

Jesus in the Wilderness

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Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVUE)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ‘saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Lent is a season that invites us on a journey. We journey inward, growing spiritually through prayer, fasting, self-denial, and meditating on God’s Word. Those disciplines lead us to journey outward. Prayer shifts our focus toward others. Fasting reduces not only our consumption, but often our spending, resources we can allocate to supporting those in need. When we study the Bible with intentionality and an open mind, we discover more about God, but also about ourselves and the world around us.

The journey may take us to the mountaintop of oneness with God, to a garden of greater understanding and fruitfulness, to a fountain of self-discovery. But, more often than not, at least for a time, the journey leads us to the wilderness. In the wilderness, we face uncertainty, temptation, spiritual hunger and thirst. But the wilderness is important, because it is in the wilderness that we plumb the depth of our souls, discover how completely we depend on God, and find the resilience to continue on the journey.

We find ourselves in the wilderness a lot these days. We are disoriented from living in a chaotic society; the institutions and norms we rely on are being dismantled at an alarming rate. We struggle with identity; principles, commitments, and loyalties are no longer as clear as they once were. Many of us are experiencing significant changes in our health, our families, our workplaces, or our financial lives. (Even in our church; the sanctuary that has been as a place of respite and a spiritual anchor for many cannot accommodate us for a time, and we may find ourselves in an Exodus experience of sorts.) In some facet of our lives, we all find ourselves on a wilderness journey, though it may not yet be clear where that journey is taking us.

Throughout this season, we will trace the journey of God's people in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, considering some of the ways the Exodus experience tested their faith and exposed their weaknesses, while also deeply forming their identity as a people. By considering their experience, we hope to better understand our own.

But first, because this is the beginning of the Christian season of Lent, let's consider Jesus's own wilderness experience. The very first verse of our lesson for today tells us that "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil." Think about that for a moment. Jesus didn't *happen* to end up in the wilderness. He didn't *choose* to go to the wilderness. He was *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness. And the Spirit didn't just lead him to a remote place. The Spirit led him there *to be tested by the devil*. That suggests that there is something about the wilderness journey and facing temptation that was formative and necessary for Jesus before he began his ministry.

The gospel writers tell us almost nothing about what Jesus did for most of his time in the wilderness. We know that he fasted – he went without food – for a very long time. About the rest we can only speculate. Did he spend his time in meditation and prayer? Was he learning to be more deeply in touch with his divine nature? Did he strengthen his body and his will for the challenges he would face over the course of his ministry? We do not know. Perhaps that time can only be understood by one who is uniquely and intimately united with God.

In any case, after forty days and forty nights, which is the biblical way of saying *a long time*, Jesus engaged in the spiritual warfare for which the Spirit had led him into the wilderness. The devil appeared, literally or figuratively, to tempt him. These were not the sort of ordinary temptations we face, like a piece of chocolate cake or another episode on Netflix; not even the more serious kinds of temptations like being untruthful, selfish, or unfaithful. The temptations Jesus faced were not in reach for us. Only the Son of God could be tempted by them.

"If you truly are the Son of God, command these stones to turn into bread." Some commentators note that the sentence structure of the Greek implies that this is not really a question, but an acknowledgement of fact. This suggests that what the devil actually said was more like, "You *are* the Son of God, aren't you? If so, turn these stones into bread." In other words, "Prove that you are who you think you are." At the root of each temptation was an attempt to sow doubt in Jesus's mind and get him to abandon his identity and his purpose.

Remember, Jesus had been fasting for a very long time. He was incredibly hungry. Turning stones to bread would provide instant relief to that condition. But it would also circumvent the point of fasting in the first place. And it would suspend the laws of nature – which Jesus certainly *could* do...for personal gain – which he most certainly would *not* do. The devil was trying to get Jesus to deny his human nature, to use his divine power to overcome the human experience of hunger. But that would defeat the purpose of the incarnation in the first place. And while it might be only a relatively minor breach at this point, escaping human suffering would have much greater implications later in his ministry. "It is written, 'No one shall live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Having failed in the first attempt, the devil transported Jesus to the top of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," (with the same implication as before), "throw yourself down from here. Angels will save you." This time, the devil tried to legitimize his temptation by quoting from Psalm 91: "For he will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." But the devil was engaging in scriptural malpractice. He may have known the scripture,

but he quoted it out of context. Jesus corrected him, “It is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

As in the first temptation, the devil attempted to get Jesus to deny the laws of physics and the human consequences for recklessness. To use his position as the Son of God to manipulate angels into saving him would be to grasp immortality. If Jesus could not die, as any person would if they leaped off the top of the temple, then he would cease to be completely human. Again, this would have even greater implications later – for him and for us.

