

“Encounter in the Wilderness”
February 22, 2026

Matthew 4:1-11

The public theologian and Episcopalian priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, suggests that the Bible “is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, *life*—and are never the same again.”

This year during Lent, my sermons explore the encounters that show up throughout scripture and the connections that people make with one another and with God. Using the Gospel of John, we will look at a few participants in that “staggeringly long parade.” We’ll see what happens when Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night and when Jesus encounters a woman at a well in the light of day. We’ll see Jesus making a connection with a man born blind and watch as Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha over their dead brother, Lazarus. Through these encounters, we’ll find new insights into our humanity, what the novelist Mark Haddon calls, the “thing human beings do together.”

First, however, let’s watch as Jesus encounters the reality of evil during a time of trial and temptation in the wilderness—an experience that also reveals Jesus’ humanity—and speaks to our own as well.

For forty days in the wilderness Jesus fasts.

Now, “forty” is not an exact measurement in scripture. It is used to refer to a long time; it is not an exact measure: the forty days of the flood, the forty years that Israel was in the wilderness after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. And here is Jesus, in the wilderness for forty days.

A long time—long enough for the devil to sense some weakness and show up to tempt him.

And as with “forty days,” when we hear or talk about “the devil,” we need to pause so that our understanding can catch up with our words.

Remember who—or what—we’re talking about here.

The Hebrew word, *satan*, is not a name but a word that simply means “adversary.” Throughout the Hebrew Bible the word appears several times, referring to ordinary human beings. If you had an opponent, you had a *satan*.

Over time, the word took on the sense of “one who pleads a case against another person.” In a court, you would be faced with a *satan*—and I’ll leave it to you to come up with your own lawyer joke from that. You might remember that the Book of Job begins in the heavenly courts where *Satan*, the accuser, the adversary has been patrolling the earth and brings Job’s case before God.

Our word “devil” comes from the Greek word *diablos*, which means, literally, a slanderer. For Matthew, the *adversary* of the Hebrew Scriptures has become the one who distorts the accusation and twists the evidence. The one who was seen as opponent of human beings has become the ultimate adversary, the one opposed even to God.

Set aside both those medieval paintings and those cartoon images of pitchforks, horns, and pointed tails. When we talk about the devil or Satan or the tempter, we are talking about what the Scottish minister and biblical scholar, William Barclay called the “essence of everything that is against God.”ⁱ

In the wilderness, then, Jesus encounters evil.

Let us be careful, here. Evil is not simply irritation or not getting what we want. Evil is not a different political perspective. There is much that we might dislike or even find repugnant that is not evil. We should be cautious in using that word, hesitant in labeling others with it.

And yet, look around. There does seem to be a power at work in the world that tempts all of us toward destruction, hate, abuse, greed. There is indeed something that is the “essence of everything that is against God.

In the bleak wilderness of violence and hatred, our guard might be up. But, an encounter with evil can occur just about anywhere—this is the warning from the encounters we heard this morning.

The garden is the image of God's desire for humankind: Abundance. Beauty. Wholeness. Peace. Stories of the garden say we were created for such as these. God's desire for human beings is life in all its fullness. When Genesis speaks of God “putting” that human being in the garden, it uses a Hebrew word that connotes great care on God's part. God is incredibly delicate with this human creation—as if setting a fragile vase on a table.

When surrounded by good things, the temptation, of course, is simply more good things. We know what that's like, don't we? “The tree was good for food, and it was a delight to the eyes, and it was to be desired to make one wise.” Satisfaction, delight, wisdom—are these not the goals of the arts and the sciences at the university that surrounds us? Are not these the goals of our labor? What could be wrong with wanting more? What could be wrong with unlocking the secrets of the atom or developing artificial intelligence without restraint?

Desert temptations are for the good as well.

Turn stones into bread—because there are always hungry people seeking to be filled.

Throw yourself from the tower into God's saving arms—because there are always people facing destruction and death.

Put the nations of the world under your command—because there are always powerless and oppressed people longing for freedom.

