Genesis 2-3, Matthew 4:1-11
March 1, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Do you have a best friend? Someone to whom you could share anything, someone to whom you could say anything and they would still love you, and not even think less of you—because they already know you so well? Do you have a friend like that? Do you have a best friend? If you do, you're lucky. You're even luckier if you are married to her. The ancient theologian Pelagius encouraged what he called *anamchara,* soul-friend. He believed that Christians should have someone in their lives, not necessarily a spouse, but someone they could tell anything, someone with whom they could share the deepest moments of their lives. We don't really know anything about Jesus' boyhood and whether or not he had close friends. But after he began his public ministry, after people had begun to follow him, he appointed twelve of them to be with him. It is these twelve people, the twelve apostles that seem to be the people he is closest to. But there were also crucial points in his life during which even the twelve were too many. We talked about one last week when Jesus went up on the mountain to pray and to think about what was going to happen in Jerusalem and he was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared to him. And then later, on the night of his arrest, he goes into the garden to pray. Here at the moments of great decision and great temptation he wants with him his best friends. So we are told he takes with him Peter, James, and John.

Peter, James, and John—Jesus' best friends. Is it strange to think that Jesus had best friends? Or is it comforting, knowing that Jesus was just as human as we are and wanted the support of his friends? At one crucial point in his life Jesus did not have the comfort or advice of his friends, for he did not yet know them, when he went into the wilderness

to be tempted. This first Sunday of Lent we remember those forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness and we remember how he was tempted. As we read through these temptations as recorded by Matthew, did you notice that he is not really tempted with any great evils. In a way the temptations he encounters might be seen as good things. He's even tempted with things his three best friends might like. When he is in the wilderness he's not tempted to kill anyone or steal anything or treat anyone badly. He's tempted to command the stones to become bread, that way he can feed himself, and he can feed lots of others as well. There's an old Arab legend that says that when God created the world he gave the responsibility of spreading rocks evenly around the world to two angels. One of them did his job well, but the other was lazy and just dumped all of his rocks in one place—Israel. When you travel around Israel, you can believe it—there are rocks everywhere. So if Jesus really were to makes stones become bread, think of all the poor people he could feed. And Jesus is tempted to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple. If he does that, it will prove to everyone that he is the Messiah—think how exciting that would be—all the people in Jerusalem would know, they would all gather together to worship him, there would be no question, no one would doubt. How great would that be? And just think of the power and stability if Jesus actually had what was offered in the third temptation. No fighting over religion around the world, no fighting between countries because it is Jesus who would be in control of all of that. What's wrong with that? Peter, James and John might have been ones to give in to those temptations. Peter, who may have been closest to Jesus was the one around whom Jesus wanted to found his church. And in the time immediately following Jesus resurrection and ascension, it is Peter who leads the early church. He is seen as the authority, as the stabilizing influence

in the young church. He might have had a lot easier time establishing a successful organization if Jesus had given in to that temptation about authority. And John, he was a man of feeling and sentiment. It was John who sat next to Jesus at the last supper, wanting to be as close as he could. It was John who stood at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother unwilling to abandon either of them. It was John who ran to the tomb on Easter morning his heart filled with hope that maybe the women were right. How much easier it would have been if everyone could believe as he did, if everyone could be sure in their faith—if Jesus had just given in to that second temptation. James, the brother of John however was a man of action. According to ancient legend, James didn't just stay in Jerusalem after the resurrection, he wanted to take the good news of Jesus as far as he could—to the furthest reaches of the empire, and in those days that meant Spain. And at least in legend, that's where he went, preaching and teaching and making disciples. It is two of those disciples, Athanasius and Theodosius, who follow him from Spain back to Jerusalem where James is arrested and eventually beheaded. These two disciples claim his body and took it back to Spain where they bury his bones. But he was a man of action and I'm sure he might have wondered once in a while whether providing bread for anyone who needed it might have been something that Jesus wanted the church to do. Aren't those things that we want too? We want the church to be a successful institution, we want to have warm, meaningful, faithful worship, we want to serve the community around us. All those are good things. We have hard working committees and elders in charge of taking care of our building and making sure the institution of the church is strong—Peter would be proud. And we have people who are constantly trying to put together worship experiences that are meaningful to the spirit and the build up our faith,

and John would love that. And we have a mission group and youth activities that are finding ways to serve the world outside our doors in the spirit of James the apostle. So what's wrong with these things? Nothing, nothing at all. That's why they are such good temptations for Jesus in the wilderness. Because when they become more important than our relationship with God and with one another rather than ways to enhance that relationship, they become devilish.

The church building, its structure, its stability, the church as an institution isn't an end in itself, but it is a way to express our faith in God and a place for God's people to gather. Worship that builds us up is important so we can grow in our love for God and our care for each other. Feeding the hungry, preaching the gospel, building homes for the homeless, all these mission activities of the church are important but we do them because God asks us to and they are reflections of our love for God and our love for every human being. When Jesus was in the wilderness, the temptation he endured was to let something come between himself and his father. As we begin our journey through Lent toward Easter we talk sometimes about doing something for Lent or giving something up for Lent. Maybe those are good things to do, but they are not ends in themselves. Should we read the bible more or pray more—yes, those are good things, but good because we come closer to God. Should we give up chocolate or pizza for Lent—maybe that's a good thing too, but only because we take that money or the time we would spend and spend it in service of God and caring for each other. As disciples of Jesus Christ, as friends of Jesus, like Peter, James and John, we follow his example—love God and love one another first. And all these other things will find their proper place.