
What We Worship in Lent Can Turn Temptation into Angels

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The First Sunday in Lent – Year A**

*Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."
Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.
– Matthew 4:10-11*

Lent has begun! We have entered the forty-day season of preparation for Easter, when people ask such things as: "What are you giving up for Lent this year?" When my father was asked that each year, he always replied, "For Lent, I'm giving up watermelons." We all knew, of course, that watermelons are not in season during Lent.

I propose a different question for Lent this year. All three of the temptations that Jesus encountered in the wilderness, and that we encounter every day, can be summed up in one question. It's not: "What are you giving up for Lent this year?" It is: "What are you worshipping during Lent this year?" What are you worshipping?

The temptations are about what we worship. Here is how I define worship: Worship is what we let ourselves be changed by. What are we letting ourselves be changed by? The powers and people that we allow ourselves to be changed by, are the powers and people that we worship. What do you worship?

In the Bible, the literal meaning of the word, "worship," is to "bend the knee." When the Bible says that people worship, it says literally that they "bend the knee." To "bend the knee" is to change, to be bent and shaped in a new way. When we kneel to pray, we are adopting a posture of being bent, on behalf of God. When we say we are "bending over backward" for someone, we mean to say that we are honoring them.

Every one of us has powers and people that we are willing to bend for, that we are willing to be changed by. We change our schedules, we give up time, we spend our money, we change our living circumstances, for certain powers and people. To bend the knee for someone is to be changed for that person. To bend the knee for someone is to worship that person.

What are you worshipping this Lent? What are you letting yourself be changed by? Today, I present the three temptations of Jesus, all three of them, as temptations to worship powers that are less than God.

Jesus was in the wilderness, like we are sometimes. The wilderness, remember, is where nothing is in season! There's nothing there, except we ourselves, except us. That means there is a lot of temptation there! It can be terrifying; it can be where Satan, the Tempter, shows up! When we are facing no one but ourselves.

The first temptation: *"If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."* Like a lot of things that satisfy and change us, there is nothing wrong with bread. The temptation, however, for Jesus was to exploit his power and position. The temptation was for him to worship his own power. The temptation for any of us is to act like we should always get what we crave. The temptation is to worship our desires, and to exploit our power.

Each of us does have some position, some power, even the very least of us. That position and that power can be good things. But each of us can be tempted to use that power for our own appetites. Do we really need this or that right now? The tyranny of the urgent tempts us to exploit our power for something less than God. The first temptation is to worship our own power.

Now, the second temptation: *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down."*

The second temptation is to turn the tables. The second temptation is to tempt God. Let's just see whether God really likes me. Let's just see whether God will protect me. Let's just see.

And if it is not God we are testing, then we are sure testing one another, aren't we? We are sure testing each other's love. Let's just see if she loves me. Let's just see if he notices that I have changed. Let's just see if they really care.

This second temptation is also about what we are worshipping. The temptation to test the one who loves us, is the temptation for the drama of self-attention. Self-obsession. This temptation is to worship that drama, the drama of our narcissistic and ego-filled self. Our need for attention, our need for drama, our need to be the center of attention, is a form of self-worship, ego-worship. Let's just see if God will save me if I endanger myself. The trust of others is surely a good thing. But the temptation is to put that trust of others to the test!

Who are you putting to the test? Your spouse? Your lover? Your family? Ah, your school, your church, your country? Watch out: chances are the person you are putting to the test is the very person who loves you the most. Jesus said, *"Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

The third temptation, of course, finally names worship in its fundamental form: *"Then the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'"*

There sure are a lot of kingdoms in this world. I belong to a lot them myself. I belong to a family. I serve on the boards of several very fine institutions; they lay a claim on me. I volunteer at all sorts of wonderful organizations. I belong to a neighborhood. I belong to a city and pay taxes here. I belong to a country and pay taxes to it.

These are kingdoms, and —once again— they are very good ones. But none of them is worthy of our ultimate worship. Jesus says, *"Away with you Tempter! Satan! Away with you, you Tempter. It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"*

That is the great commandment. Our ultimate devotion is God alone. Our ultimate allegiance is God alone. Every other reality, even the best powers and people, are secondary to this great God, the God above all.

The temptations of Jesus are the same ones that all of us face, the temptations to worship power and self-drama and realities that are less than God. We are tempted to worship our own power and position. We are tempted to worship our own drama of self-attention. We are tempted to worship the kingdoms of this world.

Well, then, who is this God, who alone we are to worship?

God is whatever is not you. God is the Other. God is other people, the needs and desires of people who are not you. God is community, the people of love and hope and faith, who are not you.

As soon as Jesus reminded himself that he was to worship God alone, then *"the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."* Yes, as soon as Jesus realized his worship of God alone, God the Other, then the temptations of Satan turned into the ministrations of angels!

The same thing can occur for us during Lent, or during whatever wilderness we find ourselves in. When we truly face ourselves, and our inherent temptations to power and position and self-drama, and when we —instead— bend the knee for the Other — when we worship God alone — when we bend the knee for God — our temptations turn into the grace of angels!

AMEN.

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