In the garden, in the wilderness, real temptation comes as an offer to rise, not to fall. We're not tempted by the ugly or the base but by the fine, the beautiful, and the noble.

In abundance and in scarcity, we encounter temptations that seem to offer something good: wisdom, food, delight, healing, satisfaction, power.

We're tempted by the idea that we *can* be like God.

We're tempted by the idea that we *can* save the world.

We're tempted by the idea that *more* is always *better*.

Because we are imperfect and our world is imperfect, however, even in reaching for the good we will have unlimited occasions of grasping onto evil instead.

Because we are imperfect and our world is imperfect, we are quick to want to push our way past any who would dare to get in the way of *our* pursuit of the good.

The paradox is that while temptation calls us to act, temptation always seems to require that we give up control of our own lives.

There is a very human tendency, as one theologian suggests, to "leave it up to the snake." Let someone else define reality, tell us what to do, what to think—leave it up to the snake. It's an easy way out for so many.

So, it has been suggested that what we see in the wilderness encounter between Jesus and the devil is not so much a person wrestling with Satan as with himself. Certainly, it is Jesus confronting the call to rise, not fall. The tempting path was to create a kingdom in the world that would be established by works of wonder and ultimately works of violence against the Roman Empire. The tempting path was to give control of his life over to what would bring acclaim and adoration and power. Those options were real.

What made Jesus appealing to so many people in his own time—and what continues to make him appealing in our time as well—is that could have chosen another path but did not.

He chose a path of non-violence even when it would lead to his own suffering.

He chose a path of personal responsibility in the face of those who would take his very life.

Let me be clear. The outcome of that testing was not predetermined. Jesus was not simply going through the motions. He could have chosen otherwise—but he did not.

Jesus could have chosen otherwise—but his decision in the time of trial and temptation was to remain true to his authentic self and to his vision of God's realm coming into the world.

And this is what makes the story of Jesus in the wilderness compelling for us today. Here we find someone whose personal integrity allows him to consider the options of self-promotion, self-aggrandizement, and acclaim by others and ultimately to hold to his own values, his own reality.

As such, Jesus makes possible the hope that by the grace of God, we too might hold on to our responsibility for our own lives. What a difference that could make in a world in which temptation so often includes a devilish invitation to turn over control of our lives to someone else.

The devil's thinking and speaking possesses a kind of certainty—a rigid assurance that there is only one way to view reality, only one possible outcome for any action.

Throw yourself off the pinnacle and the angels will take care of you.

Eat the fruit and you will be like God.

Perhaps.

But out of God's mercy we can imagine other possibilities as well. We begin to see that even our best actions can have negative effects. We begin to see that we never look as good to others as we do to ourselves.

Our hope in temptation, our hope when we encounter evil is not our own goodness but the grace of God that forgives and empowers.

On Ash Wednesday we are confronted with our own mortality. In the light of the hard truth that we will die we are invited to repent, to turn once more to the living God. That won't change the fact that we will die, but it might change how we live.

Now, on this first Sunday in Lent, we are reminded that the encounter with evil—and the temptations that accompany that—are not only the universal experiences of humanity. They are central to our own personal stories as well.

We are tempted human beings, prone to falling. As we face this—indeed only *if* we face our human condition—we are in the position to hear again the good news that comes to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Certainly one of the gifts of Congregationalism is its emphasis on individual responsibility before God. At our best, we're *not* going to let some snake—or anyone else—tell us what to do. We recognize that in joining this congregation, each one of us covenants to live in certain ways toward God and neighbor. We recognize that the life of faith will be different for each one of us. We recognize that we will discover new ways as we walk together.

Some day each of us will die. This means that what we do today *while we are alive* is of great, even eternal, significance. And so, we are called to live lives that bring healing, show love, create joy. In doing so, we recognize that we are challenged by the reality that all of our good works, all of our efforts to help others, can have unintended disastrous results. Therefore, in all that we do, we must be ready to seek and receive forgiveness.

In the garden, in the wilderness, in abundance and in scarcity we do encounter evil.

And there—always—we also encounter the forgiving love of God.

ⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pg. 12-14.