

**Sunday, February 22, 2026**  
**First Sunday in Lent (Year A)**  
Matthew 4.1-11  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Lenten Quest”**

My friends, today we begin a great quest.

Before we begin, we need to understand what a quest entails. You actually already know; you just may not realize it. Every culture throughout the ages has its own version of what is often referred to as the “hero quest.” Classic stories that follow the same basic structure. The protagonist, the hero of the story, leaves their ordinary world, sometimes on their own volition, or sometimes compelled to do so. They embark on a journey during which they face a variety of trials and temptations. Along the way, they often meet a mentor who travels with them and guides them through these trials. Through these trials, they gain wisdom, often about themselves, and return home transformed in some profound way. There are a variety of well-known examples. One of the oldest being the Epic of Gilgamesh. Other ancient examples include The Odyssey by Homer; the story of Jason and the Argonauts; the Arthurian Legends, with the most well-known being the quest for the Holy Grail. More modern examples include The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien; the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis; and the Star Wars series, particularly the original trilogy focusing on Luke Skywalker.

Or, perhaps a more appropriate analogy for our purposes is that of the vision quest: an intense spiritual rite of passage in many Native American cultures where individuals, typically teens or young adults, go into the wilderness for a period of multiple days without food or water. While there, they fast and pray in isolation, seeking guidance from the spirits to reveal their identity, their purpose, the mission of their life. Generally, although not exclusively, this is part of the transition to adulthood. Other native cultures have similar spiritual practices such as the sweat lodge.

In all of these, both the hero quest stories and the indigenous vision quest practices, the intent is the same. To go on a quest of personal discovery, with the intended result being discovery of one’s identity and purpose. A quest resulting in transformation—being transformed into who one is truly meant to be; into who one truly is. A quest of which, there is no turning back.

Our guide on the quest we are beginning today is none other than Jesus, who himself is making his own quest guided by the Holy Spirit. Let’s take a look at Jesus’ quest as recorded in today’s Gospel and explore how his quest is a model for our own—for our Lenten quest, but also for our life’s quest.

Before we get to the actual quest, commonly referred to as the temptation of Jesus, we need to step back briefly to the event immediately preceding today’s Gospel account: the baptism of Jesus. “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he was coming 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). Immediately after that, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

While Jesus is most definitely an adult, 30 years of age at this point, he is facing a major transition in his life. Up to this point, he has lived in relative obscurity. But now, with his baptism, his identity and his understanding of himself have changed. God has proclaimed that Jesus is “my Son, the Beloved.” What does one even do with such a mind-blowing revelation? Jesus was undoubtedly reeling with all sorts of questions about his identity, about his purpose, about how he was to live into this new identity and purpose. All the same questions that are part of hero quests, that are part of vision quests. And God, through the Spirit, sends Jesus on his own quest of self-discovery and of transformation. With the Spirit as Jesus’ guide. And, you guessed it, with Jesus as our guide.

Now, of course the duration of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is itself significant. Forty days. Forty being significant in Jewish numerology. The number forty being a shorthand way of saying “for a long time.” Generally a long period of time resulting in transformation. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness would have thereby connected this event with other significant “fortys” in Jewish history. The most notable being another time in the wilderness: the forty-year Exodus when the Hebrews, liberated from slavery in Egypt, traveled through the wilderness for forty years on their journey to the Promised Land and their new home. A forty-year journey that was not just a physical journey, but also a spiritual journey. A period where their old identity as slaves was stripped away and they were re-formed, as they were transformed, into the Chosen People of God. A period where they discovered their new identity and purpose, and how to live into that identity and purpose once they reached their new home. The parallel forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness being a period meant to facilitate Jesus’ discovery of his new identity and purpose, and how to live into that identity and purpose. And, you guessed it, our forty-day commemoration of Lent meant to facilitate our discovery of our identity and purpose as children of God and as the Body of Christ, and to discern how to live into that identity and purpose.

