

**SLD02.13.05 First Lent**  
**Matthew 4:1- 11**  
**EPC**  
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### **“How Tempting...”**

On this first Sunday of Lent, lectionary places us with Jesus in the middle of the wilderness. This seems appropriate since for those who take it seriously, Lent can be a kind of wilderness. A kind of wilderness of the soul, if you will. That is, for those who slow down enough to examine their soul. Or even to remember they have one.

I don't mean to be glib. It's just that we're busy people. I'm a busy person. And the examination of one's soul, or heart, or faith, in relation to self and God, takes time. Quiet time. Still time. Time bracketed for silence and honesty and courage and endurance. And it takes a certain patience, to, to put up with the wilderness presented by such an examination.

Because, you know, for most of us, even if we *make* the time to sit quietly for self-reflection and communing with God, we find ourselves restless, squirmy, uncomfortable, plagued by random itches and unwelcome thoughts...like deadlines or grocery lists, or carpool schedules ...stuff like that. The Buddhists call it 'monkey mind.' I call it 'the wilderness.' Because there's no rest in it, no peace, no grounding, no refreshment.

Take the time to be still and wait on God and you'll find out – it can be exasperating! I'm telling you - it's a wilderness in here. (head) And in here, too. (heart) And truth is, most of us aren't cut out for wilderness experiences, of either the exterior

or the interior variety. We're just not equipped for them. So Lent or not, it's pretty tempting just not to fool with it.

Jesus, on the other hand, is apparently not given the choice of whether or not he wanted to fool with the wilderness. You see, after his baptism by John, he is full of the Holy Spirit, and the wilderness, you know, is the Holy Spirit's playground. Oh yeah, the Holy Spirit just *loves* the wilderness because that's where she's feels most free and most creative and has the most fun. (Just for kicks in this sermon I'm going to refer to both the Holy Spirit and the devil as female. Don't let it distract you.)

Anyway, a day in the wilderness is a field day to the Holy Spirit, when school's out, the banks are closed, and the Spirit gets to blow where she will without even the most casual regard for human rules, demands or expectations. Oh yes, all the wilderness is a stage for the Holy Spirit and her script percolates with creative chaos inexorably pointing toward the will of God.

So, given that when you're full of the Holy Spirit, the wilderness is flat where you're going to go, following his baptism by John, Jesus trots obediently to the wilderness. It's where he'll sort out who he is and what he's meant to be doing.

'Course, maybe Jesus gets that; maybe he doesn't. After all, he's got work to do – disciples to gather, stories to tell, people to heal, authorities to annoy. Might have been pretty tempting for him to postpone the wilderness gig for a more convenient hour. But the Holy Spirit is stubbornly uncompromising about her timing; when her number's up, so is yours. So it's off to the wilderness with Jesus.

Now, according to Matthew, Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days, and doesn't eat a thing. This alone is amazing to me. A couple days of silent retreat for me and I

start getting what I call the ‘spiritual munchies,’ which is the gastronomic equivalent of ‘monkey mind,’ and during which only chips, popcorn and kit kats will satisfy. But that Jesus is made of different stuff – 40 days of spiritual boot camp and according to scripture, nothing whatsoever passes his lips.

So the first temptation dangled before Jesus’ famished eyes hardly comes as a surprise, does it. It’s food, of course. But not just any food. Satanically well-chosen, it’s *comfort* food. Carbohydrates. Bread. Homemade. Still warm. Sitting next to a slab of butter. Scripture doesn’t mention the butter but you and I both know how Satan works – there had to be butter. Freshly churned. Soft. Ready to be spread on that warm aromatic bread.

Now I call that mean.

But Jesus, upon hearing the devil’s ‘stone for bread’ option, trumps her by shifting the debate from what will give mouth-watering life in the moment to the Source of Life itself. “It is written,” says he, that “Man shall not live by bread alone but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.” Never mind warm, buttered homemade bread after 40 days of fasting, Jesus would rather quote Moses from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3b) than have any part of what proceeds from the mouth of the devil.

Seeing the way to Jesus’ heart is clearly not through his stomach, the devil moves to Plan B, laying before Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, all the powers and principalities of his day, all the board rooms and governing chambers, the political pundits and military might, all the skyscrapers and tall steeples and sports arenas and

palatial mansions and says, “Look at that, Jesus. It’s all yours. Whaddaya say? All you have to do is worship me.”

Once again Jesus, student of scripture, rabbi, teacher of prophets, responds with words from Moses (Deut. 6): “You shall worship the Lord your God, and God alone shall you serve.”

