



The Beginning of Act III



A Sermon By
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An audio version of this sermon can be found at on the Grace Church website at <http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-02-14-AWW.mp3>.

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Luke 4:1-13

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The First Sunday in Lent
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After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Luke 4:1

Three weeks ago, when the blizzard hit, like all of you, I had to find things to do, things to keep me busy while I was snowed in for five whole days. At first, it was not too difficult. I had plenty of work to do. My wife and I binge-watched a few television shows. But, after two, going on three days of that, I started going a little crazy, so I decided to rummage through all of our old books, hoping to find something interesting to read, which is when I found this book, *A Guide to Screenwriting Success*.

Now, I have no interest in writing a screenplay, but I was desperate. Plus, something about that title caught my attention. It peaked my curiosity. What makes for a great screenplay?

Many of the factors cited by the author were not very surprising. It takes: a compelling story; interesting, well-developed characters; a unique setting. None of that was really new to me, but what I did learn was every movie is written in three acts.

The First Act is when we meet all of the characters and get to know them: who they are; what they are about; what drives them and motivates them. This is especially true for the protagonist, the main character of the movie, who must have some important goal they are striving toward.

The Second Act is when tension and conflict arise, as the antagonist appears, trying to prevent the lead character from achieving their goal. The Second Act is the meat of the movie, taking up the most onscreen time, and it culminates with the protagonist down and out, emotionally, physically, spiritually.

The Third Act is the moment of truth when the main character has to rise up, has to summon the strength and courage to recommit to their goal, to overcome the antagonist, to overcome all the obstacles, and in the end, achieve their goal. It doesn't matter what kind of movie it is: comedy; drama; action/adventure; or, love story; in the end, the protagonist must succeed. The protagonist must win, even if it means he or she must lose.

As I read about these three acts which comprise a movie, I realized the gospel stories about Jesus follow the same structure. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Act I introduces Jesus as the Son of God through the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, through the shepherds and angels who appear at the manger, and by the voice that comes down from heaven at Jesus' baptism. Act II is all about Jesus' ministry but also his increasingly tense confrontations with the Jewish and Roman authorities, who actively resist his work and message. Act III is Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, his triumph over all the forces that oppose him, and his vindication by God, who raised him from the dead. Just like in the movies, in the end, Jesus wins because, in the end, God love for all of us wins.

With those thoughts running around in my head, I looked at today's gospel story, and suddenly, I noticed how important this passage was. Today's reading marks a key turning point in Luke's Gospel. It is the beginning of Act II when tension and conflict arise, as the devil appears in the wilderness, tempting Jesus to satisfy his hunger by making his own bread, to take control of all the kingdoms of the world, to leap from the pinnacle of the temple and put God to the test. Here, we have the first antagonist to Jesus. We have the first resistance, first challenge, to his work and ministry. If you are the Son of God, the devil says, then show me.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury offers good insight into the meaning of the word "temptation." Temptation, he says, comes from the Greek word *peirasmos*, meaning "a test." To be tempted is to be put to a test, and that is exactly what was happening to Jesus. He was being tested, but it was only the first of many such tests.

We all know what it is like to be tested like that. We spend most of our lives in Act II, being tested and tempted, in one way or another. Like Jesus, we are tempted to feed our own hunger to judge and criticize, blame and complain, resent and begrudge. Like Jesus, we are tempted to control everything in our world, our family members and co-workers, our image and our health. Like Jesus, we are led to the pinnacle of the Temple and tempted to be like superman or supergirl, able to do it all, manage everything, keep it all straight, never make a mistake, all without ever breaking a sweat. And, most of the time, we have to face these temptations on our own because we are the only ones who can decide what we will say, what we will do, how we will act. We have to take responsibility for ourselves but, all the while, the devil is whispering in our ear, offering us an easier way out.

We face these kinds of temptations every day, temptations luring us away from our true selves, temptations luring us away from God. Drawn in by temptation, we drift away from God, slowly at first, but little by little, step by step, the distance grows larger and larger, until we end up being something other than the person God calls us to be. We do not live the life God intends for us to live. We do not live the life we intend for ourselves. Over time, we find ourselves feeling down and out, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and we don't know what to do. We don't know how to move forward.

And, that is where Lent comes in. Lent is the beginning of Act III. Lent is the time for us to acknowledge we are not living the kind of life we want to live, the kind of life we should live. Lent is the time for us to admit we have drifted away from God, in little ways and bigger ways, and then, it is time for us to rise up, to summon the strength and courage to recommit to God, to recommit ourselves to growing closer to God, knowing we could all use a little more God in our lives.

Many people make this recommitment by giving up something for the season of Lent, and most of you probably know people who are abstaining from chocolate, or adult beverages, or going on Facebook. But recently, I came across another list of things to give up for Lent, and it included:

Fear of failure

Your comfort zone

Feelings of unworthiness

Impatience

Comparisons

Blaming & Complaining

Busyness & Overcommitment

Apathy & Negativity

Going through the motions

If I were to write *A Guide to Lenten Success*, it would include giving up those things, because giving up those things will help turn us around. Giving up those things will get us heading back toward God. Giving up those things will help us achieve our goal of growing closer to God and living a happier, healthier, more fulfilling life.

The Third Act is beginning, and you get to script the ending.

Amen.