

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Limitedness

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before I say another word, I want to invite you into a moment. Imagine stepping down a rocky path at dawn. The air is crisp and sharp, carrying the smell of earth and dust. There is nothing but sky overhead, wind brushing your face, and the faint ache of hunger as the sun climbs higher. Your feet leave tracks in sand that stretches far in every direction. This is wilderness. This is where Lent begins.

This morning, I want to do something a bit different. I'm revisiting a sermon I gave three years ago. It's not because I'm out of ideas or because there aren't enough texts to choose from. It's because something from that sermon has kept pulling at me. The themes have stuck with me and keep asking for more attention. During Lent, as we focus on honesty and what it means to be human, I think we can admit that sometimes a message just won't let us go.

Last week, on the mountaintop, we heard the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus, dazzling. Jesus, radiant. Jesus "shining like the sun." And if we are honest, we love that Jesus. We love the glory. We love the light. We love the moment when the divine is undeniable.

But the strange thing about the Transfiguration story is not what happens on the mountaintop. The strange thing is what happens next. Jesus walks down. He does not insist on staying luminous. He does not choose to remain untouchable. He does not build a shrine at the summit. He descends into the valley where people are confused, and hurting, and complicated, and afraid.

And then, today, the Spirit leads him further still. Not to another mountaintop. But into the wilderness. We often talk about this story as Jesus's *strength* in the face of temptation. But today I want to look at something else. Today, I want to talk about Jesus's **limitedness**.

Let's start where scripture starts: in a garden. In Genesis, the serpent's main temptation isn't just curiosity or appetite. The serpent's promise was that their eyes would be opened, that they would be "like God." But the irony, as our text says, is that their eyes were only opened to their own nakedness. They didn't become gods; they became humans who were suddenly ashamed of being human.

This is the root of many temptations: wanting to be more than human, to escape needing others, to avoid our limits, to run from vulnerability, to stop being human.

Sin, at its root, is not only wrongdoing. Sin is the human project of trying to escape our "creaturely" limitedness. And then Psalm 32 gives us the emotional cost of that project.

"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long." This is what it feels like to deny who we are. It is exhausting to pretend we are limitless. It is exhausting to maintain the mask. Imagine a parent forcing a bright smile as they help with homework, head pounding with the day's worries, quietly answering late-night work emails at the kitchen table so no one notices their fatigue. Or someone laughing with friends at dinner, shoulders aching from holding in sorrow, deflecting concern with practiced ease. It is exhausting to live as if we have no needs, no wounds, no fears, no dependency, no weakness. It is exhausting to act "fine" when we are definitely **not** fine.

That exhaustion isn't just in our minds. The psalm says it affects our bodies too: bones wither, strength fades, and we feel like we're falling apart inside.

But we should also say this: human beings *can* resist the easy way. Sometimes we do choose limits—holy limits. Think about George Washington. With every flaw he had, one of the remarkable moments in his life was choosing not to make himself a king. Choosing not to cling to power permanently. Choosing to step away. Choosing the limitedness of a citizen rather than the fantasy of a savior.

Consider everyday temptation resisters: the people who refuse the shortcut. People who refuse to meet legitimate needs in exploitative ways. People who refuse to "test" God's love through reckless self-destruction. People who keep choosing, again and again, the harder, more human path. So yes: human beings can resist temptation. Which is exactly why I want to suggest that Jesus's wilderness story is about something even deeper than resisting temptation.

Let me say it plainly: *I am not sure Jesus resisting temptation is the most important bit.* Because plenty of people have faced hunger and not stolen. Plenty of people have faced power and not grabbed it. Plenty of people have faced despair and not thrown themselves off the temple to force a miracle.

But no other human being is offered these temptations in quite the same way. “If you are the Son of God...” Command stones to become bread. Throw yourself down and let angels catch you. Take the kingdoms of the world.

These are not just moral tests. They are invitations to stop being human. Because the underlying temptation is: *You do not have to live inside the limits of flesh.*

And here is the radical choice at the heart of the story: Jesus—the divine Word made flesh—chooses, again and again and again, the **human option**. He refuses the “non-human” solution. He refuses the divine loophole. He refuses to use power to exempt himself from the shared conditions of human life.

