

**Sunday, March 9, 2025**  
**First Sunday in Lent (Year C)**

Luke 4.1-13

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1174419857632342>

*(Sermon begins at about 33:10)*

**“Lenten Exam”**

This is the first Sunday in our annual Lenten journey. The forty-day duration is meant to call to mind two other significant “forties” in Scripture. The first is the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted and tested by the devil—the account of which we just heard in our Gospel reading. A period which, itself, is meant to call to mind the second of the “forties”: the forty years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, as they made their way to the Promised Land.

There are two common themes—maybe more, but we will focus on two—between Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness and the Hebrews’ forty years in the wilderness. The first is the commonality of the duration: forty—be it days or years. In ancient scripture, forty was a shorthand way of indicating a long time. Generally, a long period that was meant to be transitional, even transformational. A time in preparation for something new.

For the Hebrews, the forty years in the wilderness was a time for them to unlearn and recover from the way of life they had experienced in slavery in Egypt and to learn anew who they were as God’s people. A time to reestablish their relationship with God. A time in which they would be shaped and formed by God for their role and purpose as God’s Chosen People. A time in which they were being prepared for a new way of life in the land that God had promised to give them.

For Jesus, the forty days in the wilderness was similarly a time to be formed in a new way of life, a new way of being. He had lived the first thirty years of his life in relative obscurity, as a private person, just going about his day-to-day life, working and providing for his family. But all that changed with his baptism by John in the Jordan River. As he emerged from the water, when “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Lk 3.21-22). God’s confirmation of who Jesus is as the Messiah and commissioning him to live into that role. Heralding the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. But before he could officially take on that role, he would need a time of transition in the wilderness. Time to discern just what it means for him to be Messiah. Time to discern how he would seek to embody that role through his public ministry.

The second theme in both the Hebrews’ and Jesus’ time of discernment and formation is that they occurred in the wilderness. In places set apart. Places removed from what they had known before. Places free from the distractions of day-to-day life. Places where the only thing to be done was to focus on the task at hand: discernment and formation.

If this is the symbolism behind our forty-day Lenten journey, the question could be asked, “why do we need this?” What further formation is necessary? What discernment is necessary? We already know what it means to be Christian. We know the importance of the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We are already living our faith. If Lent is a time of preparation for Easter, we already know what that means. We are, after all, resurrection people. We know that through Christ’s death and resurrection, our sins are already forgiven and we are assured of new and eternal life with him. We should be celebrating that. Why do we need to go through this dreary season of Lent? Let’s just skip straight to Easter and to celebrating who we are.

Why, indeed. Perhaps because we are human. We are flawed beings. We continue to make mistakes, even though we are resurrection people. We can always do better. We can always do more. And frankly, sometimes we just need a reminder, a refresher, to get us back on track. Lent is an opportunity for an annual re-set, as it were. To pause for forty days, to seek to mentally and spiritually remove ourselves, even if only momentarily, even if only metaphorically, from the day-to-day life which can become all-consuming and distract us from who we really are as resurrection people. To give us an opportunity, as we prepare for our annual celebration of Christ’s resurrection, to remember who we are, whose we are, and what that truly means.

And also, because we change. Life changes. Our circumstances change. Maybe what it means to be a Christian and how we are called to live out our faith has changed over time. Our forty-day Lenten journey gives us a chance to check in with ourselves, to check in with God, and to see how we’re doing. Is what we’re doing still working for us and for our life of faith? Do we need to consider making changes to more fully live into who God has created and called us to be as his people?

At our Ash Wednesday services, we were reminded of the threefold Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These are good and worthy practices to intentionally engage in at any time, particularly during this season. Although what we hear in Jesus being tempted and tested in the wilderness in today’s Gospel provides us with an even broader framework for how to approach our Lenten journey. Actually, a broader framework for how to approach our entire life of faith through Lent and beyond. In these areas, we don’t need to be tempted and tested. We are likely tempted and struggle with some, if not all, of these areas in a variety of ways already. So maybe this is a time to intentionally focus on these areas.

