

Lent 1A 2026 Matthew 4:1-11

I am not asking for a show of hands, but keeping these thoughts to yourself, I want you to take a moment to think about what you have given up or added to your routine for Lent, if you have given up or added something for Lent. Or if you haven't taken on that kind of practice specifically for Lent, just think about the habits or indulgences in general that you struggle to be disciplined about in life: going to the gym, time in front of the TV, spending vs saving money, Ritchey's Reese's Peanut Butter Crunch ice cream, just for example... Whatever your struggle, think about how hard it can be, maybe how hard it is for you right now, to withstand that temptation... Now stop thinking about that, because today's gospel has nothing to do with how badly you may be craving a Hershey's Special Dark chocolate bar.

The lectionary bounces us around a little bit, but if we were reading Matthew's gospel straight through, we would read about Jesus' baptism—which we celebrated six weeks ago—and then immediately we would read this story. Jesus is baptized by John, the Spirit descends on him like a dove, the voice from heaven says, *This is my son the beloved*, and then the very next thing that happens in Matthew's story is *the Spirit* leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. So much for thinking that our lives will be easier because we are Christian disciples or that receiving God's Spirit means that we won't be tempted anymore. The Father proclaims *This is my son...* and then we get to see how the Son of God will behave; or we could think of it this way: as the Son of God, Jesus' actions and decisions show us the clearest picture of who God really is and what kind of God we're dealing with.

In the wilderness, the devil presents Jesus with three tests. It would be better for us to read this story picturing not the devil from Dante or the devil from Gary Larson's Far Side cartoons but the devil of scripture, whom Jesus here names *Satan*, which literally means *the adversary*. In scripture Satan is not a red horned demon with hooves, a tail, and a pitchfork. Satan operates like what we would call the Devil's Advocate—always questioning what God says. In the book of Job, when the Lord praises Job's righteousness, Satan says *Yeah, but that's only because he's got so many good things going for him; if he was sick or his property was destroyed or his family all died, he'd curse you...* Or in our Genesis reading today, the serpent, who is not explicitly named Satan but has long been associate with him, says of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, *Oh, you won't die if you eat its fruit—that won't happen...* And there is always just a little bit of truth in what the adversary says: Adam and Eve do not, in fact, drop over dead as soon as they eat from that tree. Here, Jesus *could have* done any of the things the devil suggested to him. The question is not really *If* Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus and Satan know that he is; we know that he is, because again, if we were reading the gospel in order, we would have just heard the Father say, *This is my son the beloved*. The question is how

would the Son of God use his power and position in each of these scenarios. And the answer is—not in the way that Satan tempts him to use them.

Each test tempts Jesus to violate God's word and God's way in order to gain something for himself. The devil essentially asks Jesus if he will use and abuse his power in order to serve himself and his own needs. And in true Satanic fashion, there is a little bit of truth or a little bit of good in each of these tests. Remember that later in the gospel Jesus does provide bread miraculously; but he does it to feed the multitude, not himself. The angels do come to take care of Jesus—at the end of this very passage—but not because he has made a careless spectacle of his power and authority. And the kingdoms of the world do belong to Jesus, and the people in them will come to know Jesus, but that will happen by his disciples fulfilling the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, going into all the world to baptize and teach what Jesus has commanded; he won't accomplish that by force or by bowing down and worshipping the devil in exchange for the devil forcing those kingdoms to submit.

At the root of these tests is the temptation to let the ends justify the means; to do things not God's way, but the easy way, the compromised way, the devil's way. Jesus' resistance to those temptations shows us that a good and godly result cannot be achieved with evil methods. Jesus has the power to take all sorts of short-cuts. But the Son of God, who is our best example in human form of who God is, what God is like, and what God would do, the Son of God refuses to force, to coerce, to compromise with evil. When presented with the opportunity to exercise power in the way human beings tend to exercise power, Jesus chose *not* to act the way the world tells us to act. If doing things the way world does them worked to create the world that God wants, God would not have had to come here in the person of Jesus to show us a different way of living and being.

If you are succeeding in your Lenten struggle against chocolate or martinis or chocolate martinis, that's great, and I don't want to take anything away from that accomplishment. But the story of *Jesus'* temptation is more about whether Jesus would fall victim to the world's way of using and abusing power, for personal gain, or even for good if that good was won by force and not by selfless, godly love. Perhaps our greatest temptation is believing that we can act the way the world tells us to act and still claim to follow Jesus. The one who could have bent the world to his will by force chose not to, because that's not God's way. Jesus showed us God's more perfect way; may we who claim to be his disciples follow it.