

February 26, Lent 1A (*Matthew 4:1-11*)

Many professions require testing—including Son of God.

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue

I'm guessing that the church I serve is not the only communal space that finds certain areas literally stuffed with good intentions. Perhaps some of these sound familiar to you as well:

“We spent money on a vacation Bible school kit; it seems a shame to throw out what's left.”

“They won't recycle my glossy magazines, so I put them in the closet for the Sunday school to cut out pictures for collages.”

“I put a couple of boxes of books in the church library. Get rid of them if you don't want them.”

“My parents had an organ in their living room, would the church like it? We're on our way.”

This past summer, having been overwhelmed in every storage space we had, our church instituted Intentional Tuesdays. We had our staff meeting in the morning. Then in the afternoon, we each picked a space we were going to intentionally begin to clean out. I started with the closet in my office.

I'd been here for 13 years, and yet so much of the detritus I had inherited was still in that closet. This included old electronics, photo portraits of previous pastors, minutes and records that needed to be sent to the Presbyterian Historical Society, and every shape and form of candle you can imagine. On top of that layer was a layer I had brought in, including notes and records from seminary and files from the ordination process.

It was in looking through these files that I was reminded of the Bible content exam miracle.

When I was going through the ordination process, the Presbyterian Church (USA) required five exams. Usually the first one you took was the Bible content exam. It was 100 multiple-choice questions, two-thirds Old Testament and one-third New Testament. If you grew up Baptist, you nailed it no problem. If you grew up Presbyterian, you'd better get to studying.

Did I mention they only offered it once a year? The first year I failed it by a point. The second year I failed it by three points—I choked.

But due to some errors discovered in the machine grading process, that year everyone was given five extra points. Which meant I passed. Some called it a computer glitch; I called it computer grace.

Many professions require testing to make sure folks are ready for the job. Plumbers, electricians, truck drivers, doctors, lawyers, ministers . . . Son of God? You'd think the dove descending at the baptism of Jesus and the godly voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:13-17) would get Jesus an exemption, but no such luck.

In Christ, God chose to stand with us and by us in love—fully human and fully divine—and it is the latter that is being tested here. To echo Disney's *Aladdin*, God has "phenomenal cosmic power" but, because God chose to become human, "itty-bitty living space." Jesus is fasting in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, and he's just been given an opportunity. But this test isn't about food. It's about power. The devil is tempting God to show what God can do.

"If you are the Son of God" should really be translated "*Given that you are the Son of God.*" The devil isn't asking Jesus to prove who he is. He is trying to provoke him to use the power the devil knows he has. *Given that you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. Throw yourself down and let the angels catch you. Take the kingdoms of the world.*

Jesus is a survivor of a mass murder and has grown up among an oppressed people. Will he leap at the chance to avenge the murders of the innocent? The temptation for vengeance is made all the more intense by the power at God's hand to achieve it in full.

But instead, God makes the choice for love. After 40 days in the wilderness, three temptations, three refusals to submit, and angels who attend him, Jesus gets on with the task at hand: teaching, healing, and loving.

Jesus withstood temptation because his love for us was greater than his earthly desire. If our love for God reflects this strength, then we can withstand anything that threatens to stand between us and God's love.