

**The First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

## **The Second Temptation**

Matthew 4:1, 5-6

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

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Our focus is on the second temptation: **Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. . . . The devil took Him to the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You,' and 'On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'"** (vv 1, 5-6).

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Trust but verify.

You might remember this Russian proverb,

made famous by President Ronald Reagan during the Cold War.

1.

Trust but verify.

So it goes in our world. We're used to it.

We require verification before we trust someone,

and we're asked for verification before others trust us.

Just think about the steps you had to go through

last time you logged into your bank account online.

Or applied for a job. Or closed on a house.

They want proof. Security codes, account information, references, drug tests.

Trust but verify.

Which means: Trust but get confirmation. Put it to a test.

When someone says, "Trust me!", we ask for proof that they can be trusted.

Is she the real thing, genuine, true?

Or is he a fake trying to pull the wool over my eyes?

No one wants to fall for the snake oil.

Trust but verify.

Trust because there can be no real relationship without it.

But verify for protection, for safety, for security.

This proverb makes a great deal of sense in so many spheres—

in foreign policy, in business deals and workplaces, in some relationships.

Welcome to life after fall.

But it's not a good policy with God.

Truth is a characteristic of God.

It's part of His very being, His essence, who He is.

He couldn't be God without it.

So with God, it's simply "trust."

Would you require some additional verification from Him?

Would you make God file paperwork, answer security questions,  
go through a screening process?

2.

We shouldn't, but often that's exactly what we do.

That's where the fall started for Adam and Eve.

The serpent's first words were a variation of "trust but verify."

"**Did God actually say . . . ?**" (Gen 3:1).

The serpent begins with that question.

He plants the seeds of a different approach, a different attitude toward God:

Distrust, doubt, uncertainty.

Perhaps you should get some verification

before you go any farther in your relationship with God,

before you trust Him with anything else in your life.

Verify.

Use your reason and your senses to discover the truth.

Look, smell, touch, taste.

Test it out.

See if what He says is true.

He said that you shall surely die if you eat it,

but this doesn't look like it'll kill you.

In fact, it looks so good, it feels good, no doubt it'll be good for you, too.

Maybe God *isn't* protecting you.

Maybe He's just protecting Himself.

Eve had God's word.  
That *should've* been enough.  
God's word—not her reason or her senses or the serpent's word—  
but God's word should've been sufficient.  
Everything should've been tested by that.  
What the serpent said should've been tested by that.  
But instead she put God to the test.

It's a terribly dangerous thing to test God.  
To demand verification from Him.  
When she tested His word against the serpent's word,  
and against what her eyes saw,  
she found it wanting.  
If you're looking at the wrong answer key, the truth will always appear wrong.  
That's what Eve did.  
She took the plunge—away from God.

And Adam.  
I can see him standing there, listening to the serpent speak with Eve,  
and then thinking that she would make a good test case.  
He'll wait for verification. He'll use Eve.  
He says nothing. He does nothing.  
He lets her throw herself over the edge.  
Let's see what happens.  
Let's see what God does.  
Will she surely die?  
He watches, watches as God is called to the stand and put to the test.

The serpent is the accuser, Adam and Eve are the judges,  
and God—God!—is the one on trial.

So Eve eats and doesn't drop dead.  
And Adam sees this as a failure on God's part.  
Not as evidence of His being merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
But a sign of God's weakness or of evil intentions.  
So Adam plunges in too.

Ever since then, trust but verify has been our way of life with others,  
and our way of life with God.

It tells us a whole lot about ourselves,  
 about our insecurities and our desire for proof, for evidence, for reassurance.  
 We want to know whether we can count on God to protect us.

## 3.

This is the second temptation that Jesus faced.  
 It's also the one that seems the most difficult to understand.  
 We get the temptation brought on by hunger and need.  
 We get the temptation to power.  
 But what's this?

