

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/26/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**First Sunday of Lent**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, February 26<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 4:1-11**

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### The necessity of wilderness

For the first Sunday in Lent, the Gospel lection brings focus to the wilderness experience of Christ. His temptations served to prepare Him for His ministry. Through this text we recognize the times we have been tested and learn to embrace our own wilderness experiences as liminal moments in our spiritual walk. We also learn we cannot live abundantly through bread alone. For such a life we must live lives shaped by Scripture. In order to do this, we must be able to recognize the many distorted interpretations of Scripture in our midst. This week's text illustrates how this is not a new problem - the devil distorted Scripture to tempt Christ.

#### Matthew 4:1-11 Commentary

This week's lectionary text is immediately preceded by the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17) and immediately followed by Jesus proclaiming the Kingdom of God (3:12-17) and calling disciples (3:18-22). Jesus' wilderness experience described in this week's text is thus instrumental in preparing Him for His ministry.

*<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.*

The opening verse is clear. Jesus' wilderness experience was divinely intentional. The Holy Spirit did the leading with the purpose of allowing Jesus to be tested/tempted. There are other parallels within Scripture of the wilderness representing a place of preparation and a place of learning to trust God:

- Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights before receiving instructions from God (Exodus 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9)
- Elijah fasted for forty days and nights in the desert before receiving a new commission from God (1 Kings 19:8)
- Israelites wandered the wilderness for forty years in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land (see Exodus 16:35; Deuteronomy 2:7)

*<sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Taking advantage of Jesus weakened physical state, the devil tempts Jesus with abundance and plenty. Note the text references multiple loaves of bread. Jesus counters using Scripture (Deuteronomy 8:3).

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> and said 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Next the devil tempts Jesus with celebrity and fame. Anyone who could throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and land below unharmed would surely attract a following. The devil also cites Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12) but does so inaccurately. He omits "to guard you in all your ways" from v.11. This omission destroys the original meaning. Instead of encouraging the faithful to tempt God by taking unnecessary risks as the devil implies, this Scripture reveals God's protection for those who are obedient to His will.<sup>1</sup> Again, Jesus counters with Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:16).

It is worth noting how Jesus was later taunted on the cross with, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (27:40).

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

The third and final time, the devil tempts Jesus with worldly political power and status. Again, Jesus refutes with Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13).

### Reflections

Jesus was tempted three times. The first time involved removing hardships and satisfying physical hunger. The second time was with fame and popularity. The third time was with power and status. All three of these temptations would have diverted Jesus from His ministry. Jesus successfully stood up to the devil's temptations which were part of God's sovereign purpose in preparing Jesus for His ministry. Jesus would continue to be tempted in similar ways throughout the rest of His ministry, even while Jesus was on the cross. Unlike the first Adam who failed God's simple test of love, Christ the Second Adam did not.

While we may not immediately recognize it, we too face the same temptations as Jesus in our lives. While v.9 carries a specific reference to idolatry, all three of these temptations involve a form of idolatry. Living relatively comfortable lives in the West, we are often diverted from our mission as disciples by living in fear of letting go of our physical comforts and security. We often pull back from our mission and water-down the Gospel so that we are more conformed to the world, being ever-conscious of what other people may think of us. While we often talk a good game about the poor and the powerless, we cling onto our own privilege. We thus fail to progress in our spiritual walk.

We should take note that in this text the devil misapplied Scripture to tempt Christ (v.6). The same approach was used in the garden with Adam and Eve: "Did God actually say..." (Genesis 3:1). Unlike the first Adam, each time Christ, the Second Adam, was tempted He refuted the devil with an accurate interpretation of Scripture. For the last hundred years or so, much license has been taken by liberal interpretations of the Bible. The Bible and our knowledge of it remains the ultimate resource for how to live truly abundant lives. We discount it or distort it at our peril.

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<sup>1</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introductory Commentary* (London, England: Tyndale Press, 1963), 54.

Whenever we may find ourselves in the wilderness in our lives, we can take comfort in knowing that Christ has gone there before us. While such seasons of wilderness may expose the idolatries that seasons of abundance may have hidden, God has not led us into the wilderness to spiritually starve. The wilderness is where Christ meets us and will not leave us or forsake us. It is in the wilderness seasons of our life that we learn we cannot live by bread alone. It is these experiences that shape us into the disciples we have been called to be.

When we look at Christ's life, the wilderness was a necessity for His ministry. It was in the wilderness where Christ met John the Baptist. It was in the wilderness where Christ was commissioned for His ministry through His baptism. As we read in this text, it was in the wilderness where Christ was prepared for His ministry through his testing. It was in the wilderness where Christ made His important decisions for His ministry such as choosing the twelve. It was the wilderness to which Christ would continue to withdraw during His ministry for periods of retreat and prayer. Christ spent His final night on earth in what was as close to the wilderness as he could find in Jerusalem – the Garden of Gethsemane. Finally, in the closing of Matthew's Gospel, it was in the wilderness where He commissioned His disciples to make disciples of all nations. The wilderness in Christ's life was a necessity, as are the wilderness periods in ours – whether they involve the physical or metaphorical wilderness. Wilderness periods of our lives are times of preparation and are as much evidence of God's grace as those times in which we experience blessings.

#### Application

- What are some of the God-appointed wilderness periods of your life?
- What was God trying to teach you during such periods?
- What did you learn about yourself during these periods?
- What did you learn about God during these periods?
- How have these wilderness experiences prepared you to be the disciple you are today?
- How do you incorporate wilderness into your practice of spiritual discipline?

*“First the fall, and then the recovery from the fall, and both are the mercy of God.”*

– Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)

