

LENT ONE, YEAR C, MARCH 9, 2025

Many of you are familiar with the writer Henri Nouwen who was a Dutch-born Catholic priest, professor, psychologist, and writer, who was a successful religious academic. He taught at the University of Notre Dame, and then at the divinity schools of Yale and Harvard. He published forty-two books that today have sold over 8.5 million copies and been translated into thirty-five languages. His books describe struggles with chronic loneliness, clinical depression, relevance and a nervous breakdown. But after twenty-five years in the priesthood, Nouwen described how, as he was turning fifty, he began to experience “a deep inner threat.”

Nouwen found himself praying poorly, isolating himself from others and being preoccupied with being relevant. He also believed that his success had placed his soul in peril. He wrote, “I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term ‘burnout’ was a convenient psychological translation for spiritual death.”

So, facing another crisis as he turned fifty, Nouwen made the most important decision of his life. He left Harvard and moved to Toronto where he served as the residential priest at Daybreak which is a home for people with severe physical and mental disabilities.

Living among them Nouwen was suddenly faced with his naked self which became the starting point for him to discover his “true identity” as a child loved by God: He wrote, “These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self — the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things — and forced me to claim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.”

This radical break was also provoked by today's Gospel story which gave him a new perspective about the three temptations of Jesus.

First of all, Nouwen writes that “Jesus’s first temptation was to be *relevant*: to turn stones into bread.” This is all about our drive for control, efficiency, and relevance: He continues, “While efficiency and control are great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.”

Nouwen goes on to propose that true, good future leaders will be those who dare to “claim their irrelevance” and enter into solidarity with the suffering majority, bringing the light of Jesus to them as one of them.

Jesus’s second temptation was to do something *spectacular*, something worthy of hits, likes, tweets, and more followers. The devil goaded Jesus at the top of the Temple, “Since you are God’s Son, jump... The angels will catch you so that you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone.” Today we’re pressured to become “influencers.” With Instagram and Tik Tok, the proliferation of TED talks, and endless hours of reality TV, personal branding is the new norm. It’s hard to feel worthy if you’re not pursuing an audience and applause. But, Nouwen writes, “Jesus didn’t come to be a stunt man.”

Nouwen proposes a new kind of leadership, modeled on the servant Jesus rather than power games. “We need to be shepherds who, night and day, nourishes, gathers, rescues, restores, and needs the community as much as it needs him.”

Nouwen concludes with Jesus's last temptation — the temptation of power. He observes that "one of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power" — political, military, economic, moral and spiritual — "even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are."

Nouwen observed, maybe we grab for power because "it seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."

Ultimately, the temptations of Jesus comes down to him being asked to reject his values and more importantly God's values. Isn't that true for us too? We live in a culture that continually overstimulates us so that we tend to think of temptations as the kind of excess you would see in a red-light district. "But the Bible understands temptation as something much more subtle than a weekend in Las Vegas. We human beings are wonderfully made, created in God's own image. But we have free minds that can imagine a lot of things that are wrapped in temptation. The problem with temptation isn't that it's so lurid. The problem with temptation is that it seems so plausible."

During an interview with Desmond Tutu during the days of the South African struggle against apartheid Tutu was asked if he was afraid of being killed. He responded by saying there are things worse than death. The journalist was stunned by this answer, and asked, "What, possibly, could be worse than death?" Desmond Tutu responded, "If I were to get up some morning and say to myself, you know, Desmond, apartheid really isn't so bad: that would be worse than death."

Apartheid isn't so bad. It is these plausible lies, and not the more obvious temptations we face, that are the root causes of our problems. And just as Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to consider and reject the plausible lies in his life, so you and I have this forty-day Lenten season in which to examine the plausible lies in ours.

The question for each of us is this: what are the plausible lies that can claim and direct our life? Let me give you some examples; One big plausible lie in our culture is that we will never have enough and must keep everything we get for ourselves. Another plausible lie is that the other — whoever that may be — is the cause of all our problems. A big plausible lie for religious people is that we should hand over our intellects and not question our faith or our doubts or that our faith shouldn't inform our political, social, economic, and moral decisions. As the great theologian Karl Barth insisted that the Bible and the newspaper should be read together.

But perhaps the biggest lie is for us to go back on everything Jesus teaches about serving others, showing mercy, compassion and forgiveness; to abandon who we are, to betray all that we believe and love, just to gain something or save ourselves. That is part of what is broken about us. We are sometimes willing to sell our souls even for "good" reasons. Often, we are willing to argue that seemingly positive ends justify destructive means. We have a tendency to go back not just on our principles — but Jesus' teachings that categorically demands we are to love our neighbor as ourselves and for turning a deaf ear to who God calls us to be and do.

Jesus could say "No" to the plausible lies because he knew who he was: God's Son, the beloved. You and I will never be able to say "No" to those lies until we know who we are, too. Lent is not about feeling guilty or sinful. Lent is about coming to terms

with who we really, finally are. We too are God's child. We too are beloved. We have this forty day season as a time to turn our attention away from the world's plausible lies and to fix our eyes on Jesus, the one who models for us what authentic, meaningful, joyous human life can be. We have Lent as a time to live into our authentic selves. There really is still some things worse than death and that is not living as who we really are. Let us use these 40 precious days to clear our heads, open our hearts, and say "Yes" to who God really calls us to be. Amen.