The key elements of Jesus, and our, journey of discovery, the key learnings, are revealed in three specific temptations. Each temptation leading to a question about identity and purpose. About Jesus’ identity and purpose, as well as our own. As we go through each of the temptations, realize there may well be multiple ways to interpret them, to synthesize them into some overarching framework. (Not that I would ever overthink it.) Nevertheless, the temptations do ultimately point to three fundamental questions about the source of identity and purpose, in keeping with the whole theme of quest. And as you go through your own quest, I would encourage you to make the questions your own, to ask the questions that you need to struggle with in your own quest for identity and purpose.

The first temptation Jesus is presented with is, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Obviously seeking to address the primary issue of hunger due to lack of food in the wilderness, this temptation could be more broadly applied to issues of comfort and physical well-being, even of nourishment and strength. Jesus’ response, quoting from Deuteronomy, as all his responses are, is “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Recognition that we are more than physical beings relying on food for nourishment, for the source of our strength. We are also spiritual beings, which likewise have to be nourished and strengthened. For which we trust in and rely on God to provide the guidance and instruction needed for spiritual growth and sustenance. Regarding

identity and purpose, the broader question that arises is “Where do we find the strength and nourishment we need?”

The second temptation Jesus is presented with is that he is taken to the pinnacle of the temple: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” This temptation seems to address the primary issue of safety and security. Trusting that God will protect us no matter what. When posed to Jesus by the devil, with the emphasis seeming to be on the statement “if you are the Son of God” and taking place at the temple, there is also a compelling sense this is ultimately about identity itself, in terms of whose we are. The devil effectively asking, who do you trust to love and care for you, particularly in difficult or challenging times. Implying that God will protect Jesus mainly because he is God’s Son. To which Jesus responds, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Effectively saying that if we believe God truly loves us and cares for us, we do not need to test it. Rather, we can have complete faith and trust in God to do what God promises his beloved children. As such, it is about fully believing in our identity as God’s beloved children. Regarding identity and purpose, the broader question that arises is “Where do we find the love and care we yearn for and need?”

The third temptation Jesus is presented with is that he is taken to a high mountain and offered all the kingdoms of the world if he worships Satan. This temptation being one of the most challenging faced by humans: the desire for and the allure of power, wealth, and prestige. Which ultimately points to a fundamental question of one’s purpose and direction in life. What is truly important, what truly motivates our life and our actions? At its simplest, raising the issue of priorities. Who or what do we, or who do we want, to serve? Who or what will we allow to have dominion over our life and all we do? To which Jesus responds, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Making a clear declaration of the true source of power. Making a clear declaration regarding who is the only one worthy of our service. Regarding identity and purpose, the broader question that arises is “Where do we find the true power and purpose we are willing to serve?”

To recap: Jesus’ time of being tempted in the wilderness, and ultimately, our own Lenten journey, can be summarized in three fundamental questions regarding our identity and purpose, and how we live into and out of that identity and purpose:

- Where do we find the strength and nourishment we need?
- Where do we find the love and care we yearn for and need?
- Where do we find the true power and purpose we are willing to serve?

You will notice that each of the temptations and each of the questions arising all ultimately focus on trust and reliance. Who are we willing to trust and who are we going to rely on? Ourselves? Someone or something else? Or God?

Being that these questions arise out of Jesus’ being tempted in the wilderness, being that we find ourselves at the beginning of Lent, the answer to each question is—or rather, should be—obvious. And yet, that is the ongoing struggle and temptation we face, in our Lenten journey and our day-to-day life. We know the right answer. Actually choosing to embrace the right answer, living according to the right answer, is the challenge. If it was a challenge for Jesus, that he spent forty days struggling and trying to figure it all out, we are certainly going to struggle.

But that is what this Lenten journey, what this quest we are beginning, is all about. Faithfully struggling with questions of our identity, with questions of our purpose. Because while we may be given the answer in Scripture, in the example of Jesus, it is only when we do the hard work, when we willingly engage in the struggle, are we strengthened and nourished, do we experience the love and care of our Lord, and do we experience for ourselves the true power and purpose of our lives. Only when we embark on the Lenten quest, complete with trials and temptations, guided by Jesus and the Spirit, will we be transformed, ready to more fully enter into the joy of Easter that awaits us.

Blessings on your Lenten quest.