### **Readings for March 9, 2025 -- First Sunday in Lent**

‘Led by the Spirit’ Into the Desert

On this First Sunday of Lent, Luke brings us to the desert, an image of these forty days of Lent. In this text, Jesus is confronted by the devil, but he overrides all temptations. He shows us there is no evil that can overcome the redemptive love of Christ Jesus.

### **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

### **Opening Prayer**:

### Lord, Jesus, you fasted for forty days in the desert, opening yourself up to your Father’s will before you began your public ministry. Help me practice fasting with a spirit of openness to the Father’s will, so that I may be more sensitive to the needs of others and remain focused on my baptismal call to holiness. Amen (Joe Paprocki, Loyola Press)

**Opening Thoughts:**

Read the gospel passage to yourself, then look at the following comments from Fr. Ron Rolheiser, (published on the *St. Louis Univ. Center for Liturgy website)* Take a few minutes to let them sink in.

*The desert, biblically and mystically, is not so much a physical place, a geography, as a place in the heart. The desert is that place where we go to face our demons, feel our smallness, be in a special intimacy with God, and prepare ourselves for the promised land… Jesus shows us that in order to be filled by God, one must first be emptied. (Rolheiser)*

*Ask yourself:*

What are some ways I can be “in the desert” with Jesus this coming week? What does the desert symbolize? What does this image mean for me, or how might it relate to my life right now?

How can something sparse and dry help to bring about fruitfulness? *(Write down a few words or thoughts below, then share about this with the group, if you are willing)*

**Reading 1** **[DT 26:4-10](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/bible/Deuteronomy/26%3A4)**

Moses spoke to the people, saying: "The priest shall receive the basket from you

and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God.

Then you shall declare before the Lord, your God, my father was a wandering Aramean

who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien.

But there he became a nation great, strong, and numerous.

When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm,

with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I have now brought you the firstfruits of the products of the soil

which you, O LORD, have given me.' And having set them before the Lord, your God, you shall bow down in his presence."

**Responsorial Psalm** **[PS 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15.](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/bible/Psalms/91%3A1)**

**Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.**

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,

who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust."

**Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.**

No evil shall befall you, nor shall affliction come near your tent,

For to his angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways.

**Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.**

Upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.

You shall tread upon the asp and the viper; you shall trample down the lion and the dragon.

**Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.**

Because he clings to me, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he acknowledges my name.

He shall call upon me, and I will answer him;

I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him. **Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.**

**Reading 2****[ROM 10:8-13](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/bible/Romans/10%3A8)**

Brothers and sisters: What does Scripture say?

*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*

—that is, the word of faith that we preach—, for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

For the Scripture says, *No one who believes in him will be put to shame.*

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all,

enriching all who call upon him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

**Gospel** **[LK 4:1-13](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/bible/luke/4%3A1)**

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan

and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God,

command this stone to become bread." Jesus answered him,

"It is written, *One does not live on bread alone."*

Then he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant.

The devil said to him, "I shall give to you all this power and glory;

for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish.

All this will be yours, if you worship me." Jesus said to him in reply,

"It is written: *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve."*

Then he led him to Jerusalem, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him,

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written:

*He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,*

and: *With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone."*

Jesus said to him in reply, "It also says, *You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test."*

When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

Related Reflections

During the Lenten season, we come closer to our true identity in Christ. Jesus washes away our sins, doubts and failures. We enter more deeply into prayer, fasting and almsgiving as a way to revitalize our faith and to sustain our commitments in the Church.

The Church invites us to renew our devotional life in Lent. We may attend the Stations of the Cross to understand the deep pattern of letting go and receiving the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. We may receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation with more intention or frequency. In Lent, we learn self-reflection and the consequences of our actions. We may also read the scriptures more frequently, reflect with people in a group, or attend daily Mass. We may pray with greater intention.

The reason for our prayer is twofold. We learn a deeper, more beautiful reliance on God and we learn more about our sin, our failures and the walls that keep us from intimacy with God. (Like the “planks” in our eyes from last week’s Gospel reading). Prayer gets us to the truth, both in our hearts and in our actions. Prayer also offers us the truth of God’s mercy, love and redemption. Lent is not a time to slash our self-esteem or to think we are not worthy of God. Lent in fact is just the opposite; it is a time to reflect on our humility, the life that is really ours, to be more open to the intimacy, love and forgiveness that God has for us.

There is nothing that keeps us from God’s love, nothing at all. Prayer in Lent is meant to lead us into a deeper silence and awareness that forgiveness and mercy are real and forever gifts from God. We don’t change God’s mind in Lent. We allow God to change our hearts for the good in Lent. I invite you to spend time in silence and prayer during Lent. Be aware of God in your heart. Learn to settle into God’s love and do not be afraid.

