

**1 Lent**  
**Feb. 26, 2023**

**Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten**

**THE POWER PUZZLE**

Based on Mt. 4:1-11

I would like to begin by asking two questions for you to consider. The first is this: What are the steps involved in putting a puzzle together? Take a moment, just for fun, imagine you're about to put a major puzzle together. Where would you start? What would come next? The second question is this: When you read or listen to the story of Jesus' first temptation experience, what about him inspires you? For me, I find Jesus' loyalty to God, his clarity of mind, and his commitment to trust God's word very inspiring. Today I'd like to talk with you about these things.

I grew up in Virginia, Minnesota, a town of 8,421. My father was a small businessman, the part-owner of a propane gas company that sold propane and major appliances. One day when I was about 8 years old I was walking home from school when I saw one of the company trucks backed up to our front door. Then I saw my dad. I said to myself something like, "Whatever this is about, it's big. It's very big!" because we never saw dad in the middle of the workday. But there he was, rolling something very big off the truck and into the house.

I ran the rest of the way home and there in the middle of the kitchen stood my father with a shiny new refrigerator. What wasn't standing was my mother. She was jumping for joy. I couldn't remember ever seeing her so excited. I thought she was going to have a kid! Since there were already 6 of us, I didn't think we needed any more. But sure enough, some two years later I had a new little brother. And when he arrived, I think I was still pretty sure it had something to do with that refrigerator.

Something about that experience, something about seeing my mother so elated, so filled with joy--and dad, too--made a deep impression on me. I'll tell you more about this in a moment but first let's look more closely at the story of Jesus' temptation.

Theologian Patrick Wilson, in his commentary on this text notes that it's all about Jesus. It's about Jesus refusing to do--or be--any of the things Satan wants him to be. Then it gets more interesting. The first of the temptations, Wilson says, is telling us that Jesus will not turn *our* stones into bread...that Jesus did not come to fix our self-made problems, fulfill our wants or accommodate our wishes. Wilson goes on to say the message of the second temptation--the one where Jesus is to jump off the pinnacle of the temple trusting that God will save him--is that Jesus did not come to prove God's existence to us. And in the third temptation--where Jesus is offered all the kingdoms of the world if he will bow to Satan--the message is this: Jesus will not turn from God in order to embrace the world's definition of success. The implications of these interpretation's temptations are huge. And radical.

Let me show you why. One of my favorite Charlie Brown comic strips begins with a frame showing him about to shoot an arrow at a long tall wooden fence. The fence already has 3 or 4 targets painted on it, each with one of Charlie Brown's previously-shot arrows in its bull's eye. In the second frame Lucy says, "Charlie Brown, you are amazing! How did you do that?" And, in the final frame he says, "It's easy!" as he stands at the fence where he's made his final shot and proceeds to draw a bull's eye--around the arrow.

Sometimes. Oftentimes. This is how we approach God. We pick a spot in our lives where we want God to rescue us or some situation then wait for God to come and encircle it with a solution--rather than call upon God's power already in us.

So yes, this story is all about Jesus. But it's also all about us. It's about us because it depicts an archetypal experience. These are the kind everyone can easily relate to because we all have them. In this case, we see Jesus responding to the archetypal experience of temptation. Further, it's about the archetypal experience of the use of our power--the power of choice--for instance. Will we use it for ourselves or others, for good or evil?

At the recent Southern Lights Conference, Reggie Williams, Professor of Christian Ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary--and a noted Dietrich Bonhoeffer scholar--posed an intriguing question: Not *who*, but *what* killed Bonhoeffer who was hanged less than two weeks before the end of the war. We know who killed him. The Nazis. But what? *What* was the ideology that justified his demise? Professor William's surprising answer was this: It was humanity's endless quest to create the ideal human...in this case, the Arian race. In order to have an ideal anything there must be something on the opposite end of the spectrum, right? Hitler had determined that the Arian race was the ideal human race--and that Jews were the antithesis of that ideal.

