

There was a little buzz this week around Texas Representative James Talarico's appearance on a late-night talk show. Some questioned whether it was fair to host a candidate from one political party without giving equal time to opponents. That fairness debate belongs elsewhere.

What caught my attention was something different. Talarico holds a Master of Divinity degree from the Presbyterian seminary in Austin. (That's the same type of degree as I have!)

I was struck not by his politics, but by how he articulated his faith. He said:

“Jesus in Matthew 25 tells us exactly how you and I and every one of our fellow believers are going to be judged and how we're going to be saved: by feeding the hungry, by healing the sick, by welcoming the stranger. Nothing about going to church, nothing about voting Republican or Democrat. It was all about how you treat other people.

My granddad was a Baptist preacher in South Texas. He told me Christianity is a simple religion. Not an easy religion—but a simple one. Because Jesus gave us two commandments: Love God and love neighbor. And there's no exception to that second commandment.”

Christianity is a simple religion: Love God. Love neighbor.

But it is not an easy religion.

I will gently nitpick the granddad. When Jesus summarizes the law, there are, in truth, three movements wrapped together. First: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” That is the foundation. Second: “Love

your neighbor.” And third—contained within it—“as yourself.” If we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then we must also receive ourselves as beloved. Sometimes that is the hardest commandment of all.

Human beings have a tendency to center ourselves—and those aligned with us—without attending to the collateral effect of our actions on others. That tendency is ancient. The lectionary reminds us of that by returning us to the story of the first humans.

The early Hebrews told a story to explain what philosophers and psychologists would later debate. In the garden, humanity is portrayed in harmony—with God, with one another, and with creation. Trees abound. One offers life. Another offers knowledge of good and evil. For reasons known only to God, that second tree was placed within reach.

At first, the humans pass it by. But then another character enters the story. We know the character as *the serpent*. The Hebrew word is נָחָשׁ — nāḥāš — pronounced naw-khawsh’. It is related to נִחָשׁ — nāḥaš — meaning “one who practices divination or enchantments.” An enchanter. A whisperer. A wannabe-god skilled at suggestion.

The text calls this creature “crafty.” The Hebrew word is עָרוּם — ārûm — pronounced aw-room’. It carries a sense of shrewdness, even deceit. The serpent suggests that God has not been entirely truthful. “You will not surely die,” it says. “You will be like God.”

And so the woman eats. The man follows. Their eyes are opened. And what do they see? Their *nakedness*. The word is עֵרֹם — ‘êrôm — pronounced ay-rome’. Notice the wordplay: ‘ārûm (crafty) and ‘êrôm (naked). Deceit and exposure. The uniting instinct in both is the urge to cover up.

First, they sew fig leaves to cover their bodies. Then, when confronted, they cover their guilt with blame. “The woman you gave me...” “The serpent deceived me...”

Deceit enters the world. So does refusal to take responsibility. Harmony fractures. For the ancient Hebrews, separation from God was death. Not immediate physical collapse—but rupture. Alienation. Exile. The humans leave Eden and enter the wilderness.

And that is where we live; in the wilderness. A place of chaos. A place of choices. A place of testing. A place where we must decide daily whether we will live toward God’s desire or away from it.

Which makes it striking that the Spirit leads Jesus there.

Immediately after his baptism—after the heavens open, the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved”—Jesus is driven into the wilderness “to be tested by the devil.”

The Greek word is διάβολος — *diabolos*. It literally means “one who throws accusations.” From *dia* (across) and *ballein* (to throw). The slanderer.

Slander is the act of making a false spoken statement that harms another's reputation. The enchanter of Genesis has grown more sophisticated. Now accusations are hurled.

We do not have to look far to see how accusation shapes our own civic life. Slander is thrown like candy and beads at a parade—colorful, attention-grabbing, and often empty. Public discourse can feel nakedly accusatory.

And into that wilderness Jesus goes. Notice what tempts him. Not obvious evil. Not blatant immorality. Scripture. The *diabolos* quotes Psalm 91. The words are holy. The citation accurate. The promise real. But something is off.

Scripture is lifted from its living context and used as leverage—to justify spectacle, self-protection, and power. “If you are the Son of God...” Turn stones to bread. Throw yourself from the temple. Claim the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus responds with Scripture as well—but always within the wider story of covenant trust. He quotes Deuteronomy. He refuses to sever text from obedience. The danger in Matthew 4 is not that someone ignores the Bible. The danger is that someone uses the Bible to grasp at power.

We see Scripture invoked in public life—to justify policies, to sanctify national identity, to claim divine endorsement of particular agendas. Christians may disagree deeply about politics. Faithful believers will not vote the same way. But the deeper questions are not partisan:

Are we using Scripture to form Christlike character—or to secure cultural dominance?

Are we seeking the Kin-dom of God—or asking God to bless our preferred kingdom?

Are we trusting God in the wilderness—or trying to force God’s hand from the pinnacle of the temple?

Jesus refuses to turn stones to bread to escape his human hunger. He refuses to test God’s fidelity by leaping into thin air. He refuses the shortcut to the kingdoms of the world. He chooses obedience by forsaking deceit.

In the wilderness, Scripture detached from humility becomes a tool of temptation. Scripture tethered to love, justice, mercy, and the cross becomes a path of life. The good news is not that temptation disappears. Genesis makes clear that testing is woven into the fabric of humanity. The good news is that Christ remains faithful.

Where the first humans grasped, Jesus trusts.

Where they covered and blamed, Jesus stands exposed and obedient.

Where separation brought exile, Christ’s obedience opens the way home.

**And here is the grace: the same voice that declared Jesus “Beloved” speaks over us as well.**

We are invited back into alignment with God’s original intention—blessing and harmony. Loving God with our whole being. Receiving ourselves as beloved. Turning outward to love our neighbor.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter 25, Jesus tells us what that love looks like:

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.”

Love of neighbor is not abstract. It is embodied. It feeds. It welcomes. It visits. It clothes.

One final detail from the wilderness story is often overlooked; the last verse:

“Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”

The Greek word translated “waited on” is ΔΙΑΚΟΝΕΩ — diakoneō — pronounced dee-ak-on-eh’-o. It is the root of our word “deacon.”

The angels *deaconed* Jesus.

They ministered. They served. They tended to his hunger and exhaustion.

What the *diabolos* would not do—serve—heaven does.

And this is our calling. To deacon one another. To take care of those who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable, and worn down by a world full of accusation and enchantment. To embody the opposite of slander—to speak truth, to refuse blame-shifting, to live uncovered before God.

This, my friends, is why we take this *Lenten Walk*. Except, not alone — together.

We walk remembering that we, too, are led by the Spirit into places of testing.

We walk trusting that the same grace that sustained Christ sustains us.

We walk knowing that when temptation exhausts us, angels still deacon.

James Talarico's granddad was right. Christianity is simple. But it's not easy. Love God. Love neighbor. Serve them in ways that restore harmony in a fractured world. In a wilderness thick with accusation, be a people of truth. In a culture hungry for power, be a people of service. In a world that covers shame with blame, be a people secure enough in belovedness to live exposed before God.

The wilderness is real. But so is our Beloved Christ. And because Jesus was faithful there, we can be faithful here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.