

Toward the Cross

The Third Week of Lent

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. ... And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Matthew 3:16-4:2

“What are you giving up for Lent?” I remember overhearing this question every year in the school cafeteria. Since I didn’t grow up in a tradition that recognized Lent, I always found the idea a little confusing. Why were people giving up things (usually sweets)? What was the point? It was only as an adult that I learned that refraining from something during Lent was meant to be a way to enter into Jesus’ suffering.



I have given things up for Lent. And while I can’t mentally equate skipping dessert with being tortured to death, I can see how our choice to suffer echoes Jesus’ choices. He chose not just the cross but a life of surrender as He moved toward the cross. After His baptism, Jesus gave up home, family, a “useful” career. He gave up stability and routine. He gave up physical comfort and safety. And He started out by going into the desert and giving up food for forty days.

The scripture says that *the Spirit* led Jesus into the wilderness. This wasn’t Jesus’ whim; it was by divine direction. The wilderness is a place of discomfort and vulnerability, a place of lack. By the end of His forty days, Jesus had to be tired, dirty, thirsty, and as noted in the text, hungry. Very hungry. So of course, that’s when Satan attacked.

Yet Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness mirrors the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness. When Satan suggested creating bread to tempt Jesus (who is, after all, both the Bread of Life and the Word of God) it’s appropriate that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8, referring to God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, saying, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”—the very God who sent Him into the wilderness to begin with.

What Satan didn’t bank on, what Satan never banks on, was that Jesus entered the wilderness from a place of being loved by the Father. No matter what Jesus *didn’t* have at the end of those forty days, He did have the absolute assurance of who He was. Jesus knew He could count on God’s love, not because of what He gave up but because of who He was: God’s beloved child.

That holds for us, too. No matter what desert we find ourselves in, no matter what temptations we face, the fact of our Father’s love can sustain us. We can know for certain that God’s Spirit will be with us to give us comfort and strength even in the wilderness.



What “wilderness” situation are you in now or have you been in recently?

How can you remind yourself of God’s sustaining love for you—even in the wilderness?

Exercise:

1. Commit this time to God, asking Him to open your heart and mind what He wants you to be aware of.
2. Read the scripture passage below.
3. Breathe deeply. Settle into this present moment. Release any thoughts or expectations.
4. Go to the picture on the next page. (If you're looking at this picture on screen, to view the landscape picture in Adobe Acrobat, you will have to rotate counterclockwise)
5. Look at the picture and let your eyes stay with the very first thing you see. Let yourself gaze at that part of the picture for a few minutes. Try to keep your eyes from wandering to other parts of the picture.
6. Staying with the part of the picture that first caught your attention, close your eyes and allow what you saw to unfold in your visual memory.
 - Notice any images, feelings, memories, physical sensations, or prayers that stir in response to that part of the picture.
6. Now, look at the whole picture. Take your time and look at every part of the picture. Explore all the details, colors, movements, and shapes.
7. Reflect on the picture for a few minutes, and consider the following questions:
 - What emotions does this image evoke?
 - What thoughts does the image stir up?
 - What prayers does this image lead me to? (Write them down if you desire.)
8. Have a conversation with God / journal about whatever has arisen in your heart during this exercise.

Matthew 3:16 - 4:11

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do 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 splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

