

LENT 1C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
March 9, 2025

There is an old poem I learned in part while singing in a church choir during my college years. The verses were once part of our hymnals, and some of you may recall singing them. They've fallen out of favor, though, due to what is now heard as sexist language.

The poem, written by James Russell Lowell in 1845, was published in the *Boston Globe* in order to alert its readers that work was underway to admit Texas into the United States as a slave-holding state. This was before the Civil War, but abolition of slavery was very much in the nation's conscience, and dividing lines were being drawn.

The words I remember begin this way. *Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.* Today's Gospel lesson, a version of which is heard each year on this First Sunday in Lent, tells us about Jesus facing that very moment.

He's an adult who has just been baptized. Perhaps he heard the words spoken: "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." Maybe he heard the sound of the heavens breaking open, and saw or felt the very Spirit of God descending upon him. If he did, and we dare draw closely by his side, we can imagine the spiritual and emotional high he must have felt.

But that same Spirit drove him into the desert. Forty days, we're told, echoing a previous forty years between Egypt and the Promised Land, and one of the two stories about the flood. He's got nothing except the clothes on his back, not even a toothbrush. At the end, he's hungry, he's tired. He looks weak.

So you know who shows up. "You're hungry. You have the power to turn rocks into bread. Go ahead. Help yourself." Imagine being able to do that and turn a whole geographical region into enough bread to feed the masses. Go ahead, give it a try.

Sounds tempting, doesn't it? I mean, imagine being able to solve world hunger by a single act of power, just because you can. But that kind of hunger comes back after a few hours. The fix isn't permanent. And the cost? Well, it's huge.

Let's try something else, something a bit more enticing. A quick world tour, and all of it can be yours, and in at least one set of eyes, the price is right. "Just worship me," says the devil. Now, we'll have to wrestle with the statement, "all you see has been given over to me to do what I want with it" another time, but it does grab our attention, and explains a lot. The answer? Another no.

Let's get personal now. Jump off this tower, and watch as an army of angels comes and cushions your fall so you won't get even a bruise. No boo-boos, no owies,

just a nice, soft landing. Just, you know, give the devil credit for it all. After all, the devil made you do it, or at least said it was okay.

Once, to every person, every nation, comes the moment to decide. Maybe more than once, but the first time a decision must be made sets the standard for all that follows. We always have choices before us. Even when we look closely, it's often difficult to decide what is good or what is not so good. Take a look at the conversation between Jesus and the devil.

Both quote scripture to each other. The opportunities presented to Jesus could be life-changing, not just for him, but for the world, at least at first glance. But as I already mentioned, the hunger to be satisfied will return. The power offered is what empires, including Rome during the first century, long for but find is only temporary. Empires come and go, and eventually dissolve or implode under their own dis-ease and the weight of internal corruption. For no amount of power is enough when power is the primary goal.

The same goes for personal safety. Imagine not feeling any pain, or showing any sign of illness or suffering. It seems like a pretty good option, but it also shelters us from any sense of empathy or compassion for those who do feel those things. And the time will come when some some event shatters that illusion, and we're left totally unprepared and unable to cope with the consequences.

We know what Jesus decided. What about us? And what if the decision we make turns out to have the opposite effect of what we hoped? Nikos Kazantzakis, in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which Martin Scorsese made into a movie, presents a familiar one to us. As he's hanging on a cross in the hot Middle Eastern sun, gasping for breath, the devil finds the opportunity he's been waiting for. Jesus is presented with the idea that he could have rejected everything his life stood for, and could have a home, a wife, lots of kids playing around him. He wouldn't be suffering on a cross.

But the world around him, the one his children would grow up in, remains very much in the clutches of evil. Now, having said that, it seems that hasn't changed all that much. What did change is what Jesus presents to us, and whether we truly accept the offer.

The church, the Body of Christ, is called to live as an alternative to the wealth-seeking, power-hungry, barricaded, buttressed, and bunkered way of life set before us by the world. Those who follow after Jesus, who accept the same offer evil rejected when Jesus offered it to the devil, remind us again and again and invite us to see and live in a world that is God's kingdom, where God reigns in mercy, grace, and love, and to live that way of life in the way of peace and reconciliation. And God's reign becomes known not because God imposes it on us, but because we choose to live the alternative way of life offered to us in the cross of Christ.

Once to every person and nation comes the moment to decide. Which will it be? Will we choose power and status, and live in fear of losing it? Or will we choose the

freedom Jesus offers, where there's something more ahead of us instead of the fleeting offer of a world hell-bent on decay and destruction? Our decision now sets the path for the rest of our journey.

You see, it's not the decisions we make when we feel strong that really define our faith. It's where we turn in times of weakness that reveal who we are as children of God. As scripture tells us, it is the God who shows up and speaks on our behalf who is our true strength. And in a few weeks, we'll gather to celebrate what that really means not just for us, but for all creation.