



February 10, 2008

**Focus scripture  
Matthew 4:1–11**

Additional scriptures  
Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12–19

When I find myself led or drifting into places of testing, be present to me, O God. Be present in words that bring light; in friends who bring guidance; in Spirit who renews my ways and empowers me to choose faithfully. Amen.

# Wilderness Encounter

Lent opens with stories of testing and trusting. In parched wilderness and in lush garden, temptation comes. Sin or faithfulness follows, not because of the testing itself, but by what gets chosen in response. Live out of traditions whose truth we have experienced. Trust God's steadfast love. Rely on grace that ministers to our needs.

**Focus Scripture: Matthew 4:1–11**

Matthew places this story between Jesus' baptism by John and Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Forty days in the wilderness parallels Israel's forty years in the desert. Before land is entered or ministry proceeds, preparation in the presence of God begins the way. Tests and choices follow. The forty-day journey we make in Lent invites similar movement, leading us through the wilderness of Jesus' passion to the lush garden of resurrection. Tests and choices are ours as well.

Three other figures play roles in this passage. The Spirit "leads" Jesus into the wilderness. It is God, not the tempter, who directs the course of action. Matthew variously identifies the second figure as tempter, devil, and Satan. In the gospel of Matthew, this figure had evolved (devolved) from something of a prosecuting attorney in the heavenly court to a personification of evil. Within this story, the tempter puts a face on the presence of evil in the world by tempting ends that overlook the means used to achieve them. The third figure(s) are the angels at the story's end. Their "waiting on" Jesus translates a Greek verb (*diakoneo*) that also means "minister" or "serve at table."

The magical transformation of bread is an easy remedy for physical need. But will magic or compassion be the way Jesus responds to human needs? The stunt of a miraculous rescue might attract attention. But will God's deliverance and providence come in stunts or self-giving? A gesture of worship seduces with the promise of extending Jesus' realm to all nations. But will God's realm come by cutting deals with powers-that-be or living in witness to the One who is the power and the glory? Similar temptations faced Matthew's first readers. In an era of persecution, sur-

vival might take precedence over faithfulness. In an era of emperor worship, bowing the knee to Caesar might not seem such a bad idea. Jesus' choices set the tone for his ministry to follow. Jesus responds to each of the temptations by quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures. Each quote is from Deuteronomy, a book whose passages reflect on Israel's time of wilderness testing. Story and tradition shaped Jesus' life and the choices he made. Likewise, we also live out of the scriptures and traditions that bear truth to us.

The results of human choices weave through the other texts. **Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7** tells of the hazard of choosing for oneself part of the mystery that belongs to God. **Psalm 32** warns of the consequences of choices that lead to sin, and the restoration that comes by choosing to confess our need of God. **Romans 5:12–19** affirms the deadly consequences of sinful choices.

These passages also witness to God's choice of grace on our behalf. **Psalm 32** speaks of that grace in the language of forgiveness. If one reads further in Genesis 3, judgment is tempered in the imagery of God making garments to clothe the man and the woman (3:21). God's steadfast love is God's choosing on our behalf.



Whether sought out or fled from, testing will come; we may face it with trust in God's steadfast love and care. What are the wilderness places for you? Where do you see evil today in the world, and in the choices that tempt you? What traditions and practices might you and your congregation explore this Lent that would encourage or provide guidance for your own faithful choices?

Go to [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) and click on Spirit Sightings for international current events, links to this week's theme, discussion questions, and intercessory prayer suggestions.

