

**Reflection on the Gospel-1st Sunday of Lent Year A
(Matthew 4:1-11)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Lent is a time of preparation for Easter. It is also a time to enter into the “wilderness” and grapple with the mysteries of life in Christ. It presents us with a challenge to take stock of our lives, to see more clearly what is in our hearts and to discover what might be calling us out of our comfort zones. Today’s liturgy invites us to reflect on Jesus’ forty-day experience in the wilderness. Jesus is “filled with the Holy Spirit” and, like so many humans before and since, is “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness of life to be “tested” there. [“Tested” is a more accurate translation of the Greek than is “tempted”].

Forty is a significant number in Israel’s story: the great flood lasts forty days and forty nights; Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain of God; Israel wanders for forty years in the wilderness; King David reigns for forty years; the prophet Elijah travels forty days and forty nights in the wilderness on his way to the mountain of God. Explanations of its significance vary: a round number suggesting a long period of time; a time of testing or trial; totality or fullness.

In Israel’s story, the wilderness is the place of testing for God’s people: “Remember the long way that your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness... testing you to know what was in your heart” (Deut 8:2). In Matthew’s account, the “devil” is the “tester” or “tempter”, the instrument of God’s testing. In each instance, the test is expressed in terms of Jesus’ relationship to God: “If you are the son of God...” The Matthean Jesus passes the tests that the people of Israel have failed in the wilderness of Sinai. He refuses the way of special favour from God, the way of status or self-aggrandisement. He is prepared to suffer whatever it takes to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world. In other words, he chooses the way of God’s empire or the empire “of the heavens” rather than the brutality of the Roman Empire. Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed “of God”. This testing in the wilderness foreshadows later events in the gospel such as Peter’s attempt at Caesarea Philippi to deflect Jesus from his mission and the bystanders’ challenge in 27:40 to prove he is “son of God” by coming down from the cross.

Most people of faith would agree that being “of God” right now has more than a little to do with the way we relate to all of Earth’s human and other-than-human inhabitants, the value we ascribe to Earth’s precious resources, and the respect we show for life through our responsible use of those resources. Lent calls us to reject the path of domination or greed or status so that, like Jesus, we may truly be “of God”.