

Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

February 22, 2026

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Y'all tried to tell me, tried to warn me about what was going to happen. You told me that there was no way to describe it except to experience it. So here is what I now know, my accumulated wisdom after the first 2 days of the trifacta of Lent, LPS and Waffle Shop. Here at Calvary, Lent does not begin quietly. 103 years of the Lenten Preaching Series and 98 of years of Waffle Shop. Two hundred to five hundred people a day. Fabulous preaching. Volunteers everywhere. Iced tea pouring. Plates clattering. Conversations overlapping. Fish pudding. It's beautiful. It's choreographed excitement. It's the totally unique liturgical experience of Mardi Gras during Lent. And. It is holy. And I have the best job in the world. I host. I welcome. I go from table to table. I shake hands. I smile. I listen. I try to be fully present. But at some point, my social battery is empty. And when that happens, one of two things occurs. Either I keep talking and am totally dissociated. Or I quietly disappear into my office. And I've confirmed something about myself. When I am depleted, that's when *the voice* gets loud. Not a dramatic voice. Not horns and flames. Just a whisper. If you are strong, prove it. If you are responsible, hold it together. If you are faithful, don't slow down, don't let anyone see you tired. And when I'm tired it's so easy for me to get pulled into things that are not a reflection of the image of God. That text that shouldn't be sent. The ugly online battle with a complete stranger. Exhaustion turning into outrage. That's temptation. Michelle Obama says, "when they go low, we go high" and I think that's more a theological statement than a political one.

In the Book of Genesis, the serpent does not begin with rebellion. It begins with a question. "Did God really say that...?" A small crack in trust. They eat. And nothing explodes. No thunder. No lightning. Just blinding awareness. Suddenly they see themselves differently. Not as beloved creatures. But as exposed. They sew fig leaves together. They try to manage the problem. And they hide. How completely shattering it must have been to be the first creatures to have ever felt shame. And shame is always the first fruit of mistrust. We didn't read the next few verses this morning, but I wish we had because they are so important. God comes walking in the garden. Not running. Not raging. Walking. And God does not begin with, "What have you done?" God says, "Where are you?" And then this devastatingly tender question: "Who told you you were

naked?” Who told you that you were exposed? Who told you that you were alone? Who told you that you had to secure yourself? Temptation always tells the same lie: You are not safe. You must grab. You must cover. You must manage your own survival.

I learned something about this the hard way. In the fall of 2023, fresh out of seminary and in my first full-time church job, I was pushing much harder than I knew. And my body collapsed. I had shingles. And diverticulitis. At the same time. One morning, I passed out in the shower. I woke up on my bathroom floor and could not stand up. And my first thought was, ‘This is what dying feels like.’ And my second thought, because my ego was still alive and well, was, ‘If I am dying, they are not going to find me on the bathroom floor.’ So I crawled. On my belly. To my bedroom. And put on sweatpants. Like Adam and Eve. Apparently even on the brink of death, I was still managing appearances. But here’s what I could not manage: I could not save myself. I had to ask for help brushing my teeth. For help bathing. For help existing. I hated it. And I remember thinking; this is what I have become. But then I remember thinking, no. This is what I have always been. Dependent. And loved. God showed up. Not with shame. Not with lectures. With people. Holding a toothbrush. Standing beside me. I was held. Not because I was strong. Because I was loved. This is what grace feels like.

In the wilderness in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is hungry. Forty days without food. And the voice comes. “If you are the Son of God...” Turn these stones into bread. Jump from the temple. Take the kingdoms. Secure the power. Temptation is not about appetite. It is about autonomy. Secure yourself. Define yourself. Prove yourself. And Jesus refuses. “I live by what God speaks.” “I serve God alone.” He does not grab. He entrusts.

I am convinced that sin, at its root, is trying to save yourself. And forgiveness is God refusing to abandon you when you cannot. The gospel artist Yoland Adams sings “He kept me even when I could not keep myself.” I have lived that lyric countless times. Maybe you have too.

Addiction recovery understands something the church sometimes forgets. The first step in 12 step recovery says, “We admitted we were powerless, and our lives had become unmanageable.” Which is perhaps simultaneously one of the most frightening and beautiful statements of all time. Our self sufficiency collapses all around us, and all we are left with is...God.

And no, it is not just our private lives that exhaust us. It is the world. The noise. The outrage. The systems that feel bigger than us. The constant pressure to fix and hold and control. It is no wonder the voice gets loud. If you are competent-fix it. If you are faithful-don’t rest. If you are strong-don’t let them see you weak.

Temptation lures us into the shadows of death, hiding from life. But even death is no place to hide from God. And at the cross, Christ bears the full weight of our self-saving. Every time we grab. Every time we hide. Every time we try to secure ourselves apart from God. He stands where we stand, exposed, vulnerable, and He does not turn away. He entrusts himself to the Father. "Into your hands." He does not save himself. He pours himself out. So that our failures are not final. So that our weakness is not the end of us. So hear this. You were never meant to hold the whole world together. You are a creature. Not the Savior. We will be tempted. We will grab. We will hide. We will try to cover ourselves. And still-God walks in the garden. Jesus walks toward the cross. Grace walks toward us.

Y'all tried to tell me, tried to warn me about what was going to happen. You told me that there was no way to describe it except to experience it. I thought you meant the excitement and beauty of Waffle Shop. But I think maybe you meant something else. There is no way to describe what it feels like to surrender. There is no way to describe what it feels like to be held. You have to experience it. We are called to build God's Kingdom here on earth, and that work can feel daunting and exhausting. But here is the good news: You can let go now. You do not have to save the world. You do not have to save yourself. Christ already has.