

Sermon: First Sunday in Lent, Year A
Matthew 4:1–11
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Today we are celebrating the first Sunday in Lent, which started on Ash Wednesday.

Lent, in our liturgical tradition, is clearly designed as a time of preparation.

The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of Jesus' passion and resurrection.

Over time, the Church developed the custom of preparing for these holy days with a special season focused on repentance and fasting. Lent became a time not only for personal reflection and renewal, but also for preparing new believers for Holy Baptism, as we saw in the liturgy of Ash Wednesday. Lent reflects the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted.

In the Gospel we heard today, we see the beginning of Jesus' preparation for his great mission.

What is interesting here is that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

But for what, we may ask? Was not Jesus the Son of God? Did he really need to be put to the test? To be tempted?

The Gospel account tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. So, we can assume that the only reason the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness was to intentionally put Jesus to the test.

But what is temptation, we may ask? The dictionary defines temptation as the "incitement of desire," and yes, this definition is to some extent accurate when we see literally thousands of advertisements on TV, radio, and the Internet trying to "incite our desires."

So, to be tempted by anything, as we understand now, it has to be something we recognize as not being good for us. Right?

Not many of us would say that we are tempted by vegetables—by spinach, tomatoes, or lettuce, right? Not many of us would say that we are tempted by exercise...

The interesting point here is that whatever tempts us or "incites our desires" can have a downside if we don't maintain balance.

Just for example, milk chocolate is high in saturated fat—a type of fat that may increase your risk of heart disease (just read the nutrition facts on any package). Red meat in excess is also bad for our arteries.

That's the downside—the negative aspect of simply giving in to our desires. And we have many examples like this.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the original word used in *Koine* Greek for “temptation” is *peirazomenos*, and it carries a different meaning or connotation from the one we often give it today. As I mentioned before, we usually use the word “temptation” to refer to things that “incite our desires.”

However, the original meaning is slightly different. The word used in this passage, *peirazō*, more literally means “to put to the test.”

In this case, “to put to the test” is in the sense of revealing whether someone or something is strong enough to endure a challenge. In this sense, Jesus is not being tempted, but tested.

But we can ask ourselves: what kind of test was Jesus put through?

The answer is simple: the devil is testing the divinity of Jesus as the beloved Son in whom God is pleased. The devil tests Jesus right after his baptism in the Jordan River, when Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit.

The issue at hand is Jesus' identity as the Son of God. This is the focus of the temptation, and it is in this way that Jesus is repeatedly harassed and tested by the devil—to turn him into something different from what he was created to be, to be something other than the Son of God.

This identity of Jesus is emphasized when the devil repeatedly uses the conditional phrase, “*If you are the Son of God,*” which not only acknowledges Jesus' divinity but also seeks to exploit this identity to offer an alternative vision.

But Jesus, recognizing his identity, decides for himself what it means to be the Son of God.

In a sense, these temptations serve to clarify the implications of this identity as Jesus begins his ministry and resists the powers of the world—the great forces that keep people oppressed. These are the powers Jesus confronts throughout his ministry, and they ultimately lead him to the cross.

Yes, the Gospel writer understands the devil to be the leader of all forces at work in the world resisting God's kingdom, but the devil also has a role to play: he is the tester.

One biblical commentary points out that, for the Gospel writer, Satan or the devil is not the cartoonish figure we often imagine today, with horns and a pointed tail.

Instead, the name “the devil” is actually a job title.

The commentary continues: “Imagine a district attorney in that role—someone who investigates and accuses. Or imagine a building inspector. The job of the devil is to accuse, test for weaknesses, challenge, and determine whether things are as solid as they seem. The devil here has a very important role: he is testing to see if Jesus is as solid as he seems to be. This is an important inspection by the devil because Jesus has a very big job ahead of him.”

So, I wonder: what temptations or tests are you facing in your life right now?

I wonder what areas of your life need a careful and comprehensive examination?

You know what?

It is in the wilderness when we are tempted. It is in the wilderness when we are “put to the test.” Are we as solid as we seem to be?

And we are in the wilderness when our future feels frightening, when the path ahead is unknown, when our plans have failed, when hope feels lost, when life seems meaningless, or when we are alone and ready to give up.

Temptation is a universal human experience. If Jesus had not been tempted, if Jesus had not been put to the test, he would not have been proven to be truly human.

But the Good News speaks of a God who is always with us, even in the worst and most desolate wilderness. The Spirit that accompanied Jesus when he was tempted is with us and will never leave us alone in the worst of our temptations. We are not alone.

I have on my bulletin board a little quote that says:

“Trials, temptations, disappointments... all of these are helps instead of obstacles if one uses them rightly. They not only test the fiber of our character but strengthen it. Every conquered temptation represents a new fund of moral energy. Every trial endured in the right spirit makes a soul nobler and stronger than it was before.”

So, I invite you, therefore, to the holy observance of Lent. Be ready to overcome any test that crosses your path and prepare yourself for an encounter with God.

You know, our identity as children of God is based on our union with Christ. This is the inner and spiritual grace we receive in baptism.

Each time we renew our baptismal vows, we commit ourselves to resist evil, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through our words and example, to seek and serve Christ in all people, to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

May this promise be an invitation to follow Jesus' example in our actions—who, even when tested like all of us, never gave in to temptation.

May this promise also be an invitation for us to emerge, after every trial, faithful and strengthened in our identity with Christ, which is being in union and communion with God.

AMEN

A note from the preacher:

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.