Finally, the devil took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain from where he could see all the kingdoms of the world. “I will give you power over all of these kingdoms if you bow down and worship me.” Honestly, this was a pretty poor attempt by the devil. As the Son of God, Jesus *already had* authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But the devil still wanted to sow doubt in Jesus’s mind. *Do you really believe you are the Son of God? If you won’t prove it, how can you be sure? Why go through all of this to try to win humanity over to you? What if you’re wrong? Or what if you go through all of this and they still refuse to follow you? Take a shortcut. Forget about being the Son of God. I can get you what you want without the suffering, the pain, the death. Trust me.*

Jesus resisted. “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God only.’ I will *never* worship you.” Though he knew the path that was set before him, though he knew what it would cost him, Jesus would not divert from his course. He refused to put himself first. He would not take the easy way. He remained faithful to his identity, his calling, his purpose.

The devil tried to get Jesus to prove that he was the Son of God by falling for his tricks. But God’s nature is not revealed through coercive power. That may be how the world works, or how the powers of evil *want* it to work, but that is not how God works.

Jesus’s time in the wilderness prepared him for his ministry and his ultimate mission. It is a critical moment that reveals his faithfulness and resolve. It reminds us that he did not have to do what he did, yet he did it anyway – for you, for me, for all of us.

While we will not face the temptation to turn stones into bread, to have angels swoop in to save us, or to sell our souls for power over the world, we do face temptation. And Jesus’s faithfulness can help us be more faithful, too. The temptations weren’t actually about bread or defying gravity or about leadership. They were about who has control – over human need, human limitations, human power. But at a more foundational level, they were about identity. *You are the son of God, aren’t you?* Had Jesus given into the devil’s temptations, he wouldn’t have proven that he was the Son of God. He would have done just the opposite. He would have *denied* his identity as the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the world. There would be no crucifixion, but there would be no resurrection, either...and no salvation.

Our temptations look different. *Who’s going to know? I’m not really hurting anyone. It’s only this one time.* But each temptation is, at a foundational level, a temptation to deny our God-given identity. Temptation not only tries to get us to deny our identity; it tries to replace it with another one. Driven by societal expectations of output and performance, we start to think of our jobs or our roles as our identity. Drawn to accolades or pleasure, we can try to derive identity from our interests. Years of belittling comments or negative self-talk can leave us with a distorted sense of identity that we do not belong, that we are not good enough, or that we are unlovable. Some of us compensate for poor self-image by projecting confidence we do not really feel, constructing an identity that allows us, at least for a while, to protect our hearts or our egos from the deep insecurity we feel.

But our true identity does not come from our jobs or our relationships or our activities or other people's opinions or even our choices. Our deepest identity was established from the very beginning, before we were even born, a gift of our wise and loving Creator. Each one of us is a beloved child of God – beloved simply because God says we are. Each one of us is created *on* purpose and *for* a purpose – to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. To deny that identity – or even to ignore it – can harm ourselves or others.

We face forces daily that draw us away from that God-given identity, either because those who use them want us to forget who we are or because they are insecure in their own identity. And often, those forces profit in some way from making us value ourselves less than we should, less than God does. Some might call those forces the work of the devil. Others call them by other names: *envy, greed, lust, selfishness, denial, sin*. But you don't have to listen to those voices. The truth is not in them. Focus on the voice of God, who calls to us still: *You are my beloved. I will always love you, no matter what. And what I want, all I have ever wanted, is what is best for you.*

We may not be tempted by unlimited sustenance, immortality, or ultimate power – and I pray we are not. But we are all tempted to deny who we are, who God made us to be. In this season together, let us remind ourselves and one another who God says we are. We can stand firm in God's love through the faithfulness of Christ, who would not deny his identity and his mission – to give everything that we might have life. Let us find strength in him to stay true to our identity and our calling. Amen.



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