

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood,
Virginia
The First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020

(Matthew 4:1-11)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

“[W]hen we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.”¹

These are very familiar words, words that many of you have heard me quote in previous sermons. They are words found within one of our beautiful Eucharistic prayers. They are a reminder that during his time on earth Jesus experienced the things that we ourselves encounter in this life. He experienced pain ... and loss ... and sorrow. I don't doubt that he also lived in moments of joy ... and contentment ... and peace. All of these are feelings and emotions that color our time on this earth.

As this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel reminds us, there is yet another aspect of life that Jesus shared with us: the battle against temptation. The appearance of the devil came after Jesus had wandered and fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, a number that was significant to the listeners of his time. The rain that fell and flooded the earth in the time of Noah lasted 40 days and nights. The great patriarch Moses remained at the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights while awaiting the commandments from God.

But there are other parts of this scene that would have been significant and recognizable to the early Christians hearing Matthew's Gospel. Old Testament scholars note that the trials themselves that were put before Jesus also appeared at various points in Israel's past.² In Exodus 16 for example we read of those who had been led out of Egypt complaining to Moses and Aaron and saying, “[Y]ou have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”³ In Exodus 17 they again complained, this time because of their thirst and the lack of water. Finally, similar to Jesus being tempted to turn from God and take power for himself, we recall in Exodus 32 those camped at the base of Mount Sinai turning their back on God as they “cast for themselves an image of a calf, and ... worshiped it and sacrificed to it.”⁴

¹ From Eucharistic Prayer A, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 362.

² Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, “Matthew 4:1-11: Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*.

³ Exodus 16:3 (NRSV).

⁴ Exodus 32:8 (NRSV).

How did Jesus respond to these temptations? He drew on the strength of scripture, yes, but it was specifically scripture reflecting back on the time of the Exodus people. In responding to what the devil was putting before him, Jesus drew on the words spoken by Moses in the final lengthy oration we know as Deuteronomy.

Are you hungry? That's easy enough to fix; take these stones and turn them into bread to sustain you. The response from Jesus is found in Deuteronomy 8: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."⁵

Well, I'd wager that if you throw yourself off this Temple God's angels will catch you. In answering Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."⁶

*Would you like to experience **real** power? Say that you'll serve me and I'll give you control of everything you see here before you.* Again Jesus turns to Deuteronomy 6: "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."⁷

During this season of Lent, we have an opportunity to reflect on our lives and on the many ways in which we rely on God's love, support and strength. We are called to "self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word."⁸ We are challenged to think about our responses to the temptations in our own lives ... how we answer in the moments of our own hunger (spiritual and physical) or trust or need for power, prestige or acceptance.

In Lent, we are presented with our own 40 days in the wilderness. We may have temptations or incidents from our lives or mistakes made on which to reflect. There may be questions we feel we're being asked and for which we struggle to find the answers. We may be struggling to "orient [our] lives toward God and not around the things that God provides."⁹ The way we prepare ourselves penitentially and deeply to address each of these is the way Jesus did: to turn to scripture and to the strength and support of God.

This morning we began with the Great Litany, asking God to hear us ... to deliver us ... to have mercy upon us. But next week and continuing through the remainder of the season, we will recall the words from the time of the Exile. We will recite and respond to the Decalogue ... the commandments that God first delivered to Moses. Like our spiritual ancestors before us, we will hear the words of God guiding and directing us.

⁵ Deuteronomy 8:3 (NRSV).

⁶ Deuteronomy 6:16 (NRSV).

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:13 (NRSV).

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 265.

⁹ Beach-Verhey.

In the end, we will walk out of our time in this Lenten wilderness with angels ministering to us. Jesus overcame temptation and showed us the path that we should follow ... a path built on the solid stone of his faith. At the conclusion of these 40 days, how will our reflection and our faith have changed our lives?

How will our time in the wilderness make us new?

Amen.