

Sunday Sermon February 22, 2026

Lent 1A Sermon Rev. Coleen Tully Feb 21-22, 2026

“How come opportunity knocks only once, but temptation beats down the door every day?”

Mrs. Popham, my Sunday School teacher — a wonderful woman who wore a hairnet even though she didn't work at a restaurant (is what I thought as a child) — first taught me about Jesus's temptations in the wilderness. She had the wilderness stretched across a flannel board. Do you remember flannel boards? On one side of the felt landscape was an innocuous-looking devil — a scrawny guy, all hunched over in a creepy red suit with a long pointy tail reaching for a loaf-shaped stone in the sand. To his right, a supremely well-built, handsome, clean, undisturbed Jesus towered over the landscape in a pristine white robe, his finger pointed at his tempter.

“As you can see,” Mrs. Popham told us, “that pesky devil never stood a chance against the Lord Jesus. Because Jesus knew he was the Almighty Son of God, the devil couldn't bother him.” I imagine we were squirming in our chairs, impatient for the Kool-Aid and cookies we got at the end of the hour. She summed it up by saying something like, “Let me tell you what this story means. It means that as long as we trust Jesus and believe we are his children, we will always defeat the devil, too! “So, there we had it — moral of the story. Easy peasy.

You know, Jesus's humanity is something we affirm in our creeds, but to focus on his human life, to think that Jesus truly wrestled with who he was and what his mission entailed — well, that would seem almost unchristian. I cried the first time I realized Jesus must have been in absolute and total agony when he said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And, in general, like Mrs. Popham, I still don't like to think about his pain and his struggles.

I remember a black-and-white movie I watched when I was a kid. It was about a rich man who had a hard time believing his friends liked him for who he was. Part of him always thought they pretended to like him because he was rich. He decided to dress poor and to join a community of what was called hobos. They had no money, begged for food, shared everything they had, and travelled together on the boxcars of trains.

The rich man was happy and loved the life. He loved these friends and trusted their friendship because they actually liked him, not his money. One day one of his closest friends got really, really sick. He was dying. The rich man found he just couldn't let this happen. He told his friends the secret — that he had money, more than enough to pay for the medical treatment to save his friend's life, and that he wanted nothing more in the world than to do just that. And he did.

And after that, he lost all those friends.

They told him he had never really been one of them. He didn't know, not really — not like they did — what it was like to have nothing. He had only pretended to understand. At the end of the movie, he was alone. Part of me hated them for not staying his friend. And part of me knew it was true. He never had been one of them.

It is important for us to know that Jesus really was fully human. He suffered as we suffer. The Jesus we encounter this first week of Lent is a thirty-year-old carpenter who hardly has the strength to stand, much less to be looking all buff and tower over the withered landscape like the Jesus on my flannel board. As Matthew's Gospel puts it, this Jesus is "famished" after forty days of fasting and testing. Physically, he's at the end of his strength. Socially, he's alone. Spiritually, he has to be struggling as the glow of his baptism recedes into a hazy, pre-wilderness past.

And now, we cue the devil. Not a benign, skinny little fool in red tights, but a sinister, cunning exploiter of weakness. He taunts Jesus. Three temptations, one question: Can you truly bear the terror of what it means to be weak and mortal and human?

The first temptation targets Jesus's hunger. Command this stone to become a loaf of bread, implying that God's beloved should not hunger, as though unmet desire is pointless instead of a fundamental part of what it means to be human. When we humans sit with our hungers, when we sit with our wants and our desires, we learn what the need is beneath the hunger. Hunger is the classroom where the longing of the soul is revealed. A quick fix to feed that hunger robs us of that insight.

The second temptation targets Jesus's vulnerability. The implication is that if we are the beloved of God, then God will keep us safe — safe from physical and emotional harm, safe from frailty and disease, safe from accidents, safe from death. If the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God's precious children still bleed, still ache, still die.

The third temptation targets Jesus's ego, as though a God who loves us wouldn't leave us to lead a modest, ordinary life. Church history is strewn with the ugly fallout of "Christian" ambition — power, fame, and authority seeking gone awry. Jesus's version of value is one borne of humility and surrender.

I think on a good day, Jesus would have had wonderful parables or have asked clever questions and put the devil on the spot. But his strength and energy and cleverness were all gone. Jesus doesn't say one word of his own. He quotes scripture unlike how he uses the Bible almost anyplace else. Several months after this all happened, Jesus said to his disciples, "When you are handed over to your enemies, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time." I wonder if, when he said this, Jesus could taste the dust of the desert and hear again the voice of the tempter.

Do people ever say to you, "I know exactly what you are going through," or "I know JUST how you feel"? I'm pretty sure those two lines are **not** given by the Father when someone is at a loss for words. If someone says them to me, it irks me, and I wonder if they have any idea of what I have been going through.

Unlike the rich man pretending to be a hobo, Jesus truly does 'get it'. He has been where we are. He knows our struggles, our temptations, our needs. He chose to be fully human. In today's Gospel reading, the Son of God chose deprivation over power, vulnerability over rescue, and obscurity over honor.

There are days I long for that supremely muscled, buff Jesus in the brightly shining robe of my flannel board Sunday School class, staring down the slinky old Devil and ready to do some strongman Jesus magic.

But then I think — in his acts of power, the miraculous healings, exorcisms, mass feedings and resurrections — how many people did Jesus save? One hundred? Five hundred? Two thousand? Not even the whole of Galilee.

But in his abdication, his vulnerability, in his humanity — in other words, in his willingness to bear the cross — how many did he save? He saved the world. And this is the God we worship; not one above our weakness, but one who shares it with us. Amen.