Sermon :: 22-Feb-2026
<u>Lent I, Year A</u>

" 'For it is written … ' "

She shined that powerful little desk lamp right at me and wailed, "Douglas Worthington, if you *ever* do that to me *again,* it will be the *last* thing you do!" She was trying to put a *limitation* on me … trying to *restrict* me. And my 'natural' twelve year-old reaction was to begin plotting, almost *immediately,* how I could *defy* her!

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One night, when I was in sixth or seventh grade, I discovered—quite by accident[1]—that when Mrs Blass was up in the choir loft practicing on the huge organ in our cavernous church … preparing for her lessons with our director of music … she couldn't *hear* me coming up the thickly-carpeted stairs. In *addition,* because this was the height of the 1970s energy crisis and she never turned on any of the *lights* in the church … just that one little high-intensity desk lamp, to read her music … she also couldn't *see* me. So … when I pushed open the door at the top of the stairs, with its famously—and eerily—squeaky hinge [*short sound effect*] … *and* she couldn't see anyone coming *in* … well, poor old Mrs Blass just about jumped out of her skin!

Now, you have to know that Mrs Blass was something of our church's Church Lady (if you remember Dana Carvey's character[2] from *Saturday Night Live*): always picking at us kids not to *run* … to be *still* … not to eat all the *cookies* at coffee hour … to behave like *"Christian* children." So, once I discovered how much of a *rise* I got out of her when, apparently, she thought a *ghost* was floating in to interrupt her organ playing … I took her threat—her telling me I wasn't *allowed* to do this again; her 'restricting' my 'freedom' (as I saw it *then*) … as something of a *challenge:* an *obstacle* to *overcome* … rather than the rule of *decency* to *abide* by[,] that it *was*.

So, for a year or two afterwards, whenever I was at the church at night … I'd slip off to the nave, to see whether poor Mrs Blass was up there at the organ, alone and in the dark. And if she *was,* I'd creep up those stairs … stand on the little landing at the top … ever so slowly push open that squeaky-creaky loft door, for *maximum* effect [*drawn-out sound effect*]… and then try to stifle my laughter as I ran back down the stairs, hearing her, *first,* gasp in *horror,* and, *then,* sputter, in *indignation*.[3]

It wasn't, I eventually came to realize, a very *nice* thing to do … wasn't *kind* or *respectful,* and *certainly* not very *Christian*. But to my twelve-year-old mind, Mrs Blass had drawn a line in the sand … and I was bound and determined to *cross* it—to *defy* it—as often as I could.

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I tell you this as, I hope, an amusing little anecdote: certainly not *'innocent'* … but born, I think, more of early adolescent *immaturity* than *malice*. But as I reflected on today's 'mirrored' lessons about

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[1] As I recall, on this *initial* occasion, I'd been sent to the choir loft by our director of music to fetch something he'd left up there.

[2] Although, in point of fact, this was some years before Carvey ever portrayed her on TV.

[3] In truth, I don't think I did this more than three or four more times after my initial 'discovery'; but it never failed to scare the stuffing out of her!

the temptation to defy divine authority … to throw off (or throw *over*) the restrictions God places on our free will … Mrs Blass' "Douglas Worthington, if you *ever"* came to my mind: She had given me a *limit,* as God had given Adam and Eve … and entirely *like them*—and entirely *un*like *Jesus—I* succumbed to the temptation to do what pleased *me,* instead.

Now, I'll leave for another day parsing *why* the 'apple story'[4] is in Scripture … *who* the various players are … and what each is *accountable* for. For *today,* the salient point is that in the infinite and perfect *abundance* of Eden … God makes only *one thing* 'off limits' for the First Couple … and as almost their first order of business after getting created … Adam and Eve *defy* God's limits; *eat* of the forbidden tree; and lose the innocence … the joy … the creaturely un*knowing*ness … that God *intended* us to have. Whether you read the story as *literal* truth … a *literary* metaphor for our human willfulness … or a *theological explanation* of why *humanity* struggles with moral issues and value-judgments that don't bother the *rest* of creation … the upshot is basically the same: In *love,* God gave us a *limit,* for our own *good* … and in *hubris,* we *defied* it, for our own *'comfort'* … our own *'gain'* … our own *ego*.

