

**Sunday, February 26, 2023**  
**First Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

Matthew 4.1-11

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3452151605004465>

*(Sermon begins at about 19:20)*

**“Our Lenten Journey”**

Here we are – the first Sunday in Lent. And we find ourselves, with Jesus, in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. A time of fasting. A time of prayer. A time of testing and being tempted. All leading up to the most intense and significant week in the liturgical calendar: Holy Week. All in preparation for the what immediately follows: Easter.

Our annual forty-day Lenten journey—at least, after we get through Ash Wednesday and make it to the first Sunday in Lent—always begins with recounting the story of Jesus’ own forty-day wilderness experience. A way of setting the stage and providing insight into what this unique season is all about. Because, when you think about it, of all the liturgical feasts and seasons, Lent is unlike any other. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Pentecost and the season following, and all the feast days contained therein are remembrances and celebrations of key events in our Christian tradition. Lent—Holy Week notwithstanding—is the only season that has a more inward focus. A time of intentional, personal preparation, for what comes at the end of the season. As we travel with Jesus to Jerusalem. As we prepare ourselves for witnessing his Passion. As we prepare ourselves for the joys of the Resurrection. The only other liturgical season remotely preparatory is Advent, but even then, the focus is more on communal anticipation and less on personal preparation. So, yeah, Lent is a unique time in the life of the Church, and particularly in the lives of the members of the Body of Christ, unlike any other. A time that should be treated as such and not allowed to drift by as if it were just another season on the liturgical calendar.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that I, and many other clergy as well, tend to refer to our commemoration of Lent as a “journey.” This is because we do not just sit back and observe its passing, as we often do with other religious commemorations. Rather, we are called to actively participate in Lent, making a communal journey from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Making a personal journey of exploration, of introspection, of repentance, of transformation, as we prepare to witness and experience the events that are foundational to our religion, that are transformative to our lives of faith.

Given the unique nature of this season, this journey, it is particularly appropriate that we take as our starting point Jesus’ own journey of faith. His own journey of exploration, of introspection, of transformation, of preparation for what awaits him. Just to remind us all of what is happening in today’s Gospel, Jesus has just been baptized by John in the River Jordan. We are told: “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). God

confirming who Jesus is and commissioning him for what that role entails. Immediately thereafter, we pick up with today's Gospel: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4.1). Thus begins his forty-day journey in the wilderness. Paralleling our own forty-day Lenten journey. So, what does Jesus' journey have to teach us about our own Lenten journey?

I don't know about you, but I can't help but wonder why, after the Divine affirmation and commissioning, the Spirit whisks Jesus away to be tempted. This almost seems to imply collusion between God and the devil. That the devil is fulfilling some sort of divine purpose. Given the way the story unfolds, it is almost as if God sent Jesus into the clutches of the devil to have his loyalty tested. But why? Particularly after God has anointed Jesus and empowered him to carry out God's purposes. Seems a bit unnecessary, since Jesus is the Son of God. Since Jesus is God incarnate. Given the way Scripture typically works, this disconnect must be the key.

Although, as we see in the Gospel account, the devil does not test Jesus right away. He waits. For forty days he waits. "[Jesus] fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished" (Mt4.2). Only then does the devil—"the tempter"—come to Jesus. When Jesus is weakened from fasting. When not only is his physical strength depleted, but also, presumably, his spiritual strength and resolve are weakened, as well. In those last days of Jesus' wilderness experience, perhaps even the last hours, or even minutes, the devil seeks to tempt Jesus. To test him. The devil begins the first two temptations with the preface, "If you are the Son of God . . ." This is not a questioning of who Jesus is. Not a questioning as to whether he is the Son of God. Rather, the more appropriate translation is "Given that you are the Son of God." The devil knows precisely who Jesus is.

Now you can spin the three temptations dangled by the devil in all sorts of different ways. Seeking guidance from each of these, from Jesus' responses to each, in a variety of ways. Tempting with bread implying the temptation of physical wants and desires, the temptation to seek comfort. Tempting Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple as a means of testing God implying the temptation of safety and security. Tempting Jesus with all the kingdoms of the earth implying the temptation of wealth and power. And all these are certainly valid interpretations. All these are certainly things and qualities that humanity has sought, been tempted by, and even struggled with, since the beginning. More often than not, doing whatever it takes to obtain comfort, security, wealth, and power. All of which can be placed under the umbrella of self-sufficiency, of looking out for number one.

