My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.   
 Matthew’s version of today’s text is more descriptive than in Mark’s Gospel, which is summarized in two sentences and in which neither Jesus nor Satan speak. Typical of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is shown as being greater than his surroundings, and our scripture today isn’t about food, but about power.

And before we get started, let me say, translations of the Bible are funny things. Most all claim to have studied the Masoretic text, the Latin Vulgate, the Syrianic Codex, and the Septuagint, and therefore claim a faithful translation. Since about 1965, an explosion of further translations and commentaries have come online, most seeking to use ordinary language in an attempt to get people to understand the text and stories more deeply and richly. And it’s here that our story begins in what Matthew refers to as the Temptation of Christ, which is always read on the first Sunday of Lent.

So in reading the phrase “If you are the son of God…” there’s a whole bunch of scholarship that says this might be better translated as “GIVEN THAT you are the son of God…”

Satan isn’t asking Jesus to prove who he is. Satan begins to attempt to provoke Jesus into using the power that he knows God possesses. If we were translating to a more common language variant of the Bible, we might sum up today’s questions like this:

1. Command the stones to be bread that you eat.
2. Throw yourself into mortal peril and show me some angels.
3. Take the Kingdoms of the world for yourself.

But this, for us, isn’t about power. What kind of lesson is that, showing us that God wins by throwing bigger bolts of lightning? Those are the types of contests that Roman and Egyptian and Norse gods get into. Manly contests of strength where the biggest bad-ass wins. Those are the kind of Gods who are reflections of man’s ego and image.

Our God works in the world other way around. We are created in God’s image and capabilities, right?

Jesus is challenged to create Manna, the bread of the Hebrews in the Wilderness created from stones. He is asked to announce himself at the pinnacle of religious tradition and stand upon those principles as the ones that are equal to God’s word. And he is asked to supplant Moses on the mountain to seize ownership of God’s creation by decree.

So the more proper question is what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. Jesus comes to be with us to understand what it is to be us, and he comes to know that we are led by teaching, preaching, healing, and by example. Emperors decree. God is more subtle.

That doesn’t mean that God doesn’t understand the things that Satan is pointing out and leading him toward. Let’s remember that Jesus is the child of traumatic experience in the world of God’s creation and creatures.

His parents are shamed in their hometown. Mary has to flee for her own safety to the hill country to keep from being stoned to death. In traveling home to the city of their birth to pay taxes they cannot afford, they are turned away from one inn after another, even though it is a young teenage girl in obvious distress ready to give birth at any moment. And shortly after Jesus’ birth, he is warned to flee, and survive a mass murder of children.

Jesus has quite a list of grievances that accumulate at a very young age, and he could harbor these things in a way that, when he has achieved the age, wisdom, and power to do so, he could avenge his oppressors. Those who murdered every child under the age of two when he was born. Those who shamed his parents. Those who hunted for him after his flight to Egypt.

The temptation for vengeance is recorded in the annals of every other mythology we encounter. But again, those other Gods are reflections of human jealousy, ego, vengeance, evil, and malice. Our God does not look like those Gods, because we are forgiven first and created in God’s image, not the other way around. Let’s remember that. (repeat)

So what in what way do we come to understand the meaning of Jesus as the Son of God? It’s the meaning of the parent who has lost a child, who still believes that love can win. God makes the choice for love rather than revenge or power. After 40 days in the wilderness, three temptations, three refusals to submit, Jesus gets on with it: teaching, healing, and loving.

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

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We’re at the end of black heritage and history month. I’d like for us to remember the women who been asked to bear the choice of revenge versus reconciliation when faced with the loss of a loved one. The calls for these women who were called to stand down before they had the strength to stand up. They called not for revenge, or armed response, or angry mobs. But they ask for understanding of their pain first. It’s what Jesus knew and entered into, and it’s what we should take away when we, too, are tempted to invoke God on our side when our rancor gets up and too much to bear.

Some names are familiar, some less so: Emmitt Till. Medgar Evers. Harriett Moore. Martin Luther King, Jr. John Lewis. Jo Ann Robinson. Rosa Parks. Rodney King. Ahmaud Arbury. George Floyd. Tyre Nichols.

Justice is a slow flying bird in America, sometimes never landing where it’s intended or needed. But in the memory of these persons and what they endured, we can understand that they wanted neither power nor malice toward another. Our remembering them this first Sunday of Advent takes in the fact that temptations can be tempered with love and remembrance for better. May it always be so in God’s Kingdom.

Thanks be to God, Amen.