 Fr. Ronald Patrick Raab ([www.ronaldraab.com](http://www.ronaldraab.com))

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Be close to God in the desert:** The desert, scripture assures us, is the place where God is especially near. The desert, as we know, is the place where, stripped of all that normally nourishes and supports us, we are exposed to chaos, raw fear, and demons of every kind. In the desert we are exposed, body and soul, made vulnerable to be overwhelmed by chaos and temptations. But, precisely because we are so stripped of everything we normally rely on, this is also a privileged moment for grace. Why?

Because all the defense mechanisms, support systems, and distractions that we normally surround ourselves with so as to keep chaos and fear at bay work at the same time to keep much of God’s grace at bay. What we use to buoy us wards off both chaos and grace, demons and the divine alike. Conversely, when we are helpless we are open. That is why the desert is both the place of chaos and the place of God’s closeness. Scripture assures us that it is there that God can send angels to minister to us.

Fr. Ron Rolheiser *(published on liturgy.slu.edu)*

***From Pope Francis:***

Let us imagine that we are in a desert. The first feeling would be that of being enveloped by a great silence: no sound besides the wind and our own breathing. The desert is a place of detachment from the din that surrounds us. It is the absence of words to make room for another Word, the Word of God, that caresses our hearts like a light breeze (cf. [1 Kings 19:12](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/1kings/19?12)).

  “Behold I am doing a new thing; ... I will make a way in the wilderness” ([Is 43:19](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/isaiah/43?19)). A new path opens up in the desert, which takes us from death to life. We enter the desert with Jesus and we will leave it experiencing Easter, the power of God’s love which renews life. It will happen to us just as it does to deserts that blossom in spring, suddenly sprouting buds and plants “out of nothing.” Take courage, let us enter this Lenten desert. Let us follow Jesus in the desert: with him, our deserts will blossom.
- Feb 26, 2020

***\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_***

**Beasts and Angels,** by Debi Thomas, Published on Journey With Jesus, Feb. 2021

I was a little girl in Sunday School when I first learned the story of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness.  My teacher, a grandmotherly woman in a hairnet and beige panty hose, had the Judean wilderness stretched across a flannelgraph board in front of my first-grade class.  At the far left of the fuzzy felt landscape, an innocuous-looking devil — scrawny, red-suited, and fork-tailed — stooped in the sand, reaching for a loaf-shaped stone.  To his right, a supremely undisturbed Jesus towered over the landscape in a pristine white robe, his finger pointed devastatingly at his tempter.

To be fair, my teacher was doing the best she could to ease us into a story that might have frightened us.  I give her credit for that.  But here’s the problem: what I absorbed on that Sunday morning was a superhero version of Jesus that left no room for his humanity.  At no point in my childhood or young adulthood did it occur to me that Jesus actually *struggled* in the wilderness.  That he hurt.  That he hungered.  That he wept, thirsted, wrestled, and suffered.  Instead, I assumed that his triumph over evil was a foregone conclusion — a “trial” that cost him nothing.

It has taken me a long time to shed the muscular Jesus of my childhood.  To be honest, I sometimes still long for him.  I long for his divinity — the certainty of it, the mighty, magical promise of it — to overwhelm his humanity like a bright and reassuring halo.  But Lent isn’t a season for unshakeable superheroes.  It’s a season for vulnerable creatures whose wilderness journeys are never easy or straightforward.  It’s a season of shadow, a season when our certainties go into the fire and burn down to ash.  It is a season of vulnerability, honesty, humility, and penitence.

But we *need* the Jesus of the desert.  We need to know that he wrestled with real demons and real dangers during those forty days of temptation.  As alluring as it might be to cling to a divine superhero, we need the Jesus who endured a terrain where the Holy Spirit, Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels resided *together.* We don’t have to reside here alone.

Unlike his counterparts, Matthew and Luke, Mark offers us no colorful details about Jesus’s experience in the wilderness.  We don’t learn what Satan’s specific temptations were, or how Jesus responded to them.  All Mark gives us are a few terse sentences: “The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.  He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.  He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him.”

As I reflect on Mark’s version of the story, three details stand out to me: First, Jesus didn't choose the wilderness.  He didn’t schedule a National Geographic expedition, or plan a desert marathon to improve his fitness.  The Spirit of God “drove” him, *forced*him, into the desolation of a wild and unsafe place.  Jesus didn’t want to go, but the Spirit drove him, anyway.

Maybe it’s strange that I find this detail comforting, but I do.  Why?  Because it rings true to life.  Most of the time, we don’t choose to enter the wilderness.  We don’t volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror.  But the wilderness happens, anyway.  Whether it comes to us in the guise of a devastating pandemic, a frightening hospital stay, a broken relationship, a hurting child, or a loss of faith, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps.  And sometimes it is God’s own Spirit who drives us there.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us?  That God wants us to suffer?  No.  Does it mean that God is ready to teach, shape, and redeem us even during the most barren periods of our lives?  Yes.  In the startling economy of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy.  Even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine.  This is not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a fragile, and broken world that includes deserts, and because God’s modus operandi is to take the things of shadow and death, and wring from them resurrection.

