



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, March 1, 2020**  
*The First Sunday in Lent*

*The Litany and Choral Eucharist*  
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

*on*

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; and Matthew 4:1-11

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### **Taming the Wilderness**

*“Alone I was, without a single friend to give me a word of encouragement, I could neither pray nor read, but there I remained, for hours and hours together, uneasy in mind and afflicted in spirit on account of the weight of my trouble, and the fear that perhaps after all I was being tricked by the devil, and wondering what in the world I could do for my relief. Not a gleam of hope seemed to shine upon me from either earth or heaven; except just this: that in the midst of all my fears and dangers I never forgot how Our Lord must be seeing the weight of all that I endured.”<sup>1</sup>*

Words of one of the great Doctors of the Church, Teresa of Avila. Like so many holy people, she experienced great contrasts in her spiritual life – ecstatic moments when she was close to God, and dark nights of the soul when she wrestled with her faith. And, like so many of us, her testing times came when things were, actually, pretty okay. When she was sick, her prayer was fervent; when she was well, she struggled with her prayer-life.

On this first Sunday of Lent, the Gospel gives us an intimate account of Jesus’ own dark night of the soul – his temptation in the wilderness. We read how Jesus had been fasting for forty days and forty nights. Many believe this to be an echo of the forty years the Hebrew tribes spent in the wilderness following the Exodus. We know that, during those forty years the people were tested and tempted to the extreme; they were hungry; they were thirsty; they felt abandoned; they got sick; they argued; they turned to foreign gods and even made a golden calf to worship. Several times during their long and arduous journey, God questioned why he had brought them out of slavery for them to treat him with such contempt. Each time he relented and encouraged Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and the leaders to persevere. And, after those forty wilderness years, they came to the land of plenty – the Promised Land.

It is almost as if the wilderness experience was a necessary part of the Exodus story – that Israel needed to experience hunger and thirst, to be tested and tempted, in order to become stronger and more devoted to the Lord.

So, Jesus comes to his own wilderness experience and, like those first Hebrew Tribes, found himself famished and desperate. Then, and only then, when he was exhausted and famished, did the Devil choose to come.

He came not in any general way, but in very specific ways:

“Turn stones into bread; use your status to prove you are not like the starving on earth.”

“Throw yourself off the Temple; take a risk; be a showman; put your faith to the test.”

“Get as much power as you can, and at whatever cost; betray the ones you came to save and be like me.”

The Devil tempts Jesus in very specific ways – possibly with the very things that Jesus was contemplating. The Devil does not come in generalities but in specifics, just as in the Litany we prayed at the beginning of mass we heard petition after petition – specific things matter. That’s why going to confession is hard but also, so ultimately cathartic. In confession there is no place for generalities; the naming of specific sin is both humbling and releasing; no more secrets.

Jesus experienced all that it is to be human and that included temptation, doubt, and despair. His strength as the Son of Man came from his encounter with things all too human. This Second Adam that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans was not like the first Adam; *his* selfishness; *his* greed; *his* insatiable appetite for power (“*you will be like God, knowing good and evil,*” says the Devil so craftily, playing on the very thoughts in Adam and Eve’s minds) was to be his undoing. Through the first Adam came death but, poignantly, *life* would only come through the *death* of the Second Adam whose Resurrection would reverse the sin of pride.

“*O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam which gained for us so great a Redeemer!*” the Deacon will sing at the great Easter proclamation at the Easter Vigil.

By recognizing this sin but not allowing it to sabotage God’s plan, we discover that God has, in Christ, reconciled the world to himself. Michael Ramsey once said, “*This truth of man’s fallenness and Original Sin is written into our own personal self-awareness – at least, it is bitterly so in mine, and I expect it is in yours. It is also bitterly written into our historical diagnosis of the story of human civilization. What a world! What a mess! What a division! What frustration! But it remains God’s world, and somehow God is still in the heart of it, and the Spirit of God is ever striving with man, and does not cease to strive.*”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus brings redemption not *in spite* of his temptations but by carrying those same temptations to the cross – the crossbeam that he carried to Golgotha, as it were, symbolic of the weight of all human sin. No wonder he fell under its weight three times.

For Jesus, the wilderness experience became a necessary precursor to his ministry of proclamation of the Kingdom of God. “*Repent!*” he said to his first disciples. “*Repent!*” he says to you and to me. “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” (Matthew 4:17). **Turn around** (which is meaning of the word repentance) and turn away from sin.

Three years later, Jesus had another wilderness experience. This time, it was not in the desert but like the first Adam, in a Garden – the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times he threw himself down; three times he was plagued by fear; three times he felt himself alone, perhaps preparing himself for the abandonment that he would experience upon the cross; “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46b)

That wilderness experience was, therefore, also a precursor... **to our redemption.** While the disciples slept, Jesus suffered. While those in authority plotted and schemed, Jesus prayed.

My friends, on this first Sunday of Lent, let us turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ. But, don’t expect this Lent to be devoid of temptation; like Jesus we must enter into the wilderness and face our own demons knowing that he has already been there on our behalf. Once devoid of their power, we will be closer to him who loves us enough to stoop down and wash our feet.

<sup>1</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, *Autobiography*, Chapter 25

<sup>2</sup> From “*Through the year with Michael Ramsey*”, page 50