

Sermon  
February 22, 2026

Matthew 4:1-11

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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Do you remember the first time you heard scripture weaponized? The first time you heard God's name used to shame, exclude, bully, or even kill? Maybe some of us here or our loved ones have even been the target of that misuse. The first time I remember seeing self-proclaimed Christians twisting God's message into not-so-Christian ways was in literature when I was in middle school; it was in To Kill a Mockingbird. The main characters' neighbor, Miss Maudie, is a wise, compassionate woman who spends all her time outside tending to her garden. But the extremely conservative Baptists, whom Miss Maudie calls "foot-washers," take issue with her spending too much time outside gardening and not enough time inside praying. At one point, some of them pass by her working in her garden, they jab some scripture at her about how she isn't proper and pious enough, and Miss Maudie lobs it right back at them by praising all of God's good green creation.

The author of the book, Harper Lee, makes it clear which side she is on. As a young nature nerd, it was clear to me too: God created beauty and joy and kindness; but sometimes people would use scripture or take God's name in vain to tell others what to do, to "put them in their place," even to excuse hateful or violent behavior. Of course, the core of that novel is about more than the inherent goodness of God's creation. It is about the racial injustices that permeated the lives of that small Alabama town. And the same white men that convicted a black man of a crime he obviously didn't commit probably sat beside Miss Maudie and Atticus Finch at church on Sunday morning.

Even Satan can quote scripture convincingly and make reasonable-sounding arguments. In today's gospel reading God has just claimed Jesus as Their son, Their beloved, at Jesus' baptism. It is after that that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Before the tempting starts, though, Jesus fasts for 40 days. Is it a cleansing fast? Does it make his mind clearer? Or is it a test of willpower? Sure, anyone can resist Satan when the sun is shining and all our needs are met, but what about when we are famished and irritable in the wilderness? Satan begins by asking Jesus to do something that seems harmless, that is totally within Jesus' power. "Jesus, you must be starving. Nothing to eat around here but, oh, here's a stone. You can go ahead and turn that into bread since you're the son of God...right?" So simple, so innocuous. What could be the harm?

And maybe there is nothing wrong with turning a stone into bread in and of itself. In John's gospel, Jesus will turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana. In all four gospels, Jesus will multiply a couple of fish and loaves of bread to feed multitudes. But here Jesus responds to the tempter's offer by quoting Deuteronomy: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." It's not that physical bread for our physical bodies isn't important, but Jesus is not going to use miraculous God-given powers to

secure his own ends. When Jesus does perform those transformative miracles, they are to benefit other people, not to assert his own privilege. So, Satan says, “Oh a scripture battle? You’re on! If you’re the son of God, throw yourself off the temple since it is written that God will send the angels to protect you.” But I don’t think Jesus bats an eye at Satan reciting scripture. And just as he is not willing to use his power to further his own privilege, nor is he willing to use his authority to order around the angels for self-serving purposes.

Finally, Satan is done with the pretense of asking Jesus to prove himself. Beneath each of the first two temptations is the implicit call to take a different road than the one that leads to Jerusalem and the cross. Now he comes right out and says it: “Worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world.” When asked to think of world leaders who have given into that temptation, historical or contemporary, we could probably think of a few. Emperors, colonizers, and enslavers. Architects of apartheid, genocides, and the severe wealth and power disparity that leads to all those tragic injustices, that is a tragic injustice in and of itself. According to biblical scholar Cody Sanders, the original audience of today’s gospel text would have heard a political critique of the Roman empire. From the Roman empire to would-be authoritarians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it’s a tale as old as time.

Now, I’m going to guess that no one in this room today is at risk of the temptation to command armies, angelic or otherwise, to do their self-serving will. Probably no one’s at risk of the temptation to literally trade their soul for the authoritarian control of worldly kingdoms. Neither was the original audience of this text. New Testament scholar Ronald J. Allen writes, “For Matthew’s congregation, the temptation is to ease one of their tensions by just going along with the Empire and its idolatry and exploitative behaviors. This temptation is before every congregation in the United States—and other places—right now.” He wrote that in 2023, though I don’t believe it’s any less true in 2026. Especially when white Christian nationalism has become mainstream. When self-proclaimed Christians hide their bigotry behind a cross, their hunger for supremacy behind our sacred text.

Now, I’m also going to guess that no one in this room today is at risk of the temptation to spout explicit bigotry in the name of Jesus. The temptation for all of us may be to let it slide, to go along with the status quo. Not for the privilege of personal power, but for the privilege of comfort, both materially and emotionally. But if there is ever a time to try on discomfort for the sake of justice, perhaps it is in the season of Lent. After all, at the beginning of this season, on Ash Wednesday, we typically read that the fast God chooses for us is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free.

Jesus’ temptations increase in severity as they go on; one leads to the next and, most likely, we here in rural New Hampshire in 2026 are most at risk of giving into the first. As I read about this first temptation, I can’t help but be aware that I am reading it within a culture that so highly values individualism. But do we really think we can live by our own means alone? Not if we take even a moment to consider it. We depend on laborers, disproportionately brown-skinned and poorly compensated, to plant, water, and harvest the grain. We depend on factory workers or industrial bakers to make the bread, and store clerks or deli workers to sell it in a society that has refused to raise minimum wage. We do

not live by bread alone, but by the direct and indirect interrelationships we have with countless numbers of God's children.

The temptation we may be up against is to not face the ways we are inherently interconnected with our neighbors, and how so often our lifestyles depend on their exploitation. The Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dale notes that many of us were taught that using the Lord's name in vain referred to saying, "Oh my God!" I certainly absorbed that lesson as a child. Perhaps you did too. But Rev. Lizzie suggests a much more theologically appropriate way to understand the commandment, "Do not use the Lord's name in vain." She says it is more like purchasing a bracelet that says "God loves you" that was made by someone earning slave wages. I would add it is like saying Christians are superior to people of other faiths, which is coded as meaning Christians of European descent. Like thinking our wellbeing is a blessing from God, which implies those with less are less blessed.

Perhaps you already have something to fast from or feast on for Lent that is meaningful to you. Perhaps giving something up or taking something on for Lent just isn't meaningful to you at all. But if you're searching for something, maybe even if you don't think you're searching for something, you might consider fasting from taking the Lord's name in vain. You might consider feasting your eyes on the less obvious ways that we are interdependent, interconnected with all of our neighbors. By fasting from the idolatry of individualism. By feasting on the wholeness that comes with our collective liberation. By fasting from twisted scripture and mental gymnastics that we use to say we deserve more. By feasting on God's grace, freely given to everyone equally. We won't get it perfect. We are not Jesus. But we could be like Miss Maudie, lovingly caring for all of God's diverse creation, tenaciously standing up for justice, bravely calling out hypocrisy where she sees it. At one point she tells the main character, a child who goes by the name of Scout, "Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of [another]. There are just some kind of men who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results." We can too, right? However we choose to honor this season of Lent, may it be in line with the fast that God chooses: to let the oppressed go free. May it be the feast that the angels offer Jesus after his temptations: the harvest of resisting personal privilege and power. May it be a way that Miss Maudie would approve of: nurturing a garden of justice in this life.