

February 14, First Sunday in Lent: Luke 4:1-13

by [Malinda Elizabeth Berry](#) in the [February 3, 2016](#) issue

One of the many patterns discernible in the Revised Common Lectionary is a shift from year to year in the people the Lenten texts focus on. Year A is most interested in the spiritual growth and development of new believers. In Year B, the ranks of the faithful—those deepening their relationship to Jesus Christ and at home in the church—are the focal point. This year, Year C, draws attention to those who are alienated from Christ and the church.

My husband and I are Year B people living among Year B people. We live in the bosom of community. We walk about two blocks to worship in a building that also houses my husband's massage practice. I have only a mile to travel to work (by car more often than I care to admit). Child care for our son is usually free or bartered and includes a doting auntie and grandparents. We are revitalizing the soil in the yard, helping it become more fertile and productive. We and our friends are part of an active local community of locavores, dumpster divers, and cultural creatives.

In Year C, as in Year A, the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent begins with Jesus' sojourn into the wilderness, culminating in his temptation by Satan. We do not hear Mark's celebratory words from Year B that first proclaim Jesus' belovedness at his baptism, enabling him to withstand his adversary. So it's not immediately clear what the good news is for my friends and me in Luke 4:1-13.

In her theological commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Lori Brandt Hale suggests that what makes this episode of temptation theologically significant for both Jesus and us is his steadfast refusal to betray his commitment to God's mission. "His responses come with the full knowledge that obedience to God will bring persecution, misunderstanding, and the cross," Hale writes. Sharon Ringe's exegetical comment in the same volume supports this reading, noting that Jesus is facing more than temptation—more than the wish to do something desirable but unwise, like taking an extra helping of dessert. Jesus is facing testing (*peirasmos*) of the will: the will to feed the hungry, rule the world with justice, and serve God faithfully. Can he affirm the wisdom of Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"?

Church folks often succumb to the temptation of certainty. This can lead to the betrayal of other people—betrayal is one of the things that paves the way out the church’s door for my friends who are Year C people. Testing, on the other hand, is a real issue for Year B people. We become so comfortable with our faith-formed habits and steady presence—prayer, weekly worship, hospitality, and nurturing community—that we don’t always recognize interactions that test us. As Ringe wonders, have good things lured us into following a cozy Christ?

Ringe’s incisive analysis gives us a window into the narrative themes Luke uses to help us see what it looks like to live a Spirit-empowered life. As Luke tells his readers the Jesus story, he shows us that even though Jesus does not turn stones to bread at Satan’s invitation, he feeds those who hunger. Even as Jesus says no when Satan offers him political power, a vision of God’s all-encompassing reign of shalom is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. Satan prods Jesus to leap from the temple and count on angels to stop his fall; Jesus, Ringe explains, “goes to the cross in confidence that God’s will for life will trump the world’s decision to execute him.”

T. S. Eliot’s verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* chronicles the assassination of Archbishop Thomas à Becket by King Henry II’s knights. The archbishop faces four tempters. The first urges him to consider his own safety and “leave well alone” lest his “goose be cooked and eaten to the bone.” The second tells him that if he aligns himself with the king, he will receive the benefits of wealth and political power. Tempter three advises him to forge an alliance with the local barons to resist the king and “fight for liberty.” Finally, the prospect of martyrdom rears its head as the fourth tempter declares,

You hold the keys of heaven and hell.  
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind  
King and bishop under your heel.

Here is Thomas’s reply:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:  
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.  
The last temptation is the greatest treason:  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

What if we reframed our Lenten discipline to tune into the moments when we do the right things for the wrong reasons? This is, I think, in keeping with Jesus’ advice to us

in the Ash Wednesday reading from Matthew 6, about how we inhabit our piety. Being a Year B sort of Christian in Year C gives me a chance to scrutinize the rationales I use for my lifestyle choices. I may have the right answer to an ethical question yet fail the real test: following Jesus wherever he might lead me.