

---

## *The Three Temptations of the Pandemic Wilderness*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**  
**The First Sunday in Lent – Year C**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1)*

I have a special story to tell you this morning.

But, first, a word from the Bible! Most of you know that, in the Christian Church, the season of Lent begins with the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, the devil, the tempter. On the First Sunday of Lent, the Church always hears a version of this story. Jesus is led into the wilderness, for forty days of fasting, self-denial, and self-examination.

In that wilderness, he suffers at least three described temptations. Perhaps we remember them. Jesus is tempted to turn a stone into bread. Jesus is tempted to worship the devil and thus receive all the kingdoms of this world. Finally, Jesus is tempted to jump off the top of the temple, tempting God to send an angel to save him.

Jesus deflects each temptation, using a citation from scripture; because the devil, tempting Jesus, was using scriptural citations, too. Even Satan knows how to quote scripture.

Well, in our own time, for two years now, we have been living in a wilderness retreat ourselves. We have been isolated and alone. Maybe, now, we are re-emerging from our wildernesses, re-entering relationships, re-engaging truly in-person relationships and communities. This is feeling like a return, a return to nourishing community after our two year season of isolation and fasting and self-denial. We have already had Lent, forty days of wilderness temptations, for two years!

Here is what I offer this morning: the temptations we have faced recently are the same ones that Jesus faced. We have been there. We were there, with Jesus, in his wilderness temptations. And he has been here, with us, in our pandemic wilderness temptations.

Here is my special story for today. Here is how I imagine the story of Jesus's wilderness temptations in a pandemic time. These are the three temptations of the pandemic wilderness:

We were in the pandemic wilderness, and the devil came to us and said, "If you are a child of God, if you believe in prayer, command this stone to become a coronavirus vaccine!"

Oh, we certainly heard that taunt over and over again, didn't we? Why can't we get a vaccine, immediately! And, when we did get the vaccine, the temptation was "Why can't this vaccine be absolutely 100% effective?"

If only we could have had a 100% effective vaccine immediately! Yes, of course, that is a legitimate desire. But our fasting in the wilderness was about something else. It was about being safe and self-examining. We learned again that not every good thing in life happens immediately. Good things take time. Vaccines, like health itself, take time.

Many of us might have answered like Jesus, "Of course bread is necessary! Of course a vaccine is necessary! But we live by something else. We do not live by need alone." We live by the values of Christian character: wisdom, patience, love, generosity, no judgement. Those are the values we learned to live by, or that we tried

to live by, in our pandemic wilderness.

In the bible's second temptation, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said, "If you worship me, it will all be yours." Our second pandemic wilderness temptation was similar. When the devil said, "Worship me," the devil was tempting us to worship temporal and worldly authorities. The devil said, "Worship these worldly authorities, and they will be yours!"

Worship the mayor, worship the governor, worship the president, worship the CDC, worship the rabble-rousers. Worship the fake news. Worship the real news. Worship science. There are so, so many temporal authorities in this world. Some are very good! We could worship one, or several of them, and we might succeed for a time. But not forever.

Did we want absolute control of the temporal authorities of the world? Yes, of course, sometimes we did. If only I had been president, or governor, or mayor. And, how those authorities argued among themselves – everybody fighting for control. The fight for control is the devil's fight. Jesus replied, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Yes, it has been hard to be single-minded towards God in this pandemic wilderness.

Thirdly, the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple. After all, the psalms say God will send angels to protect you."

Again, we were there! Our pandemic wilderness temptation has been similar. The devil has told us, "If you are really faithful, if God is really going to protect you, then don't get a vaccine." The devil has told us, "If you are a child of God, then you don't need to wear a mask. God will protect you."

"If you are a child of God," the temptation goes, then "you can take careless and irresponsible risks." Oh, what a never-ending temptation. There are responsible risks in this world, and there are irresponsible risks. Jesus replied, "You shall not put the Lord thy God to the test."

And many of us have tried to answer similarly. Putting God to the test is one of the irresponsible risks of our time. We also remembered in this pandemic wilderness, "Don't put the people you love to the test, either!" That's another thing quarantines teach us, "Don't put the people you love to the test!"

Yes, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness have been our temptations in this pandemic wilderness. The temptation for immediate gratification, the temptation to put our trust in lesser authorities than God, and the temptation to put God to the test.

Each of us, in our own circumstance, has had a hard time resisting those temptations. They have been real and legitimate and powerful. They would not be true temptations if they did not have plausibility, such plausible possibilities of legitimacy.

The temptations in the wilderness were hard for Jesus to resist, too. And the same temptations in our pandemic wilderness have been hard to resist. We have needed the comfort of friends and the ministrations of angels.

Maybe, today, in March of 2022, we are emerging from our pandemic wilderness. I certainly hope so. If so, what have we learned?

There are such things as "beneficial" wilderness experiences. Jesus had one. Our wilderness experience, even if it was involuntary, and even if it included the tragedies of unnecessary deaths, might yet be beneficial for us if we have learned something about ourselves and about God through our temptations, just as Jesus did.

We do not live by immediate gratification alone. We worship the only God, and him only do we serve; we worship no lesser authorities. Finally, we do not put the Lord our God to the test. We do not take irresponsible risks.

Yes, we are ready for this two-year wilderness to be over! Maybe this Lent will bring the end. Maybe these next forty days will be the end of our fasting and isolation. We hope so. Lord, lead us not into temptation.

AMEN.

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*