

Matthew 4:1-11

“Conversations in the wilderness”

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

The theme for this year’s Lenten Midweek Prayer is “Holy Conversations with Jesus.” Each week during Lent, we have an opportunity to reflect upon conversations with Jesus that take place in everyday settings of life.

In the coming weeks, we will see how the conversations recorded in the gospels are very much like our own daily conversations with Jesus, because amid temptations, we can find ourselves in the lonely wilderness of life. Like Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night, we may be unsettled by fears or doubts that take us to prayer with Jesus when we are unable to sleep. As Jesus met with the Samaritan woman by the well, he also joins our everyday conversations with others in public places. As Jesus encountered people along roadside, we also encounter him on our journeys in life on the roads we also travel. As Jesus encountered Mary and Martha at the tomb of their brother, we also meet him as we grieve at gravesides and in our own moments of dying. There is no place where we cannot call upon him. Lenten Prayer is a meaningful opportunity to reflect on how Jesus is present in our lives.

This week’s gospel reading takes place in the lonely wilderness. As the tempter came to Jesus, tailoring the temptations just for him, Satan also comes to us testing us in our loneliness and weakness. It could be in times of illness, financial hardship, loss of work, addiction and despair, where we are tempted to lose hope, or to acts of self-abuse or the abuse of others. In tonight’s reading, notice how evil makes the temptations sound seductively reasonable. The tempter tests Jesus to compromise with evil, a compromise that destroys trust in God.

What does it feel like to be in the wilderness of life? A friend once confessed to me that they felt adrift in life and didn’t know how to rechart their life compass. What this person was saying was that they were adrift personally and professionally. This reminds me of the haunting words a Pink Floyd song titled “Time.” Perhaps you know it: “And then one day, you find, ten years have got behind you. No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun.” When my friend confessed being adrift, it was a description of something that had happened slowly over time. We can find ourselves out to sea professionally, relationally, and spiritually, not knowing what is next for us in life. We find ourselves in the wilderness.

In the temptation of Jesus, what I find interesting is that the tempter tells Jesus in the most attractive way possible, “This is what is next for you. This is what will nourish your life for the days and time ahead.” The temptation to fill our basest appetites, to self-display and to

absolute power over others is addictive and destructive. Satan doesn't tempt you just once, he keeps returning to you in your weakness.

Social media, the internet, and even news feeds, can test and even seduce us into thinking that food, alcohol, purchases, political party affiliations, and even technology itself, can feed and satisfy us. As our world becomes ever more secular, we are tempted to feed ourselves in every way, except spiritually. As we lose sight of the God who sustains us, we become lost in the wilderness. How much time do you spend in prayer with God's word compared to the time you spend looking at screens as if they were windows into heaven?

All of us can recall scenes in movies in which someone is out on the ledge – the ledge of a building threatening to jump. Macabre voices from below shout, "Jump! Jump!" Jesus' temptation to jump represents the terrible impulse we may feel, that in jumping, we will both end our suffering and reveal to the world its cold-heartedness toward us. It's very clear to me that if Jesus had jumped from the pinnacle of the temple, it would not have ended in nothing other than suicide. Jesus was tempted in his humanity like we are in ours.

When I was working in Japan, I remember attending the funeral of a young woman who had committed suicide by jumping from the tenth floor of a building. Overwork in a work-oriented society without adequate professional support and mental health care are part of her story, and our own society shares this affliction of not always being able to help others in their suffering.

When Jesus replied, "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*" he was quoting Deuteronomy 6:16 about Israel's challenge to God at Massah in Exodus when they had no water. In other words, Israel doubted that God was with them in their suffering. If Jesus doubted God's presence and jumped, he would have died there and not on the Holy Cross that continues to save many in this world who are tempted in their suffering. When have you been tempted in your mortality to despair in God's presence?

I think about that young woman from time to time, wondering what she would be doing now if she had been able to share what was on her heart with others who could have offered her water in the wilderness – who could have been Jesus with her in her suffering. When have you been water in the wilderness for someone who needed your help?

Jesus' third temptation was to grasp after absolute power over the entire world. This temptation reminds us about Jesus' words that in gaining the whole world we also forfeit our souls (Mk. 8:36). What tempts you to power? What causes you to seek power over others, even hoping that our own nation might rule over other nations?

If Jesus had sought absolute power, he would have been lost forever in the wilderness with Satan. He would have been unable to lead others out of death and the many lonely places we

find ourselves in by leading us to newness of life. It occurs to me that the way to life and service among the kingdoms of this world is to gain independence from grasping after power. Jesus' answer, "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,*" reveals the freedom that comes from worship and service to God. If Jesus had gained the world through the help of evil, he would have never overcome the wilderness of division and strife among the kingdoms of this world. Letting go of power allows God's power to work in our lives.

There is a story about the Second World War that many of you may be unaware of. In 1941, with the clouds of war gathering over the U.S. and Japan, Lutheran missionaries made the unprecedented decision to turn over all the assets of land and institutions that the American church had worked for, into the hands of their Japanese brothers and sisters. Of course, the American Lutheran Church could have retained control over these assets, but they did not. They could have allowed their patriotism as Americans to cloud their faith in Christ's church overcoming the world – even a world at war – with love. So, they left everything, legally transferring the land and institutions into the name of the Japanese Lutheran church.

Decades later, I served as the board chairperson of the Lutheran organization that had held all those assets before the war. After the war, these assets were returned to that non-for-profit organization, and an American-Japanese partnership in mission for Christ began again and continues to this day. I am grateful for the model of those missionaries who trusted God amid temptations to power and control.

Gaining the world never comes by force or by compromise with evil. We might gain the world, but in the process, we forfeit our souls. Place your trust in Jesus. He is always with you in the wilderness. He will lead you amid times of temptation and testing.

Jesus says, "*In the world you will have trials; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world*" (Jn. 16:33). During Lent, turn to Jesus in your times of trial.

He is always with you. Jesus has overcome the world so that you might also help others in the wilderness. Amen.