Of course, Jesus has a response to each of these temptations. Responses straight out of the Hebrew Scriptures. All prefaced with "It is written," as if the devil does not know already. Rather, this preface is more a reminder to us who seek to learn something from Jesus' wilderness journey as we make our own journeys of faith—that the guidance we seek is contained in Scripture. When tempted with bread, Jesus responds, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4.4). When tempted with security, Jesus responds, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Mt 4.7). And when tempted with wealth and power, Jesus responds, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Mt 4.10). All three responses having common themes: trusting in God and reliance on God. Jesus has provided sufficient proof to the devil that his efforts are futile. Confirmation that

Jesus does indeed have complete and abiding trust in and reliance upon God in all things. Particularly when he is at his weakest and most vulnerable.

All of these being quoted directly from the Book of Deuteronomy. Which is telling in and of itself. That the central theme running throughout Jesus' own responses to temptation and testing are directly from the record of the most significant and defining event for God's Chosen People.

Deuteronomy is a retelling, a summary of the highlights, of another significant wilderness journey in the lives of the people: the Hebrews' forty-year journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom and new life in the Promised Land. Primarily presented in the form of a speech or sermon delivered by Moses, reminding the people of what they have learned during their forty-year journey, and summarizing the Law given by God. Preparing them for the final leg of their journey across the River Jordan into the Promised Land of Canaan. Throughout their forty-year journey, the Hebrews were slowly and systematically reshaped. The old ways they had been living under in Egypt were stripped away. They were being formed into a new people. Into God's people. Not that they weren't God's people when they were in slavery in Egypt. But over the centuries they were in Egypt, they had essentially lost their connection with God. They had forgotten what it means to be in relationship with God. They had forgotten what it means to be God's people. The time in the wilderness was specifically to reestablish that connection, that relationship, that identity. And the primary way that was accomplished was through the building of trust. By providing experiences through which the people came to realize that they needed to rely on God for their survival and well-being. In the process, they came to trust that God was indeed with them and for them, no matter what they faced. Even when they messed up and did not always uphold their end of the covenant with God.

Now, admittedly, Jesus drawing on this imagery of formation and re-establishment of relationship with God does not seem to make a lot of sense as applied to Jesus himself. He did not need that the way the Hebrews in the wilderness did. Or the way we do from time to time. But as is so often the case, what Jesus does and experiences is more for our benefit than for his. To serve as an example for how we are to live our lives of faith, to engage in our relationship with God. Coming where Jesus' temptation in the wilderness does, just after his baptism and immediately before the beginning of his public ministry, this is certainly a period of preparation for what is to come. For his public ministry. Of course, we do not know what Jesus experienced during the forty days before being tempted. Although it is pretty clear that it must have been a time for Jesus to reflect on his own life, on his identity as the Son of God, and to prepare for the beginning of his public ministry. And for what that would lead to over the next three years. And where that would ultimately lead.

But it is this confluence of Jesus' own forty days of preparations for his public ministry and the Hebrews' forty years of formation as God's Chosen People, that inform and give us a sense of the importance and the purpose of our own forty-day Lenten journey. It is a time of formation. It is a time of re-establishing our connection to and our relationship with God. It is a time to renew our trust and reliance upon God. Particularly in our own time, so filled with demands on our time, our energy, and our resources, it is easy to get wrapped up in our day-to-day lives and let that which truly sustains us—our relationship with God—slip into the shadows. The season

of Lent is a way of shifting focus, to get back on track, and to reconnect with our spiritual life and with the One who is at the center of that life. It is, if you will, our annual reset, to prepare us for the commemoration of those events in Holy Week that are so central to who we are as God's Beloved Children and as the Body of Christ. All part of our ongoing formation, helping us to continually grow into the fullness of who God created and calls us to be.

Blessings on you and your journey this Lenten season. May it be holy and fruitful, as you are re-shaped and re-formed into who God sees and knows you to be.