



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 1, 2020  
GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7; PSALM 32; ROMANS 5:12-19; MATTHEW 4:1-11

## TEMPTATION

**Matthew 4:1-11** [*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,*

*'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"]

*Then 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.'*"]

*Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

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

This was not an easy week. News of the coronavirus and the potential harm for vulnerable populations is scary to people around the world. Leaders of all stripes – business, political, religious, and family – endeavor to become informed about the risk and decide how to best protect and care for the people they lead. This weighs heavily on many, especially as we seek to care for those whose health is already fragile.

And then we have the financial markets. They are meant to be efficient, factoring in economic expectations, but it's difficult to know for sure the impact of containing the virus. So computers are humming with statistical models for business slowdown and the uncertainty feeds on itself. We saw the biggest drop in 12 years, which brings its own anxiety about jobs and livelihood.

It has not been an easy week. We have seen our political leaders of diverse ideologies and party affiliations attacking each other with hyperbolic language and accusations of bad will. We ask ourselves, “Whom can we trust?” “How will these divisions be healed?”

In the midst of this, we entered the season of Lent. On Wednesday, we received ashes on our foreheads, hearing, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Octogenarians, boomers, millennials, teenagers, and babies. Everyone was summoned to the reality that our lives are bounded – there is a beginning and an end, both of which are outside of our control. This week offered plenty to stir up emotions.

We begin Lent, these 40 days (not counting Sundays) of self-reflection and repentance, and we are in a place of palpable concern and anxiety for the future. That is our context this year.

When we recited the Great Litany at the beginning of this service, we join in a practice that dates back 1600 years. When people would gather to repeat their prayers, confessions, their supplications while processing in the church or through the streets of their town, and it happened often in the church year, but especially in Lent.

The language can be jarring as we confess our brokenness – our hypocrisy, envy and malice. It is sobering to name systems of evil and dangers beyond our control. Again and again, we beseech God, we ask God to hear us: give wisdom to our leaders, comfort those who suffer, strengthen our will to care for the earth and all creatures. As we begin this journey of Lent, we begin by exposing layer upon layer of need and vulnerability – and we open that to God and to each other.

Our gospel story today is the same story we hear on the first Sunday of Lent every year – the story of Jesus’ journey into the wilderness and the desert of Judea.

“The desert is a dangerous place. It is always moving, so it is hard to know where you are.” That’s how when our children gather for Godly Play and the story is one of the Bible stories that takes place in the desert. That’s how all those stories begin. The desert is a dangerous place. “In the daytime it is hot... and in the night it is cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings you... There is little water, so you get thirsty... and there is almost nothing to eat. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go into the desert unless they have to.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I was reminded of this Godly Play approach by The Rev. Kate McDonald’s blog ([imaginationofpeace.com](http://imaginationofpeace.com)) this week.

*Jesus* goes into the desert, though, immediately after his baptism where the Spirit of God descended upon him and named him as “God’s own beloved son.” This same Spirit then journeys with him into the wilderness, where he spends forty days, fasting and doing his own self-reflection.

If you’ve ever been on a silent retreat or a solo hike, you know that so much time alone in the quiet can be initially disorienting. The hours stretch out in the silence and irksome habits of mind rush to the forefront to review old wounds and to give reign to worries and fears about the future.

So when we are told that Jesus, famished with fasting, encounters Satan, I don’t imagine a red figure with horns and a pointy tail – the caricature devil. Satan also means the tempter – God’s adversary – an energy that draws one away from the knowledge and love of God and makes a person believe they are all in this own, trapped in a losing battle. That repetition of “I can’t;” “I’m not;” “I never will be.”

This tempter gets Jesus’ attention three times. “You’re starving. It’s unbearable and no one but you can fix it.” “You’re not really God’s child. You’ll have to prove it.” “You’re helpless against the wealth and power of the world; trust me and you’ll have it all.”

And three times, Jesus responds to this tempter. Maybe it was immediate or maybe it took a while. We don’t know how long it took for Jesus to wrestle with the lies of the adversary. We do know that he answers clearly: “My hunger is for God, and I turn to him.” “God is faithful and can be trusted.” “I will only worship and follow God.”

Do you hear this three-fold pattern of renunciation of temptation or evil and affirmation and turning to God? It is what every candidate for baptism has done since the very early church; it is the beginning of the baptismal rite. In these renunciations and affirmations that we make in the baptismal rite are rooted in this story of Jesus’ time in the desert, his time in the wilderness.

So that means that when we find ourselves in the desert, when we find ourselves in the hard places in life where we did not chose to go, where necessity or hardship took us where our habits of mind can get stuck in fear and worry, we know that Jesus has been there, too.

This particular time in our country requires us to stay grounded in our faith, the knowledge that God’s love and grace are limitless, that God is faithful. As people of faith, we offer a steadfast word of hope, serving our brothers and sisters with calm confidence that, with God’s help, and with

the strength and gifts of all people of all faiths, we can safely journey through the wilderness, receiving the help of angels and offering it ourselves.

So, this Lent, as we are invited to fully observation of self-reflection, and penitence, and prayer, and meditation, there is a particular invitation in this time. Let's notice what it is that tempts us, what draws us as individuals and as a community – away from the knowledge and love of God and toward that place of doubt and fear. What is it?

For some, it might be the steady diet of negative media that feeds the temptations of cynicism and fatalism. We find ourselves railing about “the other side” or discount the value of our vote. For others, that temptation

could be the habit of worrying over our own futures, that churning, and while we are worrying about our own future, we miss the present and real need of our neighbors. Which we could help relieve. For others, the temptation might be the way we cope with anxiety. Numbing with alcohol, or screen time, you know.

There are so many temptations. Our invitation this Lent is to pay attention – where does that work in my life? And when I notice it, and we noticed it, we renounce them. We stay away from them and we turn to God.

Because the Spirit is already with us, leading us through the wilderness.

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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