My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, 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.

The tradition teaches that these temptations stand for three P’s: pride, power, and possession.

All of a sudden the story isn’t just about Jesus; it’s about us, too. And not just us: it’s about all humanity. It’s a well-known fact from historical accounts of any era and culture and credible news organizations of today that we all struggle with pride, power, and possession. People and nations fight, kill, and die over who is worthy of respect, who gets control, and who owns what. An example of that is the intent and declaration of the United States to take over Gaza, remove the people from their historic homeland, and develop it into a new Riviera, a vacation playground. Imagine if someone said did that to us in Greenland. Yup, three simple words are most definitely at the heart of our human experience.

It began to make complete sense that these were the temptations the devil offered Jesus. They are the same temptations our souls are still offered today by our selfish ambitions for pride, power, and possessions.

We should be able to recognize ourselves in these temptations. Where in our lives does pride have its strongest hold, and how does that differ from a healthy self-concept? Social media has reallllllly tipped pride into another sphere altogether. Have you ever heard of humblebragging? The goal of humblebragging is to get respect and likability while still coming across as modest. You can tell if someone is humblebragging by looking for a combination of self-deprecation and subtle self-promotion. See if you can hear it in this statement:

"I don't know why my friends are always asking me to sing for them. I don't sound that great."

Wait, what? The prideful statement is an unsolicited “My friends say I’m a great singer and love to hear me; wanna hear?” The humble statement is “my friends ask me to sing sometimes.” Do we hear the difference between pride, self-deprecation and humility?

We can easily get fooled into a conversational style which puffs up ourselves, not in-your-face prideful, but also giving unsolicited humblebrags. It can get tiring, especially when it’s applied to relationships.

Power is more easily recognized. It’s most easily seen in one person trying to exercise unequal control over another, usually uninvited. There’s intentionality involved, with the most egregious examples being those who are jealous of others.

Jealousy is a powerful, wicked mindset. It is alive and well when we see someone who has something we don’t, and we want it so badly that we actually wish ill on those who have it. We don’t even see it sometimes, but here’s a short primer:

The very thought of celebrating someone’s success, accomplishment, state of joy or happiness is abhorrent to you. If someone else celebrates it, you will mentally disengage and clam up. You literally are incapable of saying anything nice, and if you do, you know that you are hiding the true feelings of your heart. You know that one, where you give a weak smile while seething inside.

You will soon find yourself unable to separate the person from what has aroused your jealousy. They are now the object of your disdain.

In the second phase, you may begin to undermine that person by slandering them to others because you no longer see them as a sentient being with thoughts, Spirit, and feelings of their own. Essentially, you are trying to take away what you don’t want that person to have, and you will do nearly anything to not only prove your point but seek to take their accomplishment, their joy, or their life celebration and not only deny it, but take it as yours.

Possessions is all about keeping up with one’s own fatal self-image, that in order to be valued as a person you must increasingly collect the most expensive, rare, or volume of things. Boys compare their cars. Girls compare fashion. Societies compare land, food, music, any number of things to not just differentiate, but to feel superior to another. Wine ratings. Vacation listings as exclusive to the stars. Having a more expensive watch or bracelet. Tightly coupled with pride of ego and the power of jealousy, possessions complete the cycle.

And we never stop to see how we got there. Self-reflection requires actually giving up on all this stuff. All that we have spend a lifetime acquiring and coveting is for naught in the eyes of God.

OK, Pastor, that’s fine, we got that, you might say, or tell me that I’m not the poster boy for piety. True. But I also never claimed to be. Let’s focus inward again, we’re in Lent after all. The harder truth is our shortfall seeing ourselves in the responses that Jesus makes in return.

When tempted to put himself first, Jesus puts God first. He puts spiritual nourishment above bodily nourishment, trust in God above testing God, faithfulness to God above wealth. Jesus places his relationship with the eternal above all—far above the temptations the devil offers. He does all this without a single second’s thought, in total unity with God.

Dunno about you, but I haven’t figured out how to do naturally what Jesus did immediately. I still get swayed by pride, power, and possession—each and every day. In my years of ministry, I think that may be a thing that most pew-sitters struggle with in varying degrees.

The difference between our lives now and years ago should be this: we are baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We should have the humility and repentance journey to have died to our mortal being, the one that seeks to denigrate, demoralize, and degrade others. That’s the promise of being saved by grace, living in unity of spirit with God, and knowing the Universal Christ. We journey with joy, but we also will succumb to temptation. God understands that, right? What God doesn’t understand are folks who can’t be honest with themselves, and keep playing the game of being just a little bit better than their neighbors. We talked about that a couple weeks ago, and I hope you haven’t forgotten it. Christ isn’t upset with sinners, he’s totally disappointed in the ones who think they aren’t.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

If all this sounds too esoteric, let’s try again. What Jesus is saying is the same thing he says in the Lord’s prayer: Lead us not into temptation. But he’s not talking about God here. He’s asking for us to remember that God would never lead us into doing terrible stuff to ourselves or others, to put God first and keep our egos, the Satan of our inner selves, away.

Here's a final illustration: a parent takes their young children grocery shopping with them and comes to the candy aisle. They know that taking their children down that aisle will only stir up greediness in their hearts and lead to bouts of whining and pouting. So they avoid that aisle—whatever they may have needed down the candy aisle will have to wait for another day. In this way the parent averts unpleasantness and spares their children a trial. Praying, “Lead us not into temptation,” is like praying, “God, don’t take me down the candy aisle today.” It’s recognizing that we naturally grasp for unprofitable things and that God’s wisdom can avert the unpleasantness of our bellyaching. Let’s give it a try to kick off this season of self-reflection, repentance, and renewal.

Thanks be to God, Amen.