

2.22.2026 Lent 1

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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

“Times of wilderness, times of testing”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today must be the First Sunday in Lent because the gospel text is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Now I’m aware that some people might say, “Well, of course, Jesus withstood temptation and testing. He is, after all, the Son of God.” Yet to understand Jesus’ temptation, and its relevance for us, we must see Jesus being tested in our humanity. Seeing Jesus tempted in our humanity is crucial for us because the same Holy Spirit that Jesus relied upon has also been given to us in Holy Baptism.

The temptation of Jesus teaches us there are two sovereign kingdoms in this world: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. To be a human being is to journey in the wilderness, daily seeing a battle between God and evil, between grace and sin. However, since the Enlightenment, human beings have increasingly been tempted to live without God. Since the Enlightenment, we tell ourselves that with enough time and money, human beings will be able to eradicate the evil within the world and within ourselves. In other words, we lie to ourselves about the severity of evil in world, in its systems, and in us.

As modern people, we live with a very optimistic view of ourselves, that our rationality and intellect will be able to overcome the evils and unfair systems we find ourselves in. In contrast, today’s gospel reminds us that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil are two very real realms that we encounter daily. For today’s gospel to make any sense, we must see Jesus tempted in our humanity as he relies upon the Holy Spirit given to him at his baptism.

Yet I can hear the question, “But Jesus was the Son of God, why did he need the Holy Spirit?” The eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us to restore our humanity to us – to show us what our humanity is truly capable of. In Holy Baptism, we have each received the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus. The Spirit is given to us precisely to lead us as we also encounter times of wilderness and times of testing.

Jesus’ temptation is very human. Jesus experienced physical hunger and loneliness. As human beings we know a lot about hunger and loneliness. Hunger tempts us to fill our stomachs while loneliness tempts us to fill our lives with material things, or worse, addictions to all manner of things. Perhaps it is helpful as you think about Jesus’ three temptations to ask yourself, “What recurring temptations do I struggle with?” Satan is a furious opponent and no matter what life-chapter you are in, you will never stop facing times of wilderness and times of testing. Let’s look at Jesus’ three temptations.

Jesus' first temptation. After fasting for forty days and nights, Matthew tells us that Jesus was famished. The word translated as "famished" means to crave food in an absolute sense. Though it is not expressly written, I have always imagined that Jesus spent those forty days fasting in prayer and solitude with God. No one can truly fast without prayer.

When I was in high school, I remember fasting each Wednesday during Lent for a full 24 hours. I did this with friends on the track team and had others to encourage me. I was not alone. I attended a Jesuit boy's school and spent time in prayer in chapel. Of course we ran on the days we fasted, 10-15 miles. Imagine, however, increasing the length of the fast to 48 or to 72 hours. This is not the "fasting for bloodwork," fasting as you are fast-asleep, getting the earliest possible time at the doctor's office, so you can get to that cup of coffee and breakfast as soon as possible! Imagine those who fast daily because in their poverty they have nothing to eat – those for whom fasting is not a choice but a daily reality.

When Jesus broke the fast, he was famished and Satan the tempter was there saying, "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" But Jesus answered, "*It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*" If Jesus had yielded to this temptation, he would have become a celebrity – someone who could offer free food the hungry masses, or perhaps a noble social reformer. However, Jesus would have also never been able to say, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" Jesus' reply about not living by bread alone teaches us that God's word is the bread of life – that God will sustain us in times of wilderness and times of testing.

Jesus' second temptation. This temptation is much more subtle. The devil is saying, "Fine. Good. Just as I expected, Jesus. You *are* the Son of God." So "*if you are the Son of God...throw yourself down*", because I know you are the Beloved and God will let nothing happen to you." This is a form of testing we can each understand. It begins with the words, "*If you are...*" and then you fill in the blank. *If you are* "a good American"... *If you are* "a real man"... *If you are* "a great woman"... *If you are* "really smart, you'll..." You begin to get the idea. Satan is taunting or challenging Jesus, and us, in our humanity to make a display of ourselves, but not our true selves as children of God. The temptation is to prove your greatness not before God, but before others.

However, we don't choose greatness. True greatness is never chosen; it comes from humble sacrifice and service to others. Man or woman, American or otherwise, true greatness comes by living for others. If Jesus had chosen to throw himself down from the temple, he would have never been lifted upon the cross. Even on the cross, others taunted Jesus saying, "*He is*

*the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him*” (Mt. 27:42). True greatness comes from sacrificial love for others. Greatness is never taken; it is given to those who lift and serve others.

Jesus’ third temptation. The final temptation is the most terrifying of all. It is the temptation to power. The devil took Jesus to a high mountain with a view upon all the kingdoms and nations of the world, saying, “*All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.*” It is temptation to the ambition to power that is always crouching in the corner of our hearts. I imagine Satan saying to Jesus,

Yes, yes, ‘For God so loved the world’... Jesus, I can give you the world. I can give you power over all nations. It won’t take 1,000 or 2,000 years of your church’s constant suffering and sacrifice. I can give you and you followers the world in an instant.

The temptation is to self-centered power: power without service, power without love, power without compassion. It is a temptation to Jesus of imperialist and nationalist power. Jesus replied, “*Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’*” If Jesus had lived to serve himself, he would be unable to say, “*I am the way and the truth and the life.*” God would have never raised him from the tomb, and he would have never become the *Salvator mundi* – the Savior of the world.

What is important to notice about Satan and evil is that testing and temptation did not end for Jesus in the wilderness. It reoccurred as crowds pressed in upon him for healing, as religious leaders sought his death. We know this because Jesus took time away alone to pray. On the night he was betrayed, he was tempted in Gethsemane praying, “*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done*” (Luke 22:42).

Finally, after the devil left him, angels came to minister to Jesus. There is a reminder here that God sends grace to us in the wilderness. Angels may come in the form of strangers, family, or friends, people who help and strengthen you with God’s grace – with words of encouragement and prayer, notecards and texts, and even a meal delivered in times of testing.

Each of us faces times of wilderness and times of testing. We are tempted to fill our hunger, to display our greatness, to seek power over others. When these moments come, may we remember the grace of prayer. May we also say, “*not my will but yours be done.*”

Reliance upon God changes you. God’s grace changes you. Grace is the free gift of God you can rely upon in times of wilderness and times of testing.

During Lent, fast from the world, give of yourself for others, and spend time in prayer.

God’s grace will always help you, so that you can love and help others. Amen.