



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Twenty-seven years ago when I was first ordained a priest, I was working in New York City and the church that I was serving was located right in Greenwich Village. And this was back when Manhattan was really Manhattan, not the largest gated community of speculative housing in the world. It was actually a city. People did things, people danced in the streets. It was a different kind of place.

And one day this businessman came in off the street and asked to see me. Well, to be honest, I was the only priest in charge at that moment. So I was the only one he was going to get. And he walked in and I remember seeing his suit. And it was those suits that they used to wear in the 1990s. The suits that men wear today are so tight and small that you don't even want to watch them pick up a quarter. But in those days, men wore suits. They were like armor. They were full of incredible fabric and they were perfectly tailored to make them look just right. And they had power ties. And power ties were not shy. They were big, beautiful and bright.

And he sat down in the chair in my little office and he introduced himself as Ira. And I said, how can I help you? And then he said, the F-bomb, really loud. And then he covered his mouth like, oh. And then he said the F-bomb again, really loud. And then he began to weep. And then he stopped covering his mouth and he kept on saying it again and again and again. And I'm thinking, when is this going to end? And what am I going to say? And he finished with this tirade and then I said, "Can you use other words?" or something like that. And he poured out his heart to me.

He had lived a life that had taken him places that had made a lot of money, and he was alone. He was struggling with addiction. He was faced with his own mortality. He was at the end of his rope and he was lost, and he was trying to find a way forward. Now, I had been recently ordained, and so I did something that I might have cadenced differently in later years. But I just said to him, "You know, Christianity has an answer for this. Repent and be baptized, as we read in the book of Acts." And he looked at me and he stopped crying and he said, "Okay, let's do this."

A few weeks later, I was teaching a class for adult people who were going to be baptized. There were about six of them. and they all had different stories. It was part of the most amazing thing to have six adults preparing for baptism. And I was trying to engage them. They were artists and one person was regularly on the street, and then there was Ira in his suit. And I wanted to get them going and I said, okay, let's name some sins. And so someone said, "Sex." And so I turned around on the whiteboard I had and I wrote up sex. And then someone said, "Drugs." And I turned around and I put up drugs. And then someone said, "Rock and roll!" And so I put up rock and roll.

And I said, are there any more? And then Ira got a little impatient and he raised his hand. I said, what is it? He said, "I'm not sure if any of these things are sins. I don't think there's anything wrong with sex. I don't think there's anything wrong in moderation with drugs. I don't think there's anything wrong even with rock and roll. It's when I make these things God that they become sin to me. And I have spent my life making these and other things God, and it has made me miserable. And I'm ready to place God at the center and to let go of anything else."

On the date of Ira's baptism, which happened at Easter at the vigil, he had reached out to his brother who had gone through a similar kind of conversion experience and was part of a big box church somewhere in the suburbs, and asked him to present him for baptism. The brother didn't show. They had been estranged and he was hoping that this would be the opportunity for a new start. And then one person from the congregation, a friend of mine named Jeff, just stood up and he said, I'll be your sponsor. And took his number down and called him regularly and was a true godparent to him.

Ira was baptized and I'll never forget the look in his eyes when he was asked, do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? And he said I do. He was willing to wager everything on the repentance and renewal and reconciliation promised by Jesus Christ. As I was thinking about today's gospel and every time I go through Lent, I think about Ira. And I realize how powerful his witness has become in my life because Ira was unafraid of facing his temptations. And in today's gospel we have Jesus facing his temptations. Oscar Wilde in a wonderful four act comedy published in 1892, named *Lady Windermere's Fan*, said, "I can resist anything except temptation."

What is so powerful about temptation? On the one hand, we tend to define temptation as the desires of the body, as things that we want and crave and need, or think we want and crave and need. But I think that temptation is more than just that. The Greek that is used in today's gospel is *peirázō*, which means test or trial. So when it says that the spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, the point that we need to get is not that Jesus was just

hungry, but that Jesus was being led to the test. To have everything questioned.

And you and I know what that looks like, don't we? Because we get tested in one way or another. In fact, the truth about life is that it's a constant state of testing, isn't it? And even more so over the past few years. Gallup does an annual survey of wellbeing in the workplace, and what they've found is over the last 20 years, the rate of anger, loneliness, depression, anxiety, sadness, has only gone up in our workplace.

