

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 22, 2026
The First Sunday In Lent

Litany and Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Matthew 4:1-11

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'Tested as we are.'

In 1998, Rowan Williams, then Bishop of Monmouth in Wales, was asked to address the Lambeth Conference, which is the gathering of all the bishops of the Anglican Communion. His paper was titled, 'On Making Moral Decisions.' I imagine that it must have been quite daunting, facing hundreds of bishops who held deeply entrenched, though passionately faithful, yet often quite opposing views on all kinds of moral issues. In his paper, Williams said this: "*Ethics is a difficult discovering of something about yourself, a discovering of what has already shaped the person you are and is molding you in this or that direction.*" ^[1]

I was brought up in quite an evangelical Church of England parish where, I must admit, making moral choices was much less to do with wrestling with self-discovery, and far more about conformity to a particular way of thinking and teaching. I was taught a very simplistic way of reading the bible as if it were a kind of car manual, where you would find the rules of the road and how to fix the car when it wasn't working well, or even broke down. I remember once asking my vicar why some of the women members of the congregation never received Holy Communion; "Oh," he said, "*that's because they are divorced.*" Strident and enthusiastic youth leaders taught me and my friends that moral choices were black and white; and that moral choices were actually quite simple as long as we conformed to what was written in the Bible. The problem was, as I began to read the bible in my theology classes as a 17 and 18 year-old, I began to see how flawed this way of making moral decisions truly was and, how limiting. The more I studied the scriptures, the more I discovered the complexity of them – the scriptures that is – and how they were the culmination of (particularly in the case of the Hebrew Scriptures) over a thousand years of community living and history, and the consequences of particular choices.

This takes us to a reflection on today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus goes to the wilderness to find solitude, to reflect, and to pray. His fasting for 40 days leaves him, as the Gospel writer puts it, 'famished' which resulted in his encounter with the Devil. However, the Gospel writer states that the *reason* that Jesus went into the wilderness was 'to be tempted by the devil.' Could it be that this time of testing and temptation was somehow crucial for Jesus before he began his ministry and not a mere coincidence? In the same way that the story we heard from Genesis is hardly an accidental encounter between Adam, Eve,

and the serpent – the serpent, we are told, being more crafty than all the other wild animals. I mean, Adam and Eve don't say "oops" after eating the forbidden fruit, because their eyes were opened and they now knew something about themselves and the consequences that would come from all of the choices that lay before them. Rabbinical Scholars do not tend to describe the Genesis story as the 'fall' of humanity but, rather, humanity coming to maturity and discovering the enormity of the consequences of this coming of age. Some go as far as to suggest that the story has deep sexual connotations; if you will, a kind of humanity entering puberty and the pain that comes with adolescence.

In the same way, Jesus in the wilderness discovers something of himself and the consequences of his own choices. Before we go any further, we need to set the context of the Gospel passage because it is crucial to our understanding of the significance of the encounter between Jesus and Satan. Because the Anglican revisers of the Common Eucharistic Lectionary decided to part company with Rome and move the story of the Transfiguration to the Sunday *before* Lent rather than the *Second* Sunday in Lent – its more usual place – we might feel that the Transfiguration story is the precursor to the story of the temptations in the wilderness. It is not; the story that immediately precedes this Gospel passage is the Baptism of Jesus and this is key to our understanding of the temptations in the wilderness.

In Matthew's Gospel, we have already been introduced to Jesus as the true descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – a son of David – through an extensive genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel. Joseph had been told by an angel that he was to be called Jesus because he would 'save his people from their sins' and that his birth was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, for he was also to be *Emmanuel* – a name that means 'God with us.' The visit of the Magi revealed that he was born to be a King – but a King for all people and not just the Jews. And, finally, John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would be powerful, and would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. As Jesus stood in the River Jordan, the heavens were opened, the Spirit descended upon him from heaven, and a voice was heard from heaven, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"

This is my Son, the beloved. The Greek word for beloved is ἀγαπητός (*agapētós*) which derives from the word for the most deep, unconditional, and divine love found in the New Testament.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are, therefore, less to do with cosmic battles between God and the Devil, or simplistic notions about good and evil, and far more about Jesus discovering for himself the consequences of the voice from heaven – *this is my beloved son*. In some respects, we could see today's Gospel passage as a coming of age moment for Jesus – a kind of rite of passage, if you will, in which he reflects deeply on who he really is in relation to God and humanity.

I said that the story of the Transfiguration is not the story that precludes today's Gospel story, but it certainly does help us understand it. Last week, Fr. Gioia set the scene, if you will, of a deeper reflection of our Gospel passage when he so carefully and beautifully explored with us what he described as 'the shape of God.' He said, "*The shape through which God can really be seen is Jesus. Not the Jesus of the Transfiguration though!*" He went on to describe the Jesus of the first Letter of John: "*the very human-looking Jesus he lived with, night and day, for several years – the Jesus who ate, laughed, and cried with him – the Jesus whom he saw betrayed, arrested, and bleeding on the cross.*"

Now we realize why the wilderness experience is so important, because it is part of being human, and overcoming temptations only comes through self-knowledge and through a recognition that all of us are beloved sons and daughters of God, and that the very reason Jesus came was to restore that likeness in each one of us. Fr. Luigi went on to suggest that it is through the church community that we can share in

the life of Christ of which the eucharist is a sign and a present reality. In his address to the Bishops, Rowan Williams said, *"Being in the Body means that we are touched by one another's commitments and thus by one another's failures."* We are in this together, my friends.

Why did Jesus have to be tempted in the wilderness? Because as the most perfect image of the unseen God and the most perfect image of all that humanity is called to be, Jesus had to experience all that we experience on earth – not just joy and success and hope, but agonizing choices, betrayals, and even failures. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read, *"we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."* (Hebrews 4:15)

Tested in every respect. This means that Jesus understands all that we struggle with and all the choices that we have to face. It takes me back to Rowan William's exploration of ethics: *"ethics is a difficult discovering of something about yourself, a discovering of what has already shaped the person you are and is molding you in this or that direction."* Adam, Eve, and the Serpent were doing just that, but with disastrous consequences. Now we celebrate that Jesus did the same, only, his discovery of himself led to a transformation of the cosmos and the possibility of everything being drawn back into the orbit of God's love. This is, of course, the paradox of the Incarnation, and why the Christian vocation only makes sense when we hold Christmas and Holy Week close together. As Michael Ramsey put it, *"It is by the humiliation of the Son's winning of glory in the toils of history that the eternal glory of the divine self-giving is most notably disclosed."* ^[2]

Or, in the words of John Henry Newman that we shall sing in just a few moments at the offertory:

*O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
which did in Adam fail,
should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive, and should prevail.*

References

- 1 Rowan Williams 'On Making Moral Decisions' – Plenary Session at the Lambeth Conference 1998
 - 2 Michael Ramsey – 'The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ' p. 86
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