He is hungry, and he stays hungry. He is vulnerable, and he stays vulnerable. He is exposed to harm, and he refuses to turn belovedness into a shield. And that matters, because one of the most seductive temptations for all of us is the desire for safety and control. “If I am loved by God, then surely God will keep me safe... let me just test that.”

But belovedness is not the same as safety. I think of a nurse returning again and again to COVID wards. She put on layers of protective gear, risking exhaustion and illness, even when the hospital halls filled with uncertainty and fear. She came back not because it was safe, but because she was needed, and because those she served mattered to her. Her family worried every time she left, but every prayer, every message, every meal waiting at home spoke of love that did not guarantee her safety. She was deeply beloved—and still, the risk remained. In her story, we see that being beloved does not shield us from danger. Instead, it roots us more deeply in what matters, even when the path is not safe.

We want belovedness to be armor. But the promise of the cross is not that we are beloved *because we are safe*. The promise is that we are beloved *even when we are not safe*. And in the wilderness, Jesus begins to live that truth.

He does not use divine power to serve himself. He does not manipulate people. He does not build an inauthentic community by coercion or spectacle. Later in the gospels, he uses power to heal. He uses power to reconcile. He uses power to restore the dignity of those pushed to the margins. But he refuses to use power to escape the limits of being human. He takes the difficult way. The limited way. The human way.

And then Romans dares to interpret all of this at the scale of the whole human story. Paul calls Adam a pattern: a representative human being. And what does Adam do? Adam reaches beyond limit. Adam grasps. Adam tries to become “like God.” And the result is not freedom. It is bondage.

But then Paul speaks of another “one man.” Another representative. Another Adam. Jesus. And what does Jesus do? Jesus stays within the limits. Jesus refuses the grasping. Jesus chooses obedience. Jesus chooses solidarity. And it is through that solidarity, solidarity all the way to suffering, solidarity all the way to death, that life comes to the many.

Which means the point is not simply that Jesus “wins” a fight with the devil. The point is that Jesus chooses to stand with humanity so completely that nothing human is beneath him, and nothing human is outside the reach of God’s mercy.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus in Lent? It does not mean becoming special. It does not mean becoming superhuman. It does not mean being set apart in a way that makes us less human than our neighbors.

To follow Christ is to become **fully human**. To choose humanity over selfish desire. To recognize the humanity in one another, even when it would be easier to reduce people to categories or enemies or problems. To build systems that do not demand “superhuman” performance from people, but that value human dignity and make room for weakness, rest, healing, and repair. To refuse the shortcut that deforms the soul. To refuse the lie that says our worth depends on endless strength.

As we sing today, 'I want Jesus to walk with me,' remember that he can only walk with us because he chose to have legs that tire, a heart that breaks, and a life that, like ours, is limited. He walks with us because he chose to be one of us.

So this week, I want to invite all of us into a simple communal practice: find one trusted person and share with them something you need but have not spoken aloud. It might be a small kindness, a prayer, an honest moment of quiet, or help with a burden you have tried to carry alone. To offer my own example, I will share something I haven't shares broadly before now: I am dealing with chronic insomnia and I am longing for more rest in this season; I am trying to learn to ask for understanding from those close to me when I need to slow down, just as I am trying to let people handle more things that I am used to handling. Let yourself risk being a little more human, a little more known. And let us listen just as gently to whomever shares with us. In this way, may our life together begin to reflect the beauty of being fully human, just as Christ was.

And when we fail, and we will, Lent also trains us to tell the truth without collapsing into shame. Psalm 32 says the healing begins when we stop hiding. When we confess. When we let God be God, and let ourselves be human.

Jesus chooses the human option. And then Jesus invites us onto that same path. So as we walk these forty days, may we seek, not the flashiest response, not the most powerful response, not the most impressive response, but the **fullest human response**. The most human. And therefore, by grace, the most humane. Amen.