“Darn!” snaps the devil. “Can’t hook with him carbs; can’t hook him with power. What else have I got? I know. How ‘bout personal security – that’s a good one. Avoiding harm is big business these days - security alarms, gated communities, personal firearms, Homeland Security.... And why not? Nobody likes to get hurt. What’s more, I know *just* how to go about, too – Jesus ain’t the *only* authority on scripture around here.

‘Hey, Jesus! Ya wanna quote scripture? How ‘bout this one? Says right here in Psalm 91:11-12 that God puts angels in charge of you, to guard you and bear you up...look here...’lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ Isn’t that sweet? Scripture says God takes care of you, Jesus, so how ‘bout it? Wanna test it out? How ‘bout you throw yourself off this temple roof here and let’s see how reliable holy scripture is. Whaddaya say.”

Oooh, now that had to be tempting. I mean, just one measly jump from the temple roof to shut this joker up. Hec, *I’m* wanting Jesus to go for it, just to wipe that smug look off her face! Besides, what’s to lose?

Well, apparently a lot, because Jesus will not do it. Will not bite the bait, grab the ring, flip the coin; will not leverage God’s power on the devil’s, or anyone else’s schedule. But, oh, it had to be tempting to offer the devil some proof positive of his

divinity – I mean, even us believers are forever looking for it.... And what could have been more satisfying than proving the devil wrong and shutting her up once and for all?

But then again, maybe the devil wouldn't have been surprised at all if Jesus had chosen to jump. Maybe she would have had "I told you so" written all over her face. After all, what was she up to but shifting Jesus' motivation, un-grounding him, making him rise, or in this case, fly, to the occasion, by crafting of scripture an instrument of her manipulation?

"You're the Son of God? Prove it!  
You believe in scripture? Prove it!  
You trust in God? Prove it!"

How tempting it must have been to do just that! But once again the Holy Spirit guided him to reach back to the words of Moses who said simply – "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." (Dt. 6:16)

How well Jesus knows that God is not a puppet who performs on request. Indeed, our God is not 'ours' at all, in any sense that we can possess, manage or domesticate God with our desires or demands. Moses taught this, Jesus knows it, and tempting or not, he's just not going there.

A couple months ago I had a fellow to stop by my office. Just drop in out of nowhere and demand my attention. And he wanted it *now*. Truth was, he was desperate. At the end of his rope. A physical, spiritual, existential mess. And he was looking for the church to save him. *Now*.

You see, his aunt had sent him some scripture passages to read and pray over and he wanted to know where to find them. "Show me where they are," he demanded.

And tell me what they mean! I'm not a religious man," he said, I'm an atheist. But my life is crap. If I believe in God, will things work out better?"

Now *that* was tempting. I *really* wanted to say 'yes,' but it didn't for Jesus, did it?

So I just showed the man how to find the passages his aunt sent him, prayed with him, and sent him on his way, with an invitation to join us for worship that evening. "But," he whined, "I'll just go home and be lonely and depressed!" What I heard was "if you're the pastor, why can't you save me!" And what could be more tempting to a pastor? But, I thought to myself, I'm not in the saving business. God accomplished that through Jesus Christ a long time ago. And Jesus said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

I tell you, it's a wilderness out there. In here, too. (sanctuary) And in here (heart.) During the Lenten season we are invited us to see the wilderness that surrounds and permeates our lives, and dare to abide in it a little each day, in the presence of God. I know we're busy people, but we're followers of Jesus Christ, too, and like him, it's in the wilderness where we sort out who we are and what we're meant to be doing.

My prayer for all of here at Emory Church is that during this season of reflection and self-examination we'll slow down enough not only to enter the wilderness, but to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit there. And that we'll be granted the patience, courage and perseverance to endure with grace whatever God, and the devil, put before us.

And now, a moment of shared reflection. We're busy people so let's take a moment right now, during worship, at the end of this sermon, to examine ourselves before God, with Jesus help. I'm going to lead you in a very brief guided meditation so

make yourselves comfortable, feet on the floor, eyes closed, and take a deep breath.

Now take another breath.

Imagine Jesus taking you by the hand and leading you on a tour of yourself.

He leads you to your mind, and together you notice what belongs there, and what does not.

Then you journey together to the chamber of your heart and take a look around. Through the clear gaze of loving eyes, you observe together what belongs here, and what does not.

Finally, Jesus leads you by the hand into your soul, the seat of your deepest communion with God, and there you sit, together. Everything belongs here. You rest. And listen.

To the glory of God. Amen.