

Ian Oliver:

What a delight to be here. My thanks to friends and colleagues, Stephanie Paulsell, Interim Pusey Minister, and Associate Minister, Alanna Sullivan, for their invitation to be here today. We all go back a long ways. And a special thanks to Wes Conn and Lara Glass for all their work to put together today's visit by the Student Deacons of the University Church in Yale, yes, I see you, to meet with the Memorial Church Student Deacons and a special thanks to Jenny Peak, our associate pastor for putting that together.

Ian Oliver:

As you know, you have truly remarkable Christian leaders working with you here and student leaders. I bring heartfelt greetings from the University Church, your sister congregation at Yale now in our 263rd year. This would be the right moment I think for a witty remark about the historic rivalry between our institutions. But I'm sorry, I have given those up for Lent.

Ian Oliver:

On this first Sunday in Lent, I feel the stage has already been set for this morning sermon by Memorial Church's remarkable Lenten Program on the theme of pilgrimage through the Lenten Wilderness. We will be praying with you as you make this journey and now I ask you to join me in prayer. Holy God, we are pilgrims on a journey. Give us courage, give us stamina, give us eyes to see, and give us awareness that you are with us every step of the way. Amen.

Ian Oliver:

Pilgrimage begins with temptation. Why? Because a pilgrimage sounds great until you actually start on one. The plans, the packing, the maps, the earnest hope for spiritual transformation, it's all very exciting. But if I remember the first day of my first pilgrimage, the idea of pilgrimage and the reality of it quickly diverged. The pack on your back rides up or rides down in the wrong way, the new boots chafe, the first blisters form, the too hot sun or the blowing rain in your face, the odd or demanding fellow pilgrims, the trail that promises so lifting vistas, but brings only dust and scrub.

Ian Oliver:

My intention is always to keep my eyes on the distinct goal, but it dissolves as I twist my ankles on rocks and roots and my eyes fall to just four feet in front of me. My certainty that the effort would cleanse and clear my spirit descends into irritability, and the same old problems with myself and the world that I thought I was leaving at home. The first temptation is to quit the pilgrimage. "Yeah, this isn't me, this is too hard, this isn't what I expected." And Lent can feel the same, "I'm not ready, I'm too busy. This feels fake."

Ian Oliver:

In St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. His conscious ministry has just begun with the water of John's baptism, the opening of the sky, the descent of the spirit, and a voice telling him, "This is my son, the beloved." Jesus's pilgrimage begins in power, but like our own temptation comes quickly. The tempter appears after Jesus's long, fast, and slyly encourages him saying, "You're hungry, make these stones into bread. You're in danger, throw yourself down and God will rescue you. You're a budding Messiah, worship me and receive the kingdoms of this world."

Ian Oliver:

The tempter challenges Jesus at his weakest point. The point of asking what does it mean when God calls you? Beloved, if you notice, the tempter says, "If you are the son of God, prove it." Substitute your own desires and dreams. Jesus can walk the sometimes maddening, confusing path of trusting God and God's timetable, or Jesus can take a shortcut.

Ian Oliver:

Douglas John Hall calls the three temptations, the temptation of the miraculous, the temptation to spectacle, and the temptation of political power. The temptation is to circumvent the difficulties and assume that being beloved means the path will be easy. On my pilgrimage, the second temptation was to take a shortcut. You hold the map up in front of you and you see those long switchbacks going up the mountain. I don't know, I just cut through and charge right up the hill.

Ian Oliver:

As Jenny reminded me, shortcuts are always the temptation. There's that shortcut we yearned for from injury to forgiveness without living into the pain. There's that shortcut we long for to jump at easy answers or fast our reconciliation when we face complex and painful realities like racism. When only a year's long or decade's long, repentance will be enough. I like to think of Jesus's tempter as a disruptor. There's the long, often difficult, often complicated path to God's kingdom. And for Jesus, it will mean years of hunger and attacks and opposition. Why waste the time? Make a miracle, astound the world, seize the power now, take the shortcut.

Ian Oliver:

I think we've fallen in love with disruptors and shortcuts in our society today. Young tech creators and political populists have become our heroes. They are bold and new. They cut through the fusty old ways in institutions and industries and mores that need to be disrupted. Now, we can have immediate access to everything, direct democracy and amazing, really cute 15-second videos. Of course, when I talked to my students about this, they look at me. I rail about the world these days and the dangers of technology and they eloquently shrug. I can hear them thinking another grumpy boomer. I own it. I can tell they're thinking, "Your complaints may be fair, but what can we do about it? We can't go back." They can't remember a world with music copyrights and taxi medallions and traditional political parties. "No going back," they think.

