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Lent 1; Year C

There's an app I sometimes use to pass the time—please don't judge me—but it's TikTok. TikTok is one of those apps where you look down for 30 seconds, and then 30 minutes goes missing. On it, people post short videos and then often people will respond to those videos by making their own version of it. It's called a TikTok challenge. Recently I saw a TikTok challenge where a mother put a few gummy worms in front of her toddler in his high chair. She told him to wait to eat them until she came back, and they would eat the treat together. Then she stood just out of his sight to watch what he did. The camera was trained right on the baby from the tray up. First, he instinctively grabbed toward the candy, pinched and rolled the worms between his round fingers. He gave a world-weary sigh, and put them back down. "Wait," he muttered to himself. "Wait for mama." He looked around the room for her. "Mama?" She called back, "Just a minute! Wait for me!" The baby fidgeted, his eyes fixated on the gummy worms. "No, mama, no. No good," he insisted. The worms started to inch their way up to his mouth. Then, right before she returned, he slumped in his chair and tossed the gummy worms down, saying, "Heckin' Mama."

Now, I have some reservations about manipulating a child around food, but certainly this baby is relatable. With Lent upon us, we choose to live in tension with our temptations for the next several weeks. But, why? Are we basically agreeing to participate in our own TikTok challenge? Have we set ourselves up to be this manipulated toddler?

I hope not. And actually, I think we can gain some clarity about temptation if we look at Jesus' conversation with the devil, the accuser, today.

Initially, the ways in which Jesus is tempted by the accuser seem very specific to him and not closely related to every day human life. For example, after forty days of fasting, the accuser tells Jesus that Jesus could turn a stone into a loaf of bread if he really wanted to. There's no reason to go without. No need to feel deprived. No expectation that he should live in hunger. But really, don't we all hunger? Don't we all yearn for something we don't have? Not just with our stomachs, but in our gut and in our heart. On an individual level, we may hunger for companionship, to be deeply known and loved, or maybe we hunger for the ability to feel contentment—even just for a day at a time. What are you hungry for? What do you yearn for so deeply in life that makes you so desperate for it, desperate like you haven't eaten in a month? And where is God in that?

The second lie the accuser tells is that if Jesus just turns to him, the accuser will give him authority over all the kingdoms of the world. He's playing into ambition and power, here. For us, we might ask ourselves, "What am I striving for? And how is it affecting the rest of my life? Is my ambition throwing my relationships out of balance?" Because so often we tell ourselves, "If I just make it to this next pay grade, or if we can just move to a house that feels like a real family home, or I can just get into the college I want, I'll have made it. I'll be able to organize my life

just how I've wanted it for, well, my whole life." But how often does it end up being enough? Isn't there always a next thing? And what keeps us from being content with what we have now? Church, how do we include God in the conversations we have about what we want in life?

Finally, the accuser tells Jesus that nothing bad can ever happen to him because he's God's beloved and he'll be protected. This one is a little more complicated, friends, but I think it boils down to this question: what do we believe about our safety because of our faith? Many prosperity gospel teachers will tell us that God wants good things for us, and as such, we just have to pray and we will receive. We just have to rely on God and we'll always be safe. We just have to trust in God's goodness and nothing bad will ever happen to us, because we are beloved. We are God's people.

How's that working out for you? It's *not* for me. I think if it were really true that belief in God kept us safe, Jeanne Leinbach never would have gotten cancer back in 2015. She's one of the most faithful people I know. Thousands of Ukrainians wouldn't be fighting for their country and their lives.

The hard news today, beloved, is that even though we are safe with God, God does not promise us safety. Neither does she let us hide from the world and everything that scares us. Because the same Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness today is the same Holy Spirit that dwells in each of us and is winding herself through congregation, even now. She is a comforter and an emboldener, and she is also a sustainer.

It is the Holy Spirit that sustains Jesus in the wilderness, and she sustains us, too. The beautiful part of the lesson today, the good news that I hope we all take away, is that at every opportunity, Jesus could have used his ultimate power as God to simply end the discussion with the accuser. He could have simply ended the accuser. He also could have given in or fought back. But he doesn't. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he endures. He dives deep into the strength of his own humanity, and he waits. Jesus doesn't make it out of the desert using his special God powers, like a super hero. He makes it out of the desert as one of us.

This right here is the reason we add practices to our Lenten devotions. It is not about performative deprivation. It is not another chance at a New Year's resolution. It is an opportunity to stare into the depths of our own humanity...and see divinity. We are created in the image of God. The image of love. And when we look into the mirror of our souls, we will see some things we do not like. They will probably have something to do with how we have responded to temptation in our lives. But if we keep looking, we will see the face of Christ shining through, reminding us who we really are, and allowing us to try again, to atone, to reconcile—with God, with ourselves, and with the world. And the face of Christ is not critical or judgmental. Christ watches us through loving eyes as we navigate this messy, incarnated life we are living, just as he did.

I want to leave you with one final thought, Church: theologian Irenaeus had a theory of atonement, of salvation that goes something like this: Jesus saves humanity through becoming human. And he sanctified all of life's experiences as he experienced them, himself. So when Jesus was conceived within Mary, he sanctified womanhood. And when Jesus died he sanctified death. That also means that when he was tempted in the wilderness, he sanctified the experience

of temptation, too. This is why we choose to live in tension with our desires during Lent. Not because we're proving something to God. Not because God has set us up to see if we fail, like the baby in the TikTok video. We live in tension with temptation because it teaches us about our humanity. There is strength in our humanity, because there is strength in Christ's humanity. It is holy. It is sanctified. It is messy, hard, and sometimes heartbreaking. Being incarnated is. But it is also beautiful. This mess, this mix of difficult and beautiful is holy. Not the perfect house, not being able to control our circumstances. This struggle. Right here, right now, is holy. We are not safe, but we are also not alone—even in the wilderness.