

## **Testing God**

*A Sunday Morning Message on February 22, 2026*

*United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC*

Matthew 4:1-11

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Winter this year is certainly testing my patience, and I'm guessing the same is true for you. At least this latest storm – should I say blizzard – is holding off long enough for us to make it here for worship this morning and that's a good thing. This is the first Sunday of Lent, understood as a season in the Christian year devoted to reflection and preparation for the gift of new life promised by Christ's resurrection on Easter. Lent is 40 days long recalling the 40 days of Jesus wandering in the desert described in our Scripture passage this morning. To remember Jesus' 40 days of fasting, a key means of observing Lent has historically been to give something up – like chocolate for example. This thinking has been greatly expanded over the centuries as to what can constitute this "Lenten sacrifice" for anyone truly seeking to focus on who we are in relation to God and each other which Lent offers. So today we'll ponder how to become more involved in a Lenten experience, as Lent continues to unfold on our calendars, carrying us along with it.

In truth, how you choose to observe Lent – or not – is entirely your choice. Many folks don't do much at all. It's not that we're opposed to the idea of doing something a little extra to encourage a deeper awareness of our Christian faith. We're just not sure what to do and, even if we are able to decide on something to do, it's just so darn hard to remember to do it *every* day. If nothing else, though, at least you are remembering that you're not remembering what you hoped to do? At least that's something? Maybe? Hopefully? Come on. We can do better...

As your pastor, my goal for Lent is that we as a church, and you as individual members of this community of faith, will find more ways

to make meaning of our lives through the effort made in nurturing our faith. I am hopeful that with a little guidance and “coaching” from yours truly, you will want to make the effort do something during Lent to deepen your relationship with Jesus. There are multiple ways to do this, none of which are especially burdensome. One is, of course, just making that effort to make it to church for worship and fellowship on Sundays. Imagine what might happen if you actually plan – perhaps even re-arrange your calendar – to make being here every Sunday from now through Easter a must. Yes, I know all sorts of things make that a difficult if not an impossible commitment to make, let alone keep. Family commitments, travel plans, entertainment opportunities. Yep, Every Sunday. For 6 weeks. That’s a lot. Or is it? Up to you to decide.

Another Lenten observance or “discipline” to use the church word for this practice, is to make use of a daily devotional guide for Lent, like the one I created for us to use here at our church. I actually have it displayed on the altar this morning – well, this is my family’s Lenten center – but I’ve brought it in to show you what you might do. You’ll notice the little collection jar I have with it. That’s because there are various challenges to consider each day during Lent, like giving up a favorite food or a favorite activity for just one day AND putting some money in the jar not just if you cheat. Oh no, too easy. No, you owe the jar money if you even *think* about cheating on that day’s sacrificial act. Just one a week like that. Others are things like reflecting more deeply on the sermons and/or the Scripture readings on which the sermons are based. Another is making an effort to reach out to some other people, especially people you know who might be lonely and would enjoy a call or card or note. Things like that. None of them are difficult or burdensome, but they are intended to encourage you to slow down and pay attention to the people and situations all around you that you might otherwise overlook. Worth considering... Oh, and any moneys your Lenten giving jar collects

between now and Easter will hopefully be donated to our Deacons Fund! So, multi-tasking, even during Lent. 😊

Or, if even this feels like more of a commitment for Lent than you might be able to keep up with, how about an even simpler option? Just take the time – preferably the same time every day – to pray one simple prayer. Or two. What prayers, you may be wondering. Well, I recommend one or two or both. First is – no surprise here – the Lord’s Prayer:

*Our Father, who lives in heaven, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from all evil.  
For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Amen.*

The second is the Shema – the most ancient prayer of Judaism. And you already know it!

*Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And to this Jesus directly adds, “and your neighbor as yourself.” Amen.*

Just one or two prayers – at the same time every day. When you first get up in the morning, say them as dawn breaks the sky. Or in the middle of the day, when you just need a break for a minute. Find a quiet place and just pray them – in your heart or out loud. Or at dinner, just after you say grace for your meal. And if you don’t say grace, now might be a good time to start. 😊 Or even at bedtime. Add this prayer or prayers into the rhythm of your life and notice what happens. It will take intentionality and effort until the habit gets set and then, just do it. Every day. Without thought, and eventually without effort. And then watch the change – in you, and in how you interact with the world. I think you just might be surprised.

Okay, so now that we've talked about some ways to integrate Lent a little more directly into your life, let's consider again why all this matters. Let's ponder once again this familiar story of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness as he gets ready to take on the three years of ministry for which he was born. This story appears in all three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – with the details essentially the same in each. Mark's is a real cliff's notes version which is all of two verses. Luke and Matthew's accounts, Matthew's is the version we read today, have more detail. First, we know that Jesus heads out into the wilderness for 40 days, fasting and in prayer, immediately following his baptism in the Jordan River by John. Now we tend to think that the "Tempter" (or the devil or Satan or whomever – the personification of evil) was tempting Jesus for those entire 40 days but that is not the case. Jesus only encountered the Tempter and the temptations at the end of the 40 days. This is significant and a point often not emphasized enough. In fact, it shows that it is Jesus' time spent in prayer and fasting that strengthened him to withstand the temptations presented by the Tempter, Satan, the devil, as the 40 days came to an end.

