

Sermon for January 11, 2026
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

Jesus has just been baptized. Jesus goes to John and insists that John should baptize him, and the spirit of God says. “This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” God claims Jesus as God’s own, and it’s a beautiful act of solidarity and promise. And it is right at the peak of that warm, hopeful moment that the Spirit whisks Jesus away to the wilderness.

Jesus fasts for 40 days and nights, and it is when he is most famished that an adversary with many names — the tempter, the devil, Satan — comes to him. Three times he tests Jesus, twisting scripture to lure Jesus with power. He offers him power to control the elements, power of physical invincibility, the power of earthly kingship and glory. Three times, Jesus answers with scripture, neatly foiling the tempter’s bait and revealing the shallowness of his offers.

For Jesus, it seems so natural and obvious to reject these temptations. I don’t know if it would be so easy for me. If I received a credible offer of the ability to turn stones into bread, I’d consider it — especially if I was famished after a weeks-long fast. If someone promised me that if only I was brave enough to test it, God would protect me from all threat of harm, I might find a rock to strike my foot against – just to see!

But with the third and final test, we learn what the stakes really are. We join Jesus on a high place from which he can see everything. The tempter’s offer? Rule over all the kingdoms of the world and receive all the glory and wealth that come with such a position. The price? Fall down and worship Satan.

Perhaps Jesus was wise enough to see through the first two temptations so that when the third came, all that remained was to send Satan away. Perhaps Jesus was so secure in his identity and calling as God’s beloved, so certain of

the power that was his birthright, that not only was he not tempted by the power Satan offered, he wasn't even intrigued. He knows where true power comes from, and what it is for.

As we begin our Lenten journey, our own 40 days of contemplation and spiritual fasting, we can learn much about who God calls us to be from Jesus's relationship to power and its role in his identity. Our culture's notions of power look much like the temptations that Jesus was offered — endless resources, invincibility from human suffering, and especially domination of land, resources, and people. These are the kinds of temptations that built the great empires of history, with rulers, generals, and priests often weaponizing the name of God in pursuit of that power. This is power *over*, power that exploits, power that is finite and thus must be hoarded, no matter who suffers as a result.

As Christians and followers of Jesus, we must find our power differently, because power that can only be maintained through exploitation and destruction of planet and people is worth less than nothing. Though we do not have the power that comes with being God's son, we *are* beloved by God. When we follow Jesus and root our identity in God, we claim a power greater than magic tricks, greater than empires that rise and fall. We embrace the power of a love that never ceases, the power of belonging to God and to one another.

Perhaps Nobel laureate and author Toni Morrison said it best: "I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.'"

When we root our identity in Christ, we find that the power we have is worth more because we are able to share it. Because of Christ's solidarity with us,

we can practice solidarity with each other and create power together that leads to flourishing in God's world.

Recently I had the opportunity to travel to Grayson County Detention Center in Leitchfield Kentucky, just past Elizabethtown from here, to visit with women in immigrant detention. I traveled with two other local clergy, and when we arrived in Leitchfield, we met up with Karissa and Jeremy. They're a couple from Lexington who have been regularly making the journey to the jail for months to visit women who are detained.

It all started with a personal connection. A friend told them about a woman she knew, who I'll call Rachel, who was detained and desperately needed help from someone on the outside to navigate the legal system, tend to basic necessities, and communicate with her family. Although Rachel had a work permit, she had been detained while attending immigration court with a family member. Karissa and Jeremy had power as U.S. Citizens who were not at risk from interacting with our immigration and criminal legal systems.

They treated that power not as something to reject nor to hoard but as a resource to share, to use for the work of love and liberation that they feel called to. They met first with that one woman, Rachel, and they became her friends and advocates. After some time, Rachel explained that she knew other women who were longing for similar support. Rachel had received the power that Karissa and Jeremy shared with her, and she wanted to share it beyond herself.

Before long, Jeremy and Karissa were juggling regular communication and visits with half a dozen women. They built relationships with attorneys who can represent some of these women pro bono, and they have served as points of contact and squeaky wheels to help keep their cases moving forward. They've raised thousands of dollars to cover legal fees and simply put money on the women's phone accounts so that they can make texts and calls to their

loved ones and advocates. What began as an act of compassion turned into a serious commitment. They needed help, and so through connections with Louisville Standing Up for Racial Justice, they sought more people willing to visit the detention center and provide accompaniment to the women there. That's where I and others have come in.

I followed Karissa and Jeremy into a brightly lit room, partitioned by thick glass into inside and outside. As we entered, I saw the detainees who had been called to speak with our group, and when they saw Karissa and Jeremy, you might have thought they were seeing angels walk in. Perhaps they were. It was clear in an instant how meaningful these relationships were. I suddenly felt the preciousness of what Karissa and Jeremy were offering by inviting new people into their work and friendships with these women.

I got to speak with two people, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, part of an extremely regimented visiting protocol for federal detainees in the jail. Both women expressed a measure of hopelessness as they spoke about their struggles with the legal system, the confusion and uncertainty, the difficulty getting adequate representation. They spoke about their fears for their parents and children, who they support financially.

But they were much more than anguish. With one, who I'll call Juana, we spoke animatedly about the part of Nicaragua that she is from, and which I visited many times during my years there. She told me about her love of literature and her passion for teaching. The other woman, who I'll call Lola, spoke with tearful conviction about her faith, her trust that God was with her unwaveringly even though she did not know what was to come.

This work is difficult and often heartbreaking. Some of the women that Karissa and Jeremy have connected with have been deported, including my friend Lola. Others face uphill climbs through a perilous and constantly changing legal landscape. When I hear these stories, I remember the temptation of

regular old human-made power, the kind that seems to call all the shots some days, and I want some. That kind of power matters in our world, and for our lives. I believe that together, our power can shape policies, move money, reduce the suffering of people like Rachel, Juana, and Lola, and create a more just world.

But I can't forget that this kind of power on its own is fickle and easily manipulated — temptations abound. The work that Karissa and Jeremy have been doing on the power of relationships and the infinite possibilities of love. It banishes the lie that these women are alone, with no one to care for them or hope with them. It connects us more deeply to each other, and from that vantage point, rooted in God's love, we can shape our power for transformation. It's slow, but it's sturdy. It cannot be swayed by the devil's flashy tricks and outlandish promises.

All of us in this room have access to some power — the power that comes from our identities, resources, and social positions, and the power that comes from trusting we are loved by God. As we walk alongside Jesus during Lent, as we hear about his teachings, his suffering, and his promises, we'll hear more about how Jesus uses his power. In our hearing, let us listen for God's calling for us and our own power. As we do so, may we tend to the powerful love that flickers in us and stoke it into a blaze that lights up the world.