

Matthew 4.1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

“ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said 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,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.’ ”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. ¹

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Mt 4:1–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Every year my sister and I go on an extended hike together. One of those hikes was a three-day, 30 mile hike through the southern New Mexico forests at around 9,000 feet above sea level. The final day we hiked 10 miles, losing 5,000 vertical feet, to the desert of the Tularosa Basin. The hike started out beautifully forested, but the trees quickly disappeared, replaced by pinon and flowers, until even those were gone... and we were hiking through scrub and cactus. The trail winds its way down through steep canyons. About seven miles into the day, as we entered Dog Canyon, the trail became increasingly dangerous: steep cliffs (that we lovingly named the 'Cliffs of Insanity') towered 30 or 40 feet above us on our left, with a sharp drop off, littered with cactus and rock, on our right. The trail itself had a 20 to 30 percent grade. And if that wasn't enough... it was covered in pea gravel. Slippery gravel. Rolling gravel. Gravel that threatened to grab our tired feet out from under us, and toss us over the cliff without a second thought. I have never feared for my life on a hike before, and I started to wonder if I was going to get to know the Search and Rescue team. I prayed for God's protection as we walked, and for God's grace.

Today's Gospel takes place in an area that is very similar to Dog Canyon. It is a desolate and inhospitable place. There are few plants: just cliffs and rocks and some scrub. It is a wilderness. It is important to note that any time scripture refers to 'wilderness', it will be a time of testing and trial. Indeed, the Greek word translated as 'tempted' in our text might be better understood as 'tested'. Jesus is led into the wilderness... into the desert... to be tested.

This passage follows the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus is identified as the beloved Son of God, in whom God is well pleased. And it is followed by the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, as he calls his disciples and begins to preach. This placement is not accidental: ministry is often preceded by a time of testing. Indeed, the larger the ministry, the greater the tests. This testing can be found throughout scripture: Abraham, Moses, David, Job, Joseph, Paul... all were tested. This testing is less about culling the unfit, and more about recognizing God's call and empowerment. This testing allows one to move forward... confident in one's own reliance on God's presence and grace.

You may be saying, "All well and good... but what does this have to do with me? I'm not called to ordination. I'm not called to be deacon or a priest!" But you *are* called to ministry. As followers of Jesus we are called to minister in his name. In the catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer on page 855 it asks, "Who are the ministers of the church?" and answers, "The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons." You are a minister! And in our baptismal covenant, we agree to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ", to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself", and to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being". We each are called to a very important ministry indeed. This ministry happens in our homes, our workplaces, and our communities. And just like Jesus, we can anticipate that there will be a time of testing.

Jesus prepares for his ministry – and for his testing – by fasting for 40 days and 40 nights. So we should anticipate that our own calls to ministry will require some preparation. In the church we call these 'spiritual disciplines', and they allow us to let go of what distracts us from God – be it food, or power, or attention, or Facebook – and take on what allows us to be more present before God. Disciplines of letting go include fasting, but they also include solitude, quietness, confession, thriftiness, self-denial, and sacrifice. Disciplines of presence before God include prayer, worship, Bible study, and even service. Lent has historically been a time when we prepare to grow in our ministries by taking on a spiritual discipline, and I suspect that is much of the reason that we hear this passage today, on the first Sunday of Lent. For 40 days, starting on Ash Wednesday (but not, incidentally, including Sundays) we are invited to take on spiritual disciplines as a way of growing in

our awareness and response to God's presence and call in our lives. For 40 days we walk in a mini wilderness, listening for God speaking to us. And for some of us, for 40 days, we will be tested.

By now, if you've spent much time with scripture, you should be hearing echoes of earlier passages: wilderness... 40 days (or years)... testing. The passage we hear today echoes the telling of the Israelites escaping from Egypt: they spend 40 years, wandering in the wilderness, being tested... and often failing those tests. This is hardly a coincidence. Indeed, the challenges that Jesus faces in the wilderness are the same challenges that the Israelites faced in their wanderings in the desert, and the same ones that we often face in our own wildernesses.

In the first test, Jesus is challenged to turn stones into bread. This challenge echoes Exodus 16, when the Israelites, just starting their 40 years of wandering in the desert, are hungry. God sends them quail and manna – a word that literally means “What is it?!” But the Israelites grow tired of the manna, and complain. It's not enough. They want more! They want to be filled... but on their terms. It is notable that Jesus, faced with hunger, not only does not succumb to using his power for self-fulfillment... he responds with the very words from Deuteronomy that God had given Moses for the Israelites: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus passes this test where the Israelites had failed.

It can be tempting to use our ministry for our own needs, our own fulfillment. It can be appealing to measure our self-worth by our accomplishments, both in the world and in ministry. But to do so is to define ourselves in the world's terms, not God's terms. To do so is to fail to see ourselves as God sees us: created by God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, called to ministry in and for the world.

In the second test, Jesus is challenged to throw himself off the temple and let God's angels catch him. The temple was on a high hill in Jerusalem, with the Kidron valley below. To throw himself off the temple without hurting himself would draw attention to Jesus. He would be a sensation and he would quickly gather a following. The Israelites had tested God in the wilderness at Massah, and Jesus puts right their earlier failure, quoting from the same passage in Deuteronomy: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In a culture that measures impact by Facebook friends and twitter followers, where ‘influence’ is bought and ‘Influencer’ is now a job title, how do we use our own power to gratify our egos? Our culture tells me that I need to sell my own ‘brand’... but scripture tells me that I must die to myself... and it is only in that dying that I live. It is only in that death of self-centeredness that I come fully alive.

In the final test, Jesus is challenged to worship Satan rather than God. Again, this is a test that the Israelites had failed in the desert, turning to worship of a golden calf instead of God. And again, Jesus puts right the Israelites' failure, quoting Deuteronomy: “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

We face this same challenge in our own lives and in our ministries: who do we worship? Louie Giglio says that we are created for worship, that we all worship something, and the question is only, “What will we worship?” For some it is fast cars. Some worship food. Others worship our sports and entertainment stars. Many in our country right now worship money and power. Who will we worship? Will we worship God? Will our ministries in our homes, our workplaces, and our communities bring glory to God? We worship God.

I find the progression of Jesus' tests fascinating: will he gratify himself? Will he become a cultural sensation? Will he worship Satan? These three tests sum up our spheres of relationships: our relationship with our own body and soul, our relationships with our families and friends, and our relationship with God. I think we all face these same questions around our selves, our community, and our God. In each of these spheres we can choose to act to gratify ourselves, or we can choose to act in accordance with the Holy Spirit.

Lent gives us the opportunity to ask these questions: Will we focus on self-fulfillment... or will we focus on God? Will we attempt to be the center of attention... or will we point to God? Will we worship the world... or will we worship God? Lent allows us to reflect on our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with God. Lent gives us the opportunity to be tested, and to learn that God will guide and guard us, support and sustain us.

I invite you to spend this Lent walking for 40 days in a mini-wilderness. I invite you to a testing... a challenge from God. I invite you to make room for God's presence: to listen for God... to hear God speaking to you. I invite you to let God prepare you for the ministries God is calling you to... wherever those may be. I invite you to a Holy Lent!