

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Preparing for Sunday, March 5, 2017 // Lent 1, Year A

## The Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’  
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## Background and general observations

*The beginning of the season of Lent marks a return to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. At his baptism, Jesus experiences the powerful affirmation that he belongs to God and that he is loved by God. You might recall that John the Baptist was administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness, or release, of sins; when Jesus submits to John's baptism, and when he comes up out of the water, he hears the Divine Voice, "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." And it is just after this extraordinary affirmation that Jesus is "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness," where he fasts for forty days and nights and experiences tests from "the tempter" or "the devil."*

*Forty days in the wilderness would remind the readers or hearers of the Gospel of the forty years of wandering and testing that the Hebrew people endured after they were released from their bondage in Egypt and came up out of the water of the Red Sea. The earliest Christians, in other words, saw the events of Jesus' life as mirroring the events of Israel's release from bondage and their passing through the waters of baptism that swallowed up their pursuers. These were the events that set the people of Israel free and set the stage for their entering into a deeper relationship with God (just as baptism reminds us that we are set free and sets the stage for our entering into a deeper relationship with God). In the wilderness, the people of Israel would receive the covenant, and they*

would promise their obedience. Of course, the Israelites would become disobedient and fail miserably. So, in the events of Jesus' life, the earliest Christians not only saw a mirroring of the life of Israel, but also a kind of undoing of Israel's disobedience.

Another more general angle on the juxtaposition of the baptism and the testing in the wilderness would be to consider how, in our own lives, times of affirmation, spiritual highs, consolations, and so on are often followed by times of testing, spiritual lows, desolations. While affirmation is good, we might consider the role that testing, temptations, suffering, wilderness, and even failure can play in our spiritual growth and maturation.

The lesson ends with the devil departing from Jesus and angels coming and ministering to him. What a relief! We've all experienced something like this: the dark clouds disperse, or our pain subsides, and we finally have a sense of mercy, of angels caring for us. (But, remember, the devil will return when Jesus enters Judas, setting the stage for Jesus' last temptation at his arrest, trial and crucifixion.) This passage is helpful in illuminating an important balance between consolation and desolation, light and darkness, mercy and suffering. It seems we are invited to interiorize and hold close those times when we feel intimate with God so that, if ever we feel abandoned, we can remember and affirm our faith by the light of what we know to be true which is, of course, the love and nearness of God.

## **Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives**

1. The season of Lent is our forty days. Where do you stand spiritually, here at the beginning of your forty days? How might God be calling you or leading you to use this Lenten season? Into what wilderness might God be asking you to wander?
2. Have you ever been "led by the Holy Spirit"? What did it feel like?

What is your experience of spiritual wilderness? Have you had a sense of being ministered to when you were in that wilderness? Who did you feel truly loved you in your time of need?

It is possible that angels seek to help us in times of great suffering but, because of our despair, we are spiritually unavailable or unable to perceive or receive their care. How do you respond to this? Does this feel true to you?

3. In the traditional form of the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God will not "lead us into temptation"; yet, this seems to be precisely what happens to Jesus. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is "led...to be tempted by the devil." Some scholars argue that the more accurate translation of the Lord's Prayer is "save us from the time of trial."

What experience do you have of this pattern in your life – a powerful religious or spiritual experience being followed by a time of testing or temptation? How might such a "time of trial" be just as formative as the experience of a profound spiritual awakening?

Have you ever had a sense of the Spirit leading you toward difficulty and temptation? Has it been true for you that your greatest trials have manifested as gifts from God? How do you think this works?

4. Forty days is a long time. Imagine the extended silences, the extra time to think. Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “Can you handle the silence, in which thoughts and feelings you have outrun will have time to catch up with you?”

It’s probably no surprise that people might take a bottle of Scotch with them if they were on such a retreat! Solitude and silence can be a difficult and lonely endeavor. What do you know about uncomfortable stillness? Have you noticed changes over the course of your life about the ways in which you can manage your solitude?

One of the most frequently repeated suggestions of the Desert Mothers and Fathers was this: “Go into your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” They understood our desire to seek meaning outside ourselves – in spiritual gurus, in books, in the church, in the Bible – but they seem to suggest that what we need is already with us and within us, waiting to be revealed, if we can only be still and attentive to what is. How do you respond to this advice?

5. You’ll notice that Jesus does not engage the devil in arguments. Jesus simply quotes verses of Scripture in order to confirm his resolution to be attentive to God.

What is your experience of people quoting Scripture to you in order to prove their point? Do you tend to get defensive or ensnared in argument? Or, is it enough to remember that “even the devil can quote Scripture”?