**Then the devil took Him to the holy city  
 and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple  
 and said to Him,  
 "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down,  
 for it is written in Psalm 91,  
 'He will command His angels concerning You,'  
 and  
 'On their hands they will bear You up,  
 lest You strike Your foot against a stone'" (vv 5-6).**

The devil knows what he's doing.  
 He uses Scripture to lure Jesus into His trap.  
 Scripture about how God will protect the man who believes.  
 And where should the man who believes in God feel safer  
 than in the holy city and the sacred precincts of the temple?  
 So, throw Yourself down, Jesus, and try God out!  
 Make Him prove His word.  
 Or do you doubt Him and His promise of protection?

Do you see what the devil's doing?  
 He's trying to preach a sermon to Jesus, trying to teach Him the Bible.

Trying to get Him to do what Israel did in the wilderness,  
 when they rebelled against God.  
 Trust but verify.  
 Making God prove that He is God.  
 Making God submit to experiment,  
 to be "tested" as products are tested,  
 to submit to the conditions that we say are necessary  
 for us to be certain.

The devil wants to say,

“If God doesn’t give you the protection *right now* that He promises in Psalm 91,  
then He’s simply not God.

He’ll show Himself and His word to be false.”

Don’t believe it.

It’s the height of arrogance to make God an object  
and impose our laboratory conditions on Him.

You can’t find Him in that way, prove Him,  
get Him to show up as a result of some experiment.

Even to try it is to deny that God is God and to put ourselves above Him.

What would be verified if Jesus took the leap from the pinnacle of the temple?

It would verify that God’s word about His protecting presence is true.

And it would verify that this was true *for* Jesus in particular.

As true man, Jesus wanted what every son and daughter wants—  
to be safe, to be loved, to be protected.

It’s the temptation to make the Father prove Himself.

To find security in something that we can see and measure and demonstrate.

To demand yet *another* sign from God.

*Another* sign, besides His baptism,

when Jesus heard the words,

**“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”** (Matt 3:17).

But Psalm 91 doesn’t promise that the Son won’t face trouble.

It promises that the trouble will not triumph in the end.

Too often we fall into the devil’s trap.

We insist on seeing our health and well-being,

our visible protection and success as signs of God’s presence and love.

We fall into the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel.

We assume that His love requires visible protection *right now*.

We make security and protection our ultimate goal,

and use Him as a means to that end.

We put God to the test.

We ask Him to prove it.

Repent!

## 4.

Jesus didn't fall for it—literally didn't fall for it.  
He knew that He could trust His Father.  
He refused to seek the proof of His own protection  
because He was seeking more than His own protection.  
He was looking out for you,  
not when you were on the pinnacle of the temple,  
but when you lay crushed under the weight of "trust but verify."  
Jesus didn't cast Himself down from the pinnacle.  
He didn't leap into the abyss.  
He didn't tempt God.  
But He did descend into the abyss of death,  
and into the night of abandonment,  
and into the desolation of the defenseless.  
He ventured *that* leap—on to the cross—as an act of God's love for humanity.  
There He bore your reproach,  
He strapped on your curse,  
He carried your exile.

And He knew what to expect.  
All the terrible things He would suffer, the excruciating death.  
But He also knew what the Father had promised.  
That the Father had promised to catch Him.  
That's what Psalm 91 means.  
In spite of all the terrible things that happen to you,  
even when it feels as though you've been forsaken,  
you'll never lose a final refuge.  
Because Jesus triumphed over the devil,  
and went to the cross,  
you can go on trusting in the One who loves you.

Want proof?  
Need to verify it?  
You have God's word for it.  
And you have His Son.  
You have been baptized into His death and resurrection.  
You have the forgiveness of sins proclaimed to you in His name.  
You have His body given for you and His blood shed for you.  
That's enough.

Jesus trusted even when His flesh was hung from nails as if they were coat hooks,  
even when He bowed His head, breathed His last, and fell into the tomb.

**“Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.”**

Jesus told the devil,

**“Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’”** (v 7).

He endured *for you*,

and on the third day, guess who was there at the tomb?

The angels, at God’s command to serve risen Jesus.

God raised Him from the dead,

just as He will raise you.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ  
Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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