Second, our wilderness journeys sometimes last a long while.  I’ve never spent forty days in solitude and silence, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger, but I can’t imagine that Jesus’s time in the wilderness passed quickly.  The sense I get from Mark’s gospel is that Jesus despaired of that grim place filled with wild beasts.  That he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body.  For those of us who live in impatient, quick-fix cultures, this aspect of the wilderness is daunting, because we tire and despair so quickly.  Why, we ask, is this pain not ending?  Why are our prayers going unanswered?  Where is God?

Maybe, we need to ask a harder question: why did Jesus need the wilderness?  Why do we?

Mark's story begins with an account of Jesus’s baptism.  When Jesus rose from the waters of the Jordan River, the heavens tore open, and God announced Jesus’s identity loud and clear: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. But what happened to that certain sense of identity and belonging as Jesus’s wilderness wanderings stretched into week two, week three, week four?  Did it waver?  Did the Son of God have to keep reminding himself of who he was?

At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was.  That was the easy part.  The much harder part came in the desert, when he had to face down every vicious, mocking assault on that truth.  As the memory of God’s voice faded, and the isolation of the wilderness played tricks on Jesus’s heart and mind, he had to learn that his belovedness would still hold.  That God’s deep and unconditional delight would never depend on external circumstances.

If those forty days in the wilderness were a time of self-creation, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling, then here is what the Son of God chose: deprivation over power.  Vulnerability over rescue.  Obscurity over honor.  At every instance in which he could have reached for the certain, the extraordinary, and the miraculous, he reached instead for the precarious, the quiet, and the mundane.

Of course, there is nothing easy about affirming Jesus' choices.  Indeed, sometimes I find them appalling.  How often I prefer the miraculous intervention, the dramatic rescue, the long-awaited vindication.  How often I find myself echoing the demands of the tempter: Feed me!  Deliver me!  Prove yourself to me!  How often I find the restraint of God offensive.

Sometimes we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God’s children.  Because the unnerving truth is this: we can be loved and uncomfortable at the same time.  We can be loved and vulnerable at the same time.  In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft.  Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time.  A long time.

Third, there were angels in the wilderness.  Even in the land of shadow and starvation, even in the place where the wild beasts roamed, God’s agents of love and care lingered.  This, too, is a startling and comforting truth — one we can recognize if we open our eyes and take a good look around.  Even in the grimmest places, God abides, and somehow, without reason or explanation, help comes.  Rest comes.  Solace comes.  Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we prefer, but they come.

I wonder what Jesus’s angels looked like.  Did they manifest as winged creatures from heaven? As comforting breezes across the sun-scorched hills?  As a trickle of water for his parched throat?

What do your angels look like?  Do you recognize them when they show up?  When they minister to you, hold you, brace you, do you hear a new version of God’s voice, calling you “beloved?”  If yes, then what would it be like to enter into someone else’s barren desert right now, and become an angel for their journey?

As we begin our journey into Lent, may we experience the companionship of the Christ whose vulnerability became his strength.  May we enter with courage the deserts we can’t choose or avoid.  May our long stints amidst the wild beasts teach us who we really are — the precious and beautiful children of God.  And when the angels in all their sweet and secret guises whisper the name “beloved” into our ears, may we listen, and believe them.

Discussion Questions

How can we do more to find our own “desert places” during Lent so we can hear God more clearly?

Jesus responds to Satan by saying: “You shall worship the Lord, your God, and **him alone** shall you serve.” What are we sometimes tempted to serve that is not of God?

Mark’s account of this story says: “He was among the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.” What are the “wild beasts” today? Are they personal wild beasts or community ones? Climate crises? Political differences? Racial discrimination?

What angels minister to you? In what ways do you minister to others?

What comfort can we take from seeing Jesus dismiss Satan?

Jesus was tempted as we are. Temptations are not bad in themselves, but it is what we do with them that can help us turn to God or away from God. Do we see temptations as ways to turn *toward* God rather than rely our own resources?

By resisting the temptations, Jesus chose to depend on his Father to satisfy his deepest hunger, to relate with others in an ordinary way and not rely on reputation, power and possessions. How do we satisfy our deepest hungers? Do we depend on prestige and power to make ourselves acceptable to others?

**For personal thought this week:** What do our own temptations tend to look like? Bring these to Jesus and ask for his help in rejecting these, just as he did. Can we allow ourselves to be “led by the spirit” into places that challenge us to grow?

**Closing Prayers:**

**Holy Spirit**, help us to empty ourselves. Our Lenten task is to make room for you.

Anne Osdieck

**Lord God**, in the busyness of life, help me to slow down and carve out time for conversation with you, just as I make time for other important relationships in my life. Remind me to take opportunities throughout the day to be present with you. Help me to see my daily temptations as a way to turn toward you, and always to grow closer to you. Amen (Adapted from Jesuitprayer.org)

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

Weekly Focus Questions:

What was my “desert place” this week?

Was I able to see something new and green springing forth from this?

***The Comforter***

*The Spirit*

*our flesh his Dwelling, the Truth against which the*

*power of hell cannot prevail*

 *- By J. Janda*