Ian Oliver:

So what good is your agitation? Perhaps I just want to name temptations as temptations. Temptations I feel as much as anyone, the temptation of instant gratification, the temptation of anonymous attack, the temptation to find a quicker, easier way that doesn't require a change or sacrifice or loving my enemies, the temptation to finally have a very speedy, spectacular nihilism. Why nihilism? In October, I attended Professor Wendy Brown's Tanner Lectures at Yale and heard this incredibly profound political scientists talk very calmly about how nihilism has now triumphed in our society, government, and economy as though that were given.

Ian Oliver:

I have to admit, I had to look up nihilism on my phone as I sat there. I'd read my Nietzsche a long ago, but I thought nihilism was just something politicians accused each other of. But the authoritative source, Wikipedia, popped up on my screen and told me nihilism is the philosophical viewpoint that denies or

lacks belief in any or all of the reputedly meaningful aspects of life. Moral nihilism asserts that morality does not exist at all. Oh, oh, Wendy Brown is assuming this, then who are we?

Ian Oliver:

Lent is a time to ask ourselves, "How did we get here? Personally, what hard mileage have we put on our lives since last Easter? Socially, what array of choices and trends and temptations got us to a world of diminishing humanity and presumed nihilism? How did the means become the ends?" The disruption shortcut is the belief that anything that stands in the way of my achieving my desires, that challenges me to be virtuous or kind for its own sake, that questions my prejudices, habits, or beliefs that says, "Slow down or think carefully." All of those things are bad. Disruption says, "I know better." It says, "I can be the one in a million, the influencer, the thought leader."

Ian Oliver:

In Lent, I have to ask, "Haven't I been tempted to believe that being God's beloved means I should get what I want, that my hatreds and fears will become God's hatreds and fears, that my shortcuts are not really shortcuts, but just realism?" Jesus's response to disrupter is to say simple, calm things about God. Miraculously made bread will not provide truth or purpose, demands for spectacular rescues misunderstand God's grace. Even world domination is not worth the cost of losing one soul. The tempter's job is to create a false crisis that demands a shortcut. And Jesus's response is to abide in a God who is ultimately trustworthy.

Ian Oliver:

As Father John Shea has written, "The tempter's bait is to entice Jesus to imagine that being the beloved son of God means he will never be hungry, he will never be in danger, he will never be the victim of another's power." But as Father Shea writes, Jesus realizes that to be human and to love, he will have to be empty, he will have to be hurt, he will have to be powerless, but will still be the beloved son.

Ian Oliver:

At the end of the first day of pilgrimage, you're sore. You've overused muscles you didn't even know you had. There were no epiphanies. But you pull out the antiseptic and the Band-Aids and see to the blisters. You adjust your backpack and borrow some pattern. You look at the map with a much more realistic view of what lies ahead, because Atlanta, after all, is following the path to the cross. We are following a God who emptied himself of power and became one of us.

Ian Oliver:

Douglas John Hall quotes Paul Tillich saying, "We long for a Christ of power. Yet if he were to come and transform us and our world, we would have to pay the one price we cannot pay. We would have to lose our freedom, our humanity, our spiritual dignity." Luther said, "The theology of the cross over against the theology of glory and my great temptation." I don't know about you, his glory, his self-focus is going viral, is a curated life. The culture of experience without conscience.

Ian Oliver:

We live in a world of incredible beauty and abundance, possibility and opportunity. And God has given it to us, not as individuals for our own purposes, but as one whole species amongst many. The humanity Jesus lifted up and himself depends on seeing the glory of God in every human being, in making sacrifices of our own convenience, attention and service. Inhumanity surrounds us, and yet our

pilgrimage says, "We must seek to be ever more human." Nihilism surrounds us and yet we claim to see the arc of a moral universe. Atomization and isolation surround us and yet we embrace community with people we may not understand or even like because community is what we are made for.

Ian Oliver:

The only way to disrupt the disruption is to recognize it for what it is. It's a shortcut that makes the whole journey pointless. If I break all the rules, I will soon have a very speedy, very convenient, very entertaining wasteland. This Lent, I want to think about how the means we assume change the ends we can see, how as McLuhan said, "The medium is the message," how we can reclaim our spiritual lives and our society by creative, nonviolent refusal to take the shortcuts if they cost us our souls.

Ian Oliver:

On my own pilgrimage, day two begins very differently. It is less about me and more about the path. It is less about my imagination of what spiritual awakening will look like and more about trying to welcome it wherever it comes. It is about one foot in front of the other on the way. The tempter only shouts as Jesus turns away, but Jesus keeps slowly walking towards Jerusalem. The final temptation will come in Matthew 27, "If you are the son of God, come down from the cross. Take the shortcut." He didn't, and we can't. Amen.