



## St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

February 23, 2026; Lent 1A: [Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#), [Romans 5:12-19](#), [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

In one of my former parishes, I had the privilege of spending time with a man who knew he was going to die. He had a brilliant mind and a very successful career. He had been divorced and was remarried to a beautiful woman who was devoted to him. They lived in a home that was shown in architectural magazines, went to all the right restaurants, belonged to all the right groups, and traveled the world together. When I asked him if he was ready to die, he told me how he had prepared everything for his wife to be taken care of and had written precise instructions for himself. There were to be no extreme measures, and he wanted to die at home. "All taken care of," he said. Then his face changed, and he said, "There is one thing: my son." He went on to tell me how he and his son had been estranged since his marriage to his second wife and that he hadn't seen his son for many years. It was obviously a painful subject. I suggested that now might be a good time to reach out, to write his son a letter or give him a call. He looked at me and nodded but never did. A few days later, I got a call asking to come over because the end was near. When I arrived at the house, he was no longer conscious. He was laying in a hospital bed in the living room, with a hospice volunteer and his wife quietly sitting by his side. Not long after I arrived, there was a loud sound as his son burst through the door. The son immediately began screaming directions and demanding that his father be taken to the hospital and that everything possible be done to keep him alive. He wouldn't listen to any argument that this was against his father's wishes. He kept pushing until his stepmother gave in and agreed to have her husband taken to the local hospital where

they worked on him until he died early the next day. A week later, the man's funeral was held at my church. On the surface everything looked fine. Underneath, as you can imagine, it was a mess. I don't blame just the son for what happened that night. All three – the father, the son, and the stepmother – played a part.

Jesus' first temptation was to make stones into bread, to focus only his physical needs rather than spiritual ones. He told the Temptor, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' To understand this response, remember how Jesus summed the whole of the scripture in the command to love God and love our neighbor. For Jesus, living by the word of God was all about love. Did you see the joy on the face of skater Alysa Liu this week? Her spirit lifted the hearts of people all around the globe. She is a living example of how it takes spiritual as well as physical strength to win the gold. You can't live by bread alone. The father in my story had money, success, and a brilliant mind. He had great personal abilities and had accomplished a lot. He fell into the temptation of believing that was enough. In focusing solely on his physical and financial needs, he neglected his spiritual ones, including his relationship with his son.

If Jesus' first temptation was to rely on himself rather than God, his second temptation was the opposite. His second temptation was to give up his own responsibility and agency, to throw himself off a cliff, and let everything be taken care of by the angels of God. This brings me to the son. The son chose to play the part of a passive victim, with a helplessness that did nothing except make his anger and frustration worse. When I say the word "son," you might think of him as a kid. The truth is that he was a grown man about my own age, much closer to 60 than 16. He could have stepped up any time. He could have taken responsibility for his relationships and his life. Instead of doing something to change his situation, he wallowed in victimhood, again and again putting his father to a test. The son's inaction reminds me of a Country Song from a few years back called "Jesus take the wheel." It's a catchy tune but really bad theology that has

probably created a lot of car accidents. Things would have been better if he followed the theme of the 1945 film, “God is my co-pilot:” the idea that God is right there next to us, coaching us, encouraging us, and giving us the courage to meet the challenges in front of us. With the smallest of actions, the son could have begun to heal wounds which will now remain unhealed for a long long time. Without wanting to, the son learned the lesson of another Country Song, “It’s never too late... until it is.”

Jesus' third temptation is the temptation to become the king of the world by selling his soul. Now we come to the man’s wife, the stepmother of the son. Of the three, she is the one I knew best. Over the years, she regaled me with stories about her career in education, her skill in mentoring new teachers and her joy in caring for kids. As an educator, she had longed for financial security, social status and power... all of which she gained in her marriage to this man. She got what she wanted. She got there, however, by sacrificing her core values, specifically by cutting off her husband’s only son. She became the queen of her universe but had sold her soul in the process. Not long after her husband died, she slipped into dementia and then passed away herself, empty, bitter, angry, and alone.

In the wilderness, Jesus faced the temptation to focus just on his physical needs rather than on his spiritual ones. He faced the temptation to do nothing at all and let God do the work. He faced the temptation to sell his soul and give up his core values to become a king. To all these things, he said no. Notice that as soon as he did that, the angels ministered to him and his ministry was able to begin.

I didn't tell you about that family in order to throw them under the bus. I didn’t know the son but I knew and cared deeply for both the man and his wife. I didn’t tell you their story because it is tragic. I told you their story because it is human. This Lent, temptations are all around us. Like Adam and Eve, we can give in and get stuck. Like Jesus, we can also say no and move forward into something completely new.

Lent is not meant to be a time of deprivation and suffering. It is meant to be a time of reflection and repentance, of reparation and reconciliation. In all this, it is meant to be a time of preparation for resurrection, for the new life of Easter. I asked that man if he was ready to die. I wonder how things might have been different if I had asked him if he was ready to live, if he was ready for a whole new life to begin. I wonder how things might be different for you if you asked yourself the same thing.