes, “The basic, underlying temptation that Jesus shared with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God’s readiness to empower us to face our trials. None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God’s helpfulness when things go awry. Pagan idolatry is not more of a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. It is indeed difficult for us to worship and serve God only. We should be continually grateful that we have a great high priest who, tempted as we are, was able to resist all such temptations by laying hold of Scripture and firmly acknowledging that only God is God.”<sup>3</sup>

But, you might be tempted to think, he was the Son of God. And I'm just a regular old human being. How can what Jesus went through in the wilderness possibly have anything to do with me and the temptations I face in my life? Well, that's an age-old question – or at least as old as believers wondering, “Jesus Christ, who are you?” In the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Cyril of Alexandria, archbishop of Alexandria (Egypt), commented, “If he conquered as God, to us it is nothing; but if conquered as man, then we conquered in Him.”

The wilderness is a traditional image used throughout Lent. It calls to mind the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites and how they failed to trust God and/or how they treated God as less than God. It also calls to mind Jesus's forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, when he was faced with the same temptation to mistrust God and to treat God as less than God, but he passed the test – by holding fast to the Word of God and serving the one, true God before he served himself. Can you think of a better illustration of this than when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? Even while his disciples slept instead of keeping watch as he had asked them to, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39)

“and he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:7-8)

What are the wilderness areas in your life this Lenten season? How are you tempted to mistrust God and/or to treat God as less than God? Thanks be to God “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

As you think about these things this Lenten season, think about what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer: thy will be done; give us our daily bread; lead us not into temptation. Those sound a lot like the temptations in the wilderness, don't they? Or, better yet, a good way to meet the temptations of life!

The Alternative Sunday School Class is studying The Heidelberg Catechism, which teaches the faith in a series of 129 questions and answers, organized to be taught and learned on the fifty-two Lord's Days of the year. The final eleven questions of the catechism teach about the Lord's Prayer. Question 127 asks, “What does the sixth petition mean?” and the Answer is, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” means: By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment. And our sworn enemies – the devil, the world, and our own flesh – never stop attacking us. And so, Lord, uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy Spirit, so that we may not go down to defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally win the complete victory.”

“Jesus Christ, who are you?” That's an important question to ask this Lenten season. And who we think Jesus Christ is will shape our faith and our lives, especially when we are tempted and tried in the wilderness.

***Let us pray: Almighty God, your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin. Give us grace to live in obedience to your Spirit. You know our weakness. Help us to know your power to save. Guide us with your Holy Spirit, that, following our Savior, we may walk through the wilderness of this world in trust and obedience. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All information about *Superstar* is taken from: Jeffrey Kare, “How It All Began? The Story of JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR,” April 1, 2018 at [www.broadwayworld.com](http://www.broadwayworld.com).

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, “Remaining Human,” *The Christian Century* 1996.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 26.