

**Sunday, March 1, 2020**  
**First Sunday in Lent (Year A)**  
Matthew 4.1-11  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Lenten Wilderness”**

As we set off on our forty-day journey through Lent, Jesus begins a forty-day journey of his own. Although it’s really the other way around. Our forty-day Lenten journey is based, in some ways, on Jesus’ forty-day journey in the wilderness. Which, in turn, is based, in some ways, on the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The common denominator being forty. A number that, in Scripture, is meant not so much to signify a specific number, but is meant to denote a time between; the necessary span before the gracious conclusion. The number of years between the time the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land. The number of days between Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his public ministry. The number of days (okay, excluding Sundays) between our confession of our sinfulness and acknowledgment of our mortality on Ash Wednesday and the celebration of our salvation and eternal life on Easter.

The story of Jesus’ forty-day journey in the wilderness and the accompanying temptations are always the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent, so it must be important to our own Lenten journey. So, what does Jesus’ time in the wilderness have to say to us about our own time in Lenten wilderness?

Just to recap—prior to being led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus was baptized by John at the River Jordan. We are told that “just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3.16-17). Next thing you know, Jesus is being whisked off to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. As I read this Gospel account, Jesus was not tempted during the whole forty days. Scripture tells us that he had been fasting in the wilderness for forty days, and when he was famished, that’s when the devil showed up and started throwing one temptation after another at Jesus. Taking advantage of Jesus’ weakened condition to try to entice him to give into the devil’s ploys.

Before we get to the temptations themselves, the question arises: why was Jesus led into the wilderness and why did he fast? Let’s start with the fasting. Fasting was understood to be a means of opening oneself to receiving God’s guidance. At his baptism and with God’s proclamation that he is the Son of God, Jesus had just been anointed and commissioned by God. That’s a lot to take in. Jesus would have needed time to process, to figure out just what that meant. To figure out what God wanted him to do. So, given the customs of the day, he would have entered into a period of fasting—denying his own needs and wants and opening himself to God’s guidance as to what he was to do and where he was to go from there. Here’s where the forty days comes in. The time between. The time between his commissioning and the time when he begins the ministry that would be his living into God’s commissioning.

So why the wilderness? Couldn't Jesus just as easily have fasted in a little more comfortable location, like his home in Nazareth? Going into the wilderness to be tempted is significant. The wilderness is empty, devoid of anything that could provide temptation. The real place of temptation is in villages and cities. In centers of human activity, where there are all sorts of temptations. But in the wilderness, there are no inherent temptations. The choice of this location is to reinforce that temptations do not come from without, from outside of ourselves. Temptations come from within ourselves. Outside forces do not create temptation. Temptations are our response to external circumstances or situations. Temptations are our internal urges. In the wilderness, Jesus would be forced to deal with his own internal temptations, particularly those in response to God's revelation that he is the Son of God. Think of the temptations that could arise from receiving such news. The temptation to run for the hills and escape that heavy burden. The temptation to use his newly found status for personal gain, or for the benefit of his family and friends. Or the temptation to doubt himself, that he had what it takes to do the job God had placed before him. Jesus needed to be alone and apart from all other distractions to work through for himself just what God was asking of him and how he could best live into his new role. Another way to look at it is that this time in the wilderness, this time apart, was Jesus' time of preparation to find his authentic self. To discern and determine how he would and could most fully live into God's commissioning.

I imagine that Jesus had finally sorted it all out in his own mind—remember, forty days, the time between, the necessary span for gracious completion—and he was probably ready to head back to civilization when the devil decides to strike. Right when Jesus is weakest and most vulnerable because of lack of food for all that time. The devil undoubtedly thought this would be easy. He could tear Jesus down without even breaking a sweat.

The devil seeks to do this with three temptations. By dangling before Jesus three things that are of great importance to nearly every human being. Taking advantage of Jesus' weakened condition due to forty days of fasting, the devil tempts him with food. "You're famished. Just turn those stones into bread and have your fill." And while the temptation presented is food, a necessary human need, the metaphor could be extended beyond mere food to the temptation for any material comfort. The temptation for material possessions. But Jesus counters with the argument that there is more to life than the material. There is also the spiritual—one's relationship with God is also important. Maybe more important, in some ways.

The second temptation presented is for protection. "Go ahead, Jesus. Jump off the pinnacle. There's nothing to worry about. God will protect you, keep you safe." Yes, we all want to be safe and protected. But Jesus counters that while God does protect us, one should not unduly test God. God is not an on-demand emergency service, nor is he beholden to human bidding.

And the third temptation is power. "Okay, Jesus. If you just worship me, I'll give you power and wealth and prestige beyond your wildest imagination." Yes, we all want to be acknowledged and valued. We all want to have at least some power over our own lives. But some want more and more power—power and authority over others for the sake of having power and authority over others. For prestige. Or another way to look at it is the temptation to worship the world or worldly ways instead of God. But Jesus counters that the only true power is and comes from

God. That power and prestige are not to be worshiped. Only God is to be worshiped. That one's true value comes through serving God, not being served by others.

Material possessions, the need and desire for protection and safety, and the need to be acknowledged and valued are all legitimate concerns. They all have their rightful place in our lives. But there are limits. Concern for such things can be taken to extremes. There is always the temptation to go beyond what is truly necessary. In Jesus' responses, he does not seek to deny the reality of these needs and desires in human life, but to temper them. To place them in proper perspective. And to recognize that our relationship with God is equally important in our lives. It is that relationship with God that should provide the lens through which we view our human wants and desires. Our human wants and desires are not bad in and of themselves. They only become so when those wants and desires get in the way of or detract from our relationship with God. For there is more than the hunger for food, for physical things. As beings created by God in the image and likeness of God, our souls have a deeper hunger for God.

Foundational to Jesus' time in the wilderness, and particularly to his dealing with the temptations presented by the devil is the issue of identity. During the temptations, the devil twice says "if you are the Son of God." "If" is not an expression of doubt. The devil knows precisely who Jesus is. That he indeed is the Son of God. When he says "if," he is really saying "since." "Since you are the Son of God" you could do . . . "Since you are the Son of God, why not go ahead and turn stones into bread?" "Since you are the Son of God, why not go ahead and throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple?" It is this identity that Jesus relies upon, that gets him through these temptations. The identity that had been conferred upon him at his baptism just forty days before. And ultimately, unless something goes seriously awry, it is that identity that will determine just who influences Jesus' actions—God or the devil.

As we make the first few steps on our own forty-day Lenten journey, we can learn a few things from Jesus' forty-day journey in the wilderness. No matter where we are, there are temptations: those presented to us or those that bubble up from within. Some of these are valid to a certain extent. We do have needs. There are also desires that contribute to our well-being. But at times, those desires, those temptations get in the way of or conflict with what God desires for us; get in the way of or conflict with who God calls us to be.

Lent is a time for us to intentionally separate ourselves from those things that get in the way of our relationship with God. That distract us from living into God's calling for us. By entering into a wilderness period, Lent is a time to focus on our relationship with God and be attentive to what God truly wants from us and for us. A time to be vulnerable and open to God calling us. A time to discover our true, authentic self. A time to reclaim our identity as beloved of God, as those made in the image and likeness of God. The identity conferred upon us at our own baptisms. For it is that very identity that will strengthen us and help us get through the temptations that will undoubtedly arise, this Lenten season and beyond.