Part of the theological irony of Hitler's sad premise is that God had already created the ideal human. It's right here. And it's everywhere. It's Bob and Mary and Hans and Natasha. It's you and me. It's every human being. That's what Jesus taught.

We see in Hitler and all those who promote such demented ideologies the obvious abuse of power. Where then, do we learn about the appropriate use of our power?

I enjoy working with wood and so have a variety of power tools. I love what I can do with them--their amazing power and capabilities. Whenever I get a new one, somewhere in the box or online, there's a manual that teaches me all about how to use it--and how *not* to use it. That manual comes in very handy, especially if I use it.

But where do we humans learn about the proper use of our power? Did you come with a manual? Wouldn't your parents have appreciated it if you had! I know I didn't. Yet from the day we're born our parents begin teaching us about power. And where did they learn it? From others, right? From their parents, and their parents...and from the world around them. Is it any wonder why we humans are so, well, puzzling.

One final question today: What is Matthew's purpose in including Jesus' temptation in his gospel? One reason was to help his audience get to know just who this Jesus was. After all, Matthew's gospel emerged 2 or 3 generations after Jesus' death. If he was trying to convince people to believe in Jesus then he needed to show them who this Jesus was. Such information is good to know, of course, but information alone doesn't change hearts. Doesn't change lives.

No, he had a deeper reason: transformation. What the people of Matthew's time needed in their day to day struggles was transformed hearts and minds--the kind capable of transforming their lives and the life of the world. And what's the surest way to empower people? Inspire them!

When we look at the anatomy of inspiration we see that typically some stimulus from outside of us--something our senses pick up on...could be a beautiful piece of art, an exquisite sunrise, the kind word or act we experience, the sight of a newborn baby...could be almost anything--does something inside of us. We breathe deeply, we feel our chest swell, we may tear up, or we find ourselves feeling full of joy. In short, it inspires us. And when we feel inspired we are most loving, most generous, most forgiving, most courageous, most kind, most compassionate, most everything that is God. This, I believe, is why Matthew wrote, indeed it's why the entire Bible was written: To inspire and transform each of us to use our power for the wellbeing of all.

Watching my parents that day my father brought home that refrigerator...watching them experience such joy over something as mundane as a refrigerator...did something to me. It inspired me. It transformed me. As a result of it, I made my first career decision at the ripe old age of 8. When I grew up I was going to have a job just like dad's...a job where I helped make people happy. It was one of the reasons I became a pastor.

One final story. When our family gets together for holidays or vacations, someone usually brings out a puzzle. In one case, Renee and I provided one that we'd picked up at a garage sale. We excitedly cleared the dining room table, poured out the pieces and set to work. By the end of the day we were down to the very last piece. But guess what. It didn't fit. It didn't fit because it belonged to a different puzzle! Argh! This meant not only that we couldn't finish our puzzle, but that somewhere out there in the universe was another one that was missing this piece! This is the sort of thing that keeps puzzlers awake at night!

But that's the nature of life, isn't it? It's puzzling! At any given moment we're not just working on one puzzling situation or issue or relationship or dilemma but several. Maybe many! We finish one only to discover there are six more begging for our attention. And we're not just missing pieces, we've got too many pieces. We've got pieces for which we don't have puzzle--not even the picture on the box! And quickly, life isn't fun, isn't meaningful, anymore.

But wait. We're forgetting something. We're forgetting our power--not just any power, but as in Jesus--the power of God in us, power that inspires us, that transforms us. When we stop and remember that it's available to us, that it's ours, that it's *in* us...then we're back at life's table.

As we begin our sermons Reverend Renee and I say words that those of you who knew Father Ted, St. Cyprians' previous priest always said before his sermons. I'd like to close with these words because they are all about God's power in us. And they say it all.

*"In the name of the God of all creation, the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus Christ, and in the power of God known in the Spirit." Amen.*