

Into the Wilderness
Matthew 4: 1-11
Ann Hatfield

We begin the season of Lent by following Jesus into the wilderness. This area near the Dead Sea is covered with desert sand and crumbling limestone. It is a warped and twisted landscape, where hills are like dust heaps, ridges run in all directions, and the surrounding rocks are bare and jagged. Like a vast furnace, the whole expanse glows with intense heat.

Like prophets before him, Jesus undergoes a forty-day period of testing. With hair *still damp* from baptism, and “You are my beloved Son” ringing in his ears, Jesus is now in the wilderness. Forty days and nights of fasting and prayer have left Jesus hungry, weak, and tired. In this vulnerable condition, you can almost hear the sinister music reach a crescendo, as the tempter appears.

The Bible takes evil very seriously, and so should we. In Hebrew, *the satan* means “the accuser” or “adversary.” We can understand Satan or the devil as the personification of evil that works in opposition to God. These three temptations seek to separate Jesus from God, and turn Jesus from God’s kingdom of justice, peace, and joy.

First, Satan targets Jesus’ hunger. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Satan implies God’s children should not hunger. In the devil’s economy, unmet desire is an aberration that should not be tolerated. Satan tempts Jesus to magically satisfy his hunger, as well as the needs of others. Jesus refuses. He will not “cheat” his way to fulfillment. Instead, Jesus relies on God for lasting nourishment.

The second temptation targets Jesus’ vulnerability. “[God] will command his angels concerning you,” Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus. “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” The implication? If we are God’s beloved sons and daughters, then God will keep us safe – safe from any harm, safe from accidents and disease, even safe from death. Satan offers life devoid of pain, frailty, and risk. Again, Jesus refuses. He trusts God loves us IN our human vulnerabilities and limitations.

Finally, Satan targets Jesus’ ego. After showing Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world,” the devil promises Jesus fame, recognition, and clout. “It will all be yours” – a kingdom

beyond compare! You will be admired, envied, and applauded on center stage, not sidelined in obscurity. Jesus refuses. He will not deviate from worship and adoration belonging to God alone.

It's all GOOD! – Feeding hungry people, freedom from pain, and recognition of gifts. Satan tempts Jesus with GOOD things, but for all the WRONG reasons. Jesus sees through the traps. In response to each temptation, Jesus answers with scripture, recommitting himself to loving and serving only God.

With its harsh and barren landscape, the wilderness can be a place of disorientation and desolation. But within this austere terrain are also opportunities for reorientation towards God. The wilderness can be a place of recommitment and new beginnings for us, too.

When as a young man, former President Jimmy Carter applied to a nuclear submarine program, he was interviewed by an admiral, who asked, "How did you rank in your class at the Naval Academy?" With some pride, Carter answered, "Sir, I was 59 in a class of 820." Instead of congratulations, the admiral asked him, "Did you do your best?"

Carter almost replied, "Yes, sir," but recalled he could have learned more. So, he answered, "No, sir, I didn't always do my best." The admiral looked at Carter for a long time in silence, and then asked one final question, which Carter said he never forgot – *nor was he able to answer* – "WHY NOT?"

This Lenten season, we will explore the lectionary passages through the lens of a wilderness theme. Something about the wilderness is foundational to our faith. Here, we ponder who we are – *and more importantly* – who God is.

During Lent, ARE WE making commitments to prayer, study, and service? Are we doing OUR best? If we cannot answer "yes," then this holy season of pilgrimage asks us, "**Why not?**"

Lent began on Ash Wednesday, with ashes reminding us of the ruined, misguided, and broken places of our lives. Thankfully, God does not leave us there. Like Jesus, we are invited to recommit ourselves to kingdom-living. We have this opportunity to reorient our lives.

Listen, as we hear this Lenten invitation expressed in a poem by Pastor Sarah Are:

“Begin again,” life whispered in my ear;
For some days are beginning days.

Some days are designed to be the day we try again...
On those days, God is cheering for you.
That’s just the way God and beginnings work.

For when your heart is broken and your life is in pieces,
Or when the addiction or the depression (or just frustration) have found their way
back into your bones,

Or when you lose sight of the person that you were called to be,
The wilderness will sing to you, “Begin again.”

“Begin again” with the person you want to be.
“Begin again” with the person you want to love.
“Begin again” with the knowledge of your faith.
“Begin again.”

This Lent, we are invited to embrace the wilderness. Whether it is the wilderness of doubt, grief, or self-discovery – *whatever it is* – trust God to meet you there. Let the journey begin, again. Amen.

¹ Sir George Adam Smith, as referenced by William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, 63.

² Debie Thomas, *Journey With Jesus*, “Tempted.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Adapted from Edward Hayes, *The Ascent on the Mountain of God: Daily Reflections for the Journey of Lent*, 17.

⁶ Sarah Are, *Poetry Prayers*, “The Wilderness Is a Place of Beginnings,” from Sanctified Art, sanctifiedart.org.

⁷ “Reflections on the Wilderness Theme,” A Sanctified Art, sanctifiedart.org.