

Title: Buttons, Bread, and the Long Way Home

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

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I went to the store for one small thing. You know that promise is the most dishonest promise we ever make. "I'll be quick."

I needed a wall hanger. Just a simple 3M wall hanger. The kind is designed to disappear, and the whole purpose is to hold something else up without being noticed. A humble object.

I searched aisle after aisle. Tools. Lightbulbs. Picture frames. Curtain rods. Everything is designed to hang except the one thing made to hang things. Finally, I spotted a man in a blue blazer. Store employee. My moment of redemption.

He was on his phone. Not the "work call" phone. The "Oh wow, what did she say next?" phone. So, I waited. Because I am a polite person. At least in public. He turned his back on me.

I cleared my throat, the universal human language, for *I exist*. He glanced at me, a sharp glance, and kept talking. Minutes passed. I shifted my weight. Looked at the ceiling. I pretended to study packaging. Considered growing old in aisle nine. Finally: "Pardon me, I just have a quick question."

He rolled his eyes, mumbled into the phone, "I gotta go," and looked at me with the expression reserved for people who have interrupted history. "What?"

"I'm looking for a wall hanger."

"Hardware. Second aisle. In plain view."

I walked away. But something stayed behind. Because while my feet went to hardware, my mind went to court. Closing arguments were delivered. My righteousness grew stronger with every step. I didn't go back. But I wanted to.

Not to find the hanger, but to restore justice to the universe. And somewhere between aisle seven and aisle eight, I realized: The real moment wasn't the conversation, but my reaction. Something inside me had been hooked.

We normally ask: Why are people rude? But Lent asks: Why did that moment have power over you? Because temptation rarely feels like rebellion. Rather, temptation feels like justification.

You should say something. You deserve better. You need to fix this. So, you feel justified in your actions. The wilderness of Scripture begins exactly there. In our reading, we witness not evil actions, but persuasive thoughts. And that is why our theme this Lent matters. This Lent, we are **"On the Way With Jesus."** We are not watching Jesus. We are not studying Jesus. We ARE walking with him.

And the first place our walk takes us is not a miracle, but a wilderness. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days. He was not looking for miracles, crowds, or sermons. He was opening his heart and mind to questions. Each and every question asks him the same thing: **"Will you trust the Father... or manage the world yourself?"**

In his first temptation, Jesus' situation was addressed. He is starving. So, the tempter prods him with a basic need question, "Turn these stones into bread." Feed yourself. Feed the world. Solve hunger immediately.

Nothing is wrong there, is it? Feeding oneself and others is a good idea. Our Mission Committee is proud of its work with Downtown Presbyterian and Room In The Inn. We collect food near our exits each Sunday and post a list of the Food Bank's needs. So, what is at stake in this temptation?

In the tempter's voice, we witness that if Jesus wins devotion by satisfying appetites, humanity will follow him only while full. So, Jesus resists the urge to control the situation and answers, "We do not live by bread alone."

Meaning, life is received before it is managed. The first temptation is not about hunger but about whether true life is a gift or a project or (dare I say it) a ministry to engage.

Our witness of Jesus' second temptation is interesting. We are taken to the temple. The tempter says, "Jump. Angels will catch you." If Jesus does this, he will avoid the whip, the crown of thorns, and the cross. People will experience his power, and there will be no doubt. We will not require faith to walk with Jesus. Everyone will believe instantly.

But forced belief is not faith, is it? Jesus' power to coerce and convince would exist in the moment's spectacle. And Jesus refuses proof that replaces trust. He will not make God undeniable. Because love chosen freely is the only love God wants.

And if those two were not enough, the tempter throws in his final temptation until we see him again at the cross. He uses power to sway the moment. Our tempter offers all kingdoms to Jesus.

Again, no cross required. Just cooperate with how the world already works. Jesus could win the hearts and minds by control. But that's the world's way, isn't it? God's kingdom does not arrive by domination. So, Jesus refuses.

And the pattern becomes clear:

In these three temptations, we witness on our way with Jesus that there really are no shortcuts to life, no shortcuts to trust, and certainly no shortcuts to love.

And this is where this story of Jesus in the wilderness meets us: not only personally, but as a church. We are at a hinge moment in our life together. This week, the Pastor Transition Team completed the Mission Study. Tonight, the Session votes on approving it. If it passes the Session, the Commission on Ministry of the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee will receive it tomorrow. In these actions, we are in a new moment where the Nominating Committee is gathering names from the congregation to form the Pastor Nominating Committee.

These are important steps. Hopeful steps. But also, this scripture offers us a warning. These next steps are dangerous steps. Because moments like this awaken a familiar temptation: Let's move quickly. Let's solve it. Let's secure the future.

We want clarity. We want stability. We want the next chapter now. But Lent interrupts us and says, "Be careful." The church does not call a pastor the way a business fills a position. The wilderness teaches us something: God forms a people before God sends a leader.

Like Jesus, we are not called first to act but to listen. We are not to control, but to discern. We are not to hurry but to walk. That is what it means to be **On the Way With Jesus**.

Because every temptation Jesus faced was a shortcut to a good outcome. Bread would help people. Spectacle would inspire belief. Power would stabilize the world. But none of them was Abba's way, was it?

And a church can be tempted the same way: to accomplish the right thing the wrong way by moving faster than trust. So at this hinge moment, our calling is simple: Listen. Pray. Wait. Trust the long road.

Watch closely: Jesus refuses bread, yet later he becomes bread. He refuses spectacle, yet later crowds mock him helplessly. He refuses power, yet later he reigns from a cross. The temptations return at Calvary: “If you are the Son of God — save yourself.”

He could, and He doesn't. Because saving himself would mean abandoning us to the instincts that break us — control, proof, power. So he chooses the long road. And now he invites us to walk it with him.

So, this week, your buttons will be pushed. Not dramatically. Probably not by a villain. More likely by someone ordinary who has no idea they are starring in your spiritual life. And in that moment, you will feel the urge to fix things.

And you will think the issue is the other person. But what if the real decision is about you? Not what happened, but what story you will live inside. Because in the wilderness, Jesus did something curious. Nothing impressive.

He trusted before anything changed. No applause. No results. Just quiet faithfulness.

And later Christians looked back and said: That... that was the beginning of the cross.

So I've wondered: When I walked away in that store, what actually mattered? His tone? Or whether irritation would “disciple” me? And I wonder about us as a church. At this very moment — mission studies, votes, committees, conversations — what will shape us most? Perfect decisions? Or patient listening?

Maybe the kingdom of God comes mostly unnoticed. Maybe it appears whenever people refuse to rush ahead of God. And maybe — just maybe — The reason Jesus would not save himself was not only to redeem the world... but to teach his people how to walk. So, when the moment comes in a conversation, in a meeting, or in a decision, we will pause. We will pause and ask: Are we solving this, or are we following him?

On our way to follow Jesus, I postulate that we consider the slower answer. While we may feel like nothing happened, maybe heaven may smile and say, “*They stayed on the way.*” Amen.