The first temptation the devil puts to Jesus could be characterized in the question: “Who nourishes or sustains you?” The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” To which Jesus responds, “One does live by bread alone.” Indicating this is not just about bread. This is not just about physical hunger. Bread is only a metaphor for the broader issue of nourishment, of sustenance. What is it that truly sustains us? Or perhaps, better put: who sustains us? In our modern world, and certainly in our American culture, there is great value placed on the image of “rugged individualism” and a prevailing ethos of self-sufficiency. We tend to idolize those who are self-made, who have “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps” and improved their lives. The image of “rags to riches,” which always implies having made it on our own as opposed to being helped by others.

In the wilderness, the devil is tempting Jesus to give in to his own desires, and to use his divine power for his own purposes. In this case, to satisfy his own hunger. The implication in Jesus' response to the devil is that as creatures of the Divine, we are to recognize who truly sustains us. That God is the source of our strength and wellbeing in all respects: body, mind, and spirit. Yes, we can and must do things for ourselves. But it is only through the gifts, talents, and abilities God has bestowed upon us that allows us to do what we do. That particularly in difficult circumstances, we rely on a greater strength to help us through. And that in all that we do, we need to recognize the ultimate source of our sustenance is not ourselves, but God.

The second temptation the devil puts to Jesus could be characterized in the question: "Who do you serve?" The devil promises to give Jesus power and authority over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship him. Implying that wealth, power, and prestige will be his, if he just says the word. To which Jesus responds, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The temptation and Jesus' response imply that the broader issue is about sovereignty and service. Where does our true allegiance lie? Is it in wealth and material possessions? Is it in power and authority? Is it in fame and prestige? Not that there is anything wrong with wealth, power, and prestige. There are some who are rich and famous who do great good in the world. But it is really more about the motivation. Do we want wealth, power, and prestige out of a sense of personal validation, a sense of self-worth? If so, Jesus implies, that is the wrong reason.

In short, are our actions in service to self or in service to others. Or in service of something greater. Jesus' response—"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"—is clear. Our service is to be to God alone. And by extension, in service to those of greatest concern to God.

The third temptation the devil puts to Jesus could be characterized in the question: "Who do you trust to love and care for you?" The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, posing a test to see if God would really protect Jesus if he were in danger. The words the devil quotes from scripture indicating that God says he will provide protection, but the unspoken piece being, "but will he really?" To which Jesus responds, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Not much more to be said there. In short, Jesus is saying that there is no need to test whether God loves and cares for us. We are God's beloved children. Of course God loves and cares for us. We can trust and have faith in God's promises to do so.

The final exam Jesus faces in the wilderness boils down to three questions. Three questions that apply equally to us. And three questions that we need to be continually asking ourselves, in this season of Lent and throughout our lives:

- Who nourishes or sustains you?
- Who do you serve?
- Who do you trust to love and care for you?

The correct answer to each of these questions is the same:

- Who nourishes or sustains you? God.
- Who do you serve? God.
- Who do you trust to love and care for you? God.

Seems simple enough. And yet, how often we forget. Which is why we need Lent. To remind us of the basics. To provide a refresher course. To help us get back on track, even if only for a season. And being who we are, asking the questions is not always sufficient. Sometimes we need a little testing to remind us of the answers.

I know many of you are already feeling tested to the limit. Why would we want to be tested any more than we already are? Perhaps, in a time in which, because of what is going on in our nation and in the world, we already feel tested, where our trust in what we have always held on to, thought to be unshakable, seems to be crumbling before our very eyes, taking time away—albeit metaphorically—is in order. When questions of who sustains us, who we serve, and who we trust to care for us seem to be tested as if by the devil, we are invited by the model of our Lord to recall the foundations of our faith. The foundations of who we are as beloved children of God. We are invited to renew our commitment to and trust in God. To, as Jesus did, draw more than ever upon God's strength to sustain us, making it our own. To double down on our commitment to serving him and him alone—particularly by serving those who are on the margins and of most concern to God. To seek to deepen our trust and faith in the One who loves and cares for us beyond measure. The One who gave his life for us that might have life abundant. To seek to deepen our relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves, so that, as we draw nearer to our annual celebration of Easter, we may more fully live into, and more fully know in our inmost being, what it means to be and live as resurrection people.