And, of course, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is the *perfect counterpoint:* The Son of Man … tempted by *cosmic* power … *rejects* the lure of 'comfort' … of 'gain' … of 'ego' … and remains steadily, and staunchly, faithful to *limits—protective* limits; *salutary* limits; *divine* limits—God has placed on humanity, in Scripture.[5]

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It strikes me as ironic that even as some are now seeking to make great hay out of our supposedly being a "Christian nation"[6] … in *fact,* we're living in an age when *ignoring* … *breaching* … *defying* … the moral limits and principled restrictions God imposes on our behaviors … in the *Person* of *Jesus* … has become more and more acceptable—indeed, almost commonplace:

- *Jesus* tells us not to live by material things alone, but to appreciate the abundant goodness God so readily *supplies*. But our *leaders* claim we must *"own"* lands that don't belong to us[7] … get 'first dibs' on other countries' natural assets … siphon other nations' resources into the wells of *American* businesses … maybe even *annex* whole sovereign nations: 'downgrading' them to U.S. statehood or territory status.
  > *Jesus* tells us not to focus on feeding our *appetites,* but on feeding our *souls*. But *we* hear this not as spiritual *wisdom,* but as a chafing *restriction* on the exercise of our *ego* … and we succumb to the temptation of *greed*.

- *Jesus* tells us not to put God to the test: to conduct our lives in ways that comport with the gifts and opportunities God has already *given* us. And over the last fifty or seventy-five years … through diplomacy, economic policy, military superiority and investment …

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[4] You'll note that in the text, it's not actually identified as an *apple* tree.

[5] The three limits Jesus quotes are from Deuteronomy 8 and 10, but I think they are, by extension, meant to 'call up' the entire corpus of the Jewish Law.

[6] Undoubted, the majority of the Europeans who first came to and settled in North American were Christians, and the founding of our nation was conducted by men who were Christians: Their faith influenced their values and their thinking, of course. But they did not set out to found—they expressly *rejected,* in fact, the *idea* of—ours being a "Christian nation" in any sense that then held sway back in Europe.

[7] *I.e.,* rather than merely *enjoy* our almost-plenary *rights* in them

we have guided the rest of the world … surely not *perfectly,* but at least *constructively* … along pathways of peaceful relations … cooperative co-existence … mutual growth … and concerned care for humanity's future. There is, clearly, *something* of the Kingdom of *Christ* is this responsible, sustained exercise of 'soft power.'
But *now* our *leaders spurn* our allies … make *peace* with despots … *abandon* nations and peoples who have historically relied on us … *roil* international trade … pursue hemispheric *hegemony* … and jettison *decades* of international environmental science and cooperation.
> *Jesus* tells us to honor the *blessings* God has given us, in how we choose to *conduct* ourselves in this world. But *we* see this as a *restriction* … 'leaving money on the table' … not 'grabbing all we can': a *limitation* that *weakens us,* rather than a guardrail that *strengthens the world* … and we succumb to the temptation of *arrogance*.

- *Jesus* tells us not to glorify ourselves, but to worship God alone, in praise and service. But our *leaders* bask in how "very proud" God is of them[8] … claim to answer to no controlling authority but their own morality[9] … wrap themselves in the self-congratulatory laurels of peacemaking, even as they absolve themselves of any obligation to "think purely of peace."[10] And at every turn, they seek to plaster their name on every building … their image on every initiative … their will on every element of our collective existence.
> *Jesus* tells us to hold our earthly ambitions in *check* and give glory to *God:* the *one power* … the *one will* … the *one love* … that actually constitutes, governs and protects this world. But *we* regard this as a denigration of our *own* worth … a censorship of our *own* adulation … an underestimation of our *own* value to this world … and we succumb to the temptation of *pride*.

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To a *twelve*-year-old, Mrs Blass' attempt to limit *my* behavior … to restrict *my* fun (at her expense) … was a *challenge*—almost a *dare:* something to *overcome* … something to prove wouldn't hem *me* in or tie *me* down … and thus, show the world how *'strong'* and *'brave'* and *'right'* I was.

But *now? Now,* I look back at how much I must have *upset* her … *frightened* her … taken a *pleasurable* thing from her and made it *anxious. Now,* I wish I'd *appreciated* the *limit* she sought to give me … as a pathway to treating *others* as *I'd* want to be treated; *accepted* her attempted *restraint* on my *ability* to do something … as a lesson in not succumbing to the *sin* of my *power* at the *expense* of my *integrity:* of the Christ-*within*-me.

The world isn't a lonely organist, practicing up there, in the dark … and world leadership is vested in *adults,* not twelve-year-olds. And yet, I can't help but think how much the lesson this seventh-grader eventually learned about accepting the *grace*—the *goodness*—of God's *limits* on our behavior … applies to *us,* as a *nation;* and to our *leaders,* like that adolescent standing at the top of the dark

[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/20/us/politics/trump-anniversary-briefing.html (accessed Feb 16, 2026).

[9] https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/08/us/politics/trump-interview-power-morality.html (accessed Feb 16, 2026).

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/19/first-thing-i-no-longer-feel-an-obligation-to-think-purely-of-peace-says-trump-amid-greenland-threats (accessed Feb 16, 2026).

staircase … hand on the creaky door, ready to push … with a decision to make … about what he's going to do *next*.

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