

**Lent, 1st Sunday, Year A, 2011****Readings: Gen 2, 7-9; 3, 1-7; Rom 5, 12-19; Mt 4, 1-11****Trust in the wilderness**

Each year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we hear an account of Jesus's forty days in the wilderness, being tested while he was there. Today's gospel from Matthew is often called the story of the temptation of Jesus. I'd prefer to call it the story of the trust of Jesus, Jesus's trust in God while he is in the wilderness. It also calls us to trust in God, especially when we face an experience of the wilderness in our own lives.

Today's gospel follows immediately after Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist. At his baptism, right as Jesus is emerging from the waters of the Jordan, an extraordinary event occurs. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and the voice of God declares: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. The human Jesus has a powerful experience of who he really is. He is utterly loved by God. He is given the mission to proclaim to all his brothers and sisters—to us—that we too are God's beloved.

Right after this extraordinary beginning of his mission, Jesus is led into the wilderness for forty days. Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God. For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for his ministry. The forty days hark back to the forty years the

Israelites wandered in the wilderness in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land. Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt, told in the covenant at Sinai that they were God's own beloved people and always would be, and had been promised a land flowing with milk and honey. In the midst of the trials of moving through the desert, at Sinai God had sworn to be always with them.

But the test of the barren desert was too much for them. They complained that they would rather be back at the "fleshpots of Egypt." Even though they had been slaves there, at least they had meat to eat, not just the tasteless manna with which God was sustaining them during the long trek. So they gave up their faith—their trust—in the God who promised to be with them. They melted down their jewelry, made a calf of gold to be their God, and worshiped it. How easily their lack of trust became idolatry.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness have many literary echoes of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. Just as Israel's wilderness years began with God's promise always to be with Israel in love, Jesus's wilderness days begin with God declaring to him that "you are my beloved—with you I am well pleased." In the wