

## First Sunday in Lent - A (2026)

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I mentioned on Wednesday during our morning and noon Ash Wednesday services, the Book of Common Prayer *invites* us to observe a *holy* Lent by self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. This is an invitation to journey on and through holy ground, to spend intentional time, as Rev Margaret Rose writes, “to be drawn into the very heart of God...*to return to our very beginning, our essential selves, created from the dust of the earth...*” The brilliant Christian apologist, theologian, writer, and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Beyond Words*, “During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another *what it means to be themselves.*”

During this season of reflection and truth-telling, we are challenged to be honest with ourselves, not out of fear but in joyful hope that the truth we encounter about ourselves and our relationship with God will lead us to see ourselves as God sees us. We must ask ourselves the tough questions about our motivations, aspirations, choices, and whether we’re working towards God or away from God. Buechner concludes, “*To hear yourself try and answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become.*” This holy journey can be sobering and liberating if we accept its invitation and engage with opportunities for real growth and learning.

Matthew tells us that Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where, for forty days, he was tempted by the devil. I am confident that it should not come as any surprise that while researching the word ‘temptation,’

virtually all of the images of temptation on the internet had religious themes. Pictures of a devil and angel on opposite shoulders, both trying to get the listener's attention; an apple dangling from a tree with Eve standing nearby; and one other image of a female hand holding an apple with a snake appearing from the top of the photo. These photos obviously reflect a major theme in Christian thought, that the forces of evil, reflected in the image of a devil or snake, are constantly at work in the world to redirect us from the ways of God. Unfortunately, Satan is very good at what he does, and the battle continues to rage in our world today. Just look at all the division, rancor, jealousy, and power struggles that sow seeds of discontentment, all courtesy of the great deceiver, the great divider, the evil one. (Temptation comes from the devil, and testing comes from God).

Matthew tells us that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, and Jesus had nothing to eat. Think of it: continually being tempted and tormented daily, the culmination we heard in today's gospel reading. Think of the continual assault against him physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Forty days of nonstop duress to try and disorient Jesus, to reorient him to the ways of Satan, away from the ways of God.

Satan was using this wilderness time to soften him up, to see what he was 'made of.' Matthew reminds us that Jesus, "filled with the Spirit," was *led* into this time of trial. Despite having been led there, the Spirit did not leave him there. What a great reminder for the rest of us as we face our own struggles with temptation, testing, or challenging circumstances: the Spirit is never absent.

After repeated assaults, no nourishment, and exhaustion from hot days, cold nights, and forbidding landscape, Satan assumes Jesus is ready for the big three temptations: for relief from hunger, for instant dominion or authority in exchange for worship and allegiance, and to call upon the angels of heaven for protection. Each time Satan suggests to Jesus that maybe he's really not who he says he is by his constant inquiry of "If you are the Son of God...." In other words, "Prove it," says the devil. Use the power that the Son of God holds and turn stones to bread, take the authority of dominion to immediately rule the world, and show and amaze the crowds how you can summon the angels of heaven to keep you from hurting, if not killing, yourself by leaping from the top of the temple. Each time the devil

goads Jesus and asks for proof, Jesus correctly uses scripture to rebuff the devil's invitation. Jesus knows his true identity as the Son of God. He knows from whence he came. Both Satan and Jesus know of what Jesus is "made of."

Matthew concludes his account with the words, "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him." Honestly, I prefer Luke's ending, "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*" The temptations will continue. The ongoing struggle for a change in identity and allegiance will continue. The ongoing challenge is whether to choose the shortcuts in life, the ways of the devil, versus those of lasting value, the ways of God. The Garden of Gethsemane, the trials, the flogging, the insults, and the cross await. Opportunities to change the course of human history, to which Jesus responds, "not my will, Father, but yours".

One of my favorite lines from C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* is, "*Every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven; that is, it is joy, peace, knowledge, and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.*" In a similar vein, Moses told the people before entering the Promised Land that they had the choice to choose life or death, as he exhorted them to choose life. Jesus had choices to make, and because he was always seeking to be in harmony with his Father, he made choices that turned toward heaven. We also have choices that either turn toward things of God or toward things of the world. Lent is the perfect time to reexamine these life-altering choices that face us.

As we begin our collective and individual journeys through Lent, we're asked to examine what we are made of. These next 6 weeks, we are invited to pray, fast, meditate, study scripture, and seek and affirm "who we are" and to whom we are in

allegiance. We are charged to review the choices we've made and prepare for those that lie ahead. We are to ask the hard questions of ourselves that can help us remove the masks we wear that hide our authentic selves. We are to use this time of self-examination to draw closer to the heart of God. This journey allows us to affirm the way we choose to live and to make changes in our lives where we find ourselves coming up short. We need not hide from our Heavenly Father, who calls us his children. Our identities are forged with this relationship. The challenge is to live as the people God knows we can be because we are made of the "right stuff." As Rev. Baudelina mentioned in her Ash Wednesday homily, this process is undertaken day by day, hour by hour, even minute by minute, one choice at a time.

Lent helps us create a sacred space for this search to embrace our true and authentic selves as beloved children of God. The Spirit led Jesus, not just in but through the wilderness, and the Spirit joins us on this journey of seeking and finding. Easter will be different because of what we're about to go through. Jesus has shown us the way....let us follow in his steps.