There are three temptations in total. First, the devil tempts him with food since he knows Jesus is famished after 40 days with no food. But, Jesus responds, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Okay, so that's a no. The second temptation is personal safety, something which surely would have been in the forefront of Jesus' mind as he just spent three days alone in a wilderness with wild animals, scorpions, and heaven knows what other dangers. This is why in this second temptation, the devil reminds him he is so beloved of God that he could throw himself off the highest pinnacle of the temple and God's angels would save him from harm. It's implied "just like they did during your 40 days just completed." But again it's a no from Jesus who says "it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test." The third temptation is

personal wealth and power – that one thing which seems to be driving so many bad decisions in our country these days. The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain where he can see all the kingdoms of the world and tells Jesus all this wealth and power can be his, if Jesus will just worship him. No surprise that Jesus adamantly refuses: “Away with you Satan! For it is written ‘worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’” At this moment the devil leaves and angels appear to take care of Jesus, according to Matthew that is. Luke has a more interesting ending saying, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Now, that leaves the ending to this temptation of Jesus hanging, doesn’t it. Interesting...

What I’d like us to focus on together today, though, is what Matthew quotes Jesus as saying to the devil after the second temptation. I like this answer because it has such broader application for all of us than just what Jesus is saying to the devil. Jesus tells him no because “it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And what was that temptation again exactly? That if Jesus would just throw himself off the highest pinnacle of the temple, God’s angels would catch him before he could be injured or killed by the fall. In other words, Jesus could be completely reckless and do something incredibly stupid and God would make it all okay again. God would prevent something bad from happening even when actions made that something bad inevitable. And Jesus says no. He wasn’t going to test God. Actually, he was saying he didn’t *need* to test God. He already knew God would care for him, provide for him, love him as only God could. And that life, real life, the life God had intended him to live was waiting. Jesus knew what he was saying here. He knew what God needed him to do – challenge the Temple authorities on their insistence on orthodoxy (rigidly defined belief mediated only by priests) and orthopraxy (rigid and highly structured worship practices which were a burden to the poor). Jesus knew none of this was necessary for God’s people to connect with God. And Jesus knew that

challenging this authority structure of the Temple which had tied itself to Rome would be incredibly dangerous in the long run. The devil was reminding him of this danger, giving him an out. But Jesus didn't budge. Jesus was intent on living into the hopes and expectations God had for him from the moment he was born.

Do not put the Lord your God to the test. The words hold true for us too. "But, I don't put God to the test!" we think. And, most of the time, that's basically true. But, not entirely. What do I mean by that? Well, we try to bargain with God. All the time. As kids who didn't pray, "just let me pass this test, God, and I promise I'll study more for the next one!" As we get older we move on to things like "please let me get this job or this house or this person to love me and I promise I'll \_\_\_\_." And of course we've all been there praying to God that a loved one not die too soon and we promise to be a better spouse, a better son or daughter, a better friend..."

Dear ones, every time we pray these kinds of prayers when we are asking God for something we need or want, promising something of ourselves in return – that is testing God. And, make no mistake. We ALL do it. We all do it. We do it because it makes sense to think that our all powerful God can make these dramatic kinds of things happen. That we can pass the math test without studying; that we can get that dream job or that dream house against impossible odds; that God will miraculously cure a loved one of a terminal disease. We've all made those prayers, dear ones. They are totally understandable even as they miss the mark. Dear ones, when we bargain with God, when we test God in this way, we are diminishing our own faith. These kinds of prayers carry an implied threat – if you don't do this for me, God, you can't expect me to trust you, to have faith in you, to believe you. And that, dear ones, is just not the kind of thing that will ever go anywhere with God for the simple reason that it is an entirely selfish perspective.

First of all, when we pray a bargaining prayer, a testing prayer with God, we are saying that our knowledge of a situation is all there is to it. We're also saying that, if God knew and understood what was really happening like we do, of course God would do something to give us what we want. But, here's the thing, that is not faith. That is not entrusting your life to this God who has loved you since before you were born. Of course God knows every minute detail of your life which is, in and of itself, a frightening thought. I mean, the whole idea that God is all-knowing if you really think about it, well, disconcerting to put it mildly. For all kinds of reasons. Most important here, though, is to remember that God loves us even when we screw up, even when we sin, by what we do and what we don't do. God understands that our lives can be overwhelming and as a result, sometimes our prayers are not as thoughtful, as devotional, as loving toward God as they should be. Dear ones, we have all at one time or another tested God in our prayers and in our actions and guess what. God still loves us. God still and always forgives all our human shortcomings, including wanting to take the easy way to get what we desire now and then. God knows how much our hearts are breaking when we are faced with the unbearable loss of someone we love. We want God to save them, to save us from this loss that's coming so we pray for a miracle. And there is nothing wrong with that. Not really because even that God-testing prayer holds an element of ultimate faith in the very God you are trying to bargain with. Yes, dear ones, we all test God from time to time and that's okay. It's okay because it's a very human thing to do and God made us each to be exactly who we are – human shortcomings and all.

In the final analysis, that's what Lent is really about. It's a time to find the courage to look at ourselves deeply and honestly and decide what kind of person we want to be. How much do we want to include God in our lives? What are we willing to give up to be the kind of person God needs us to be? How might our lives be enriched,

changed forever if we dare to accept God's invitation, God's challenge, to explore more deeply during Lent how we might become the person God knows we can be? These are the questions posed to us during Lent, dear ones. All that is needed is for you to take the time to consider them. Is Lent a time of testing for us? A time to consider all the ways we test God's patience with us? Yes. Yes it is. In fact, that's really the whole point. Let's face the tests together. Amen.