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Matthew 4:1-11
Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19

February 22, 2026
The First Sunday of Lent

Here is a simple yet unsettling truth...We all lie. From little white lies to big, harmful lies. We lie to make ourselves feel good. We lie to get something that we want. We lie to make people see us a certain way. Sometimes we lie to keep the peace and avoid conflict.

It starts early...when you ask your 5 year old...did you eat that cookie? They will answer with chocolate smeared all over their face...No, I did not eat the cookie.

Lies tend to get bigger as we get older...looking over someone's shoulder during a test, taking credit for someone else's work, grabbing an unfair advantage in game you play. Surely those kind of lies won't hurt anyone, right? At least, that's what we tell ourselves.

But, what about bigger lies...cheating on a spouse, hiding an addiction, stealing money from an employer. Those feel a little shakier because someone might get hurt on the other end.

The thing is...Lies are tempting whether big or small. And we get drawn in because every lie promises us something we don't have or protects us from something we want to avoid.

So, we might look at big lies, big temptations and say I would never do that. I'm not that kind of person. We tell ourselves that it's a bad person who would make those kind of choices, choices that would harm someone else, choices that are unethical or amoral. But the reality is that we often slip into increasingly bigger lies without even realizing it.

That's how temptation works. The risk and the reward get higher as we walk the tight rope of justification. After all, it was just a chocolate chip cookie.

Consider Jesus' tightrope in our Gospel.

Let me first give you some context...before our reading for today, Chapter 3 of Matthew tells us that Jesus was just baptized by John and as he comes out of the water, the heavens open up, the Spirit descends and he hears this incredible voice of God. This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

Think about if you were in Jesus' shoes...the actual voice of God telling you how pleased God is with you. That's gotta lift your spirits. Give yourself a gold star and a pat on the back. And then just as Jesus is feeling all the warm fuzzies, the Spirit leads him out and dumps him in the wilderness for 40 days.

Wait, what?

And I am sure Jesus wanted to do everything right. To be the person God expected him to be. The Beloved son with whom God is well pleased. But things start to get hard. Jesus is hungry. He is surely tired. Maybe frustrated. Maybe even angry. Why would God do this to his beloved son? It was the perfect time for temptation to take hold. When life throws you a curve ball and you are at your wits end, a little weak in your resolve. Tired of trying so hard to do the right thing and struggling to keep your head above water.

It starts simple enough...Satan says, Jesus...I know your hungry. These 40 days have been so hard. Turn these stones into bread. No one will be the wiser. It's just a few rocks after all and just think how good that bread will taste.

It's just a few rocks. No one will know. I can relate to that kind of temptation. Can you?

Then, that simple indiscretion turns into a bigger temptation...Satan says, hey, Jesus, jump off the top of this temple and see if God will save you. Test him. You know God won't let anything happen to you. And, once you are saved, people will know how important you are. Imagine how famous you will be. You'll go viral.

Hmmm. That might be nice. It would certainly feel good to have a little more respect, a little more influence, a little more popularity. It'll be good for business.

The stakes get higher.

And then the biggest temptation of all is thrown in...Jesus, just one more thing. I promise it won't hurt anyone. If you give up all that you believe and follow me, I will give you more power and prestige than you could ever imagine. Wouldn't that be great? You can have everything the world has to offer. There will be no limits, no rules, no accountability. Who cares about ethics and morality and faith when you can have every advantage this world has to offer?

And thus, the biggest lie of all, the greatest temptation...giving up all that we know is good and right and true for the promise of personal gain. And you never imagined that those few rocks could cause so much damage.

Writer Debi Thomas says that "The devil doesn't come to make Jesus do something "bad." He comes to make Jesus do what seems entirely reasonable and good — but for all the wrong reasons."¹

We can be the most faithful person, the most dedicated person, the most ethical person and still fall to temptation. And like Jesus, if you are hungry, worn out, discouraged, or desperate taking that first step to eat that bread can be hard to resist.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2541-tempted>

From little rocks on the ground to power and money and prestige. The first lie, the first temptation will always seem insignificant. That's how it works. Remember...The devil doesn't come to make us do something "bad." He comes to make us do what seems entirely reasonable and good — but for all the wrong reasons."

What does that mean as we begin our Lenten season? I think it means that as we enter a time of reflection and confession that we need to look at the little ways we have lied to ourselves and to others. Where have we tried to be something that we are not? Where have we dismissed our harmful actions and justified to ourselves that no one will get hurt? Where have we convinced ourselves that our choices are reasonable even if they don't feel so good in the moment?

This process of self-reflection and repentance isn't easy work. But Jesus reminds us that when we put our focus on our belovedness, temptation will never have the last word. Will we always get it right? No, we won't. But we can keep turning back to God, grounding ourselves in what is truly reasonable and good...but this time for all the right reasons.