

March 5, First Sunday in Lent

## **Matthew 4:1-11**

by [Nurya Love Parish](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

I remember the first time I stumbled across the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. I was in my early twenties, when I was not yet a Christian but I was Christian-curious. I hadn't been raised by or among Christians, but I had recently discovered religion as a Unitarian Universalist. Now that I understood a little bit about faith, I wondered about Christianity.

I wanted to understand how Christians made sense of their strange doctrines. The creator of the universe was born as a human, by a virgin? That human was killed but did not stay dead? These statements baffled me, yet appeared to be acceptable to a majority of the world's population. Were they using some system of internal logic I could comprehend, even if I might not agree?

I hadn't read the Bible much at all. But I had discovered *Weavings*, a magazine published by Upper Room Ministries. I didn't know much about Christianity, but I knew something about good writing and good illustrations. *Weavings* had both. It was created by those mysterious beings, Christians. I realized that reading it might help me in my quest to understand them. So it was that I found myself reading an essay by Wendy Wright on temptation.

She began with the story of Jesus in the desert. Like so much of Christianity, it was confusing. Who was this devil? What was Jesus doing talking to him in the desert? Did people really believe this stuff?

And then I read this sentence: "The tradition teaches that these temptations stand for pride, power, and possession." And all of a sudden my soul—not my mind, but my soul—said "Aha!" as a puzzle piece clicked into place.

I didn't know much about Jesus, the devil, or that desert, but I knew pride. I knew the desire for power; I knew the wish for possessions. I was familiar with all of them, from painful experience.

All of a sudden the story wasn't just about Jesus; it was about me, too. And not just me: it was about all humanity. I knew from the history books and the newspapers that we all struggle with pride, power, and possession. People and nations fight, kill, and die over who is worthy of respect, who gets control, and who owns what. The more I thought about it, the more these three simple words seemed to be at the heart of the human experience.

It began to make complete sense that these were the temptations the devil offered Jesus. They were the same temptations that the devil still offered me.

That "aha!" moment in the midst of a *Weavings* essay was one of many that led me along the road of conversion to the Christian faith. It was not a road my parents had ever meant for me to travel. Ironically, it was my antireligious father who convinced me of the human need for faith. He was 49 years old when I was born and 67 when he died. I spent my childhood witnessing his slow decline, an aging parent facing his mortality. I learned from watching him that death comes to us all; the only question is how we meet it. In the face of death, neither pride nor power nor possession holds much sway. What matters in the face of death is how we, in our mortal lives, relate to the eternal.

I began by recognizing myself in the temptations, but I soon realized that I was meant also to recognize myself in the responses that Jesus makes in return. When tempted to put himself first, he puts God first. He puts spiritual nourishment above bodily nourishment, trust in God above testing God, faithfulness to God above wealth. He places his relationship with the eternal above all—far above the temptations the devil offers. He does all this without a single second's thought, in total unity with God the Father.

It has been 20 years since I found that *Weavings* essay. I've racked up one baptism, one marriage, and two ordinations (UU and then Episcopalian). But I still haven't figured out how to do naturally what Jesus did immediately. I still get swayed by pride, power, and possession—each and every day.

The difference between my life now and 20 years ago is this: I have been baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so I have already died to my mortal being and been raised with Christ. Because of his saving action on the cross, I don't need to be afraid when I succumb to temptation. I can simply begin again. In Lent, and anytime.

*When you fall into sin, we are asked at baptism, will you repent and return to the Lord?*

*I will, goes the reply, with God's help.*

I need God's help every single day.

But every single day since I was baptized, I have read myself more and more into the story of the Bible. I have discovered how it actually makes sense that God was born in human flesh, that he was killed but would not stay dead. The facts of incarnation and resurrection have become visible in my life—just as the temptation story once did. It turns out the story does hang together with an internal logic. Twenty years ago when I encountered it, that internal logic was wiser than I was. I could not make sense of scripture then. Now it helps me make sense of me.