And part of the reason I think we have great resignation is because people have finally stopped trusting in their careers to give them the kind of peace they want. People are looking for other ways because they are facing testing of one form or another day in and day out. Whether it's the testing of this world, which seems to be coming apart at the seams, or whether it's a testing that comes in our own lives as it becomes more difficult for us to raise our children or to negotiate the world we live in. Or it's a testing that comes when we fear for our security. In all of these ways, life is about testing.

And the good news is that Jesus has gone into a place where He has been tested and tempted. Because the fact that Jesus did that means that it will be redeemed, that when Jesus goes through testing, He sanctifies it. Because the whole point of Christianity – and write this down if you're taking notes. The whole point of Christianity is that God in Christ has come not to obliterate human nature, but to redeem human nature from within. And that means that testing and temptation can actually be our teachers. And that instead of maybe trying to push these things away or try to become some kind of spiritual superhero, because you know that we are not, none of us are, the truth of the matter is we find our redemption by moving with Jesus into the wilderness where our own testing becomes an agent of transformation and change and repentance and reconciliation.

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where He was tempted. If I were to name the greatest temptation that we are facing, it's not the fact that we're having too much sex or too many drugs or too much rock and roll, maybe too much rock and roll. My belief is that the greatest temptation we're facing now is not to believe that this act of repentance and this work of the church at Lent is possible.

The crowds ran to John the Baptist because they believed Israel had fallen so far that there was no way that they could ever return to God. There was nothing they could ever do that would satisfy God's need for amendment. And so when John said to them, repent, it was actually an act of grace and meant that God was not finished with them, that God still loved them, that God was coming toward them, and that they could come back to God. The greatest temptation

we have is we are afraid to exercise our religion because we are so tested and tempted these days that we are afraid that that religion will fail.

Over the course of this week, I was reading a poem that just blew my mind by Anya Krugovoy Silver. And in the middle of it, it comes as a prayer. She writes:

Merciful One, save me from slight repentance
Merciful One, save me from slight repentance.

Today's gospel is an invitation to follow the spirit and meet Jesus in the midst of our trials and temptations. There are three things I want you to see today as you perhaps make that journey for yourself. The first thing I want you to see is that every temptation is a test of identity. Note what the Devil says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God," the devil is seeking to upend Jesus in His core identity.

And so it is with us. The temptations we need to fear, the temptations and trials that we need to somehow work our way around with fear and trembling with the hope of God's grace, these are the things that attack our identity. And our identity is not, as I just said, that we are some kind of spiritual superhero that puts on a cape and somehow never makes a mistake. Our identity is found when we cleave to the identity of Jesus. This is the whole point of what Paul is writing today in Romans. Jesus has come to be the source of our identity so that I know who I am because He knows me.

The second thing I want you to see is it happens in the wilderness. And a wilderness could be defined in different ways. When I close my eyes, I think of some kind of desert place with hills. But, in fact, the best definition of a wilderness is any place you are where you do not have a map and you are lost. Any place where you do not have a map and you are lost. You are in a wilderness.

And that journey can seem incredibly solitary at times. And I think that's been done for a reason, because we all have to discern what is the shape of our trials and temptations. The people around us will quickly tell us what they think is the greater temptation than another, and it'll usually be the thing that they're least prone to will be the worst temptation possible. And the one that they're most prone to, they'll give it a pass. No. Each of us is called into the wilderness where we negotiate our identity and the solitude of prayer and the space of redemption. And we ask, what is God calling us to do? Who is God calling us to be?

And the third thing I want you to see is that we never face temptations alone, and trials alone. We might be by ourselves, but Jesus is with us. Because God in Christ was willing to walk into temptation and testing and trial because God wanted to be with us for eternity. And this was a sacrifice that Jesus willingly

took. He followed the Spirit, which is in another way, saying He followed Himself, for God was just as much in Jesus as God was in that Spirit. And so Jesus knew and trusted that there is where He must be. He did it so that you would always be surrounded by God's love in Christ, that you would never be alone.

Merciful One, save me from a slight repentance. This Lent, do not miss the opportunity of transformation. Take the chance. Find your faith again. Walk with Jesus into the wilderness and do not be afraid of the trials and temptations that you experience. Because although Jesus will not test God, Jesus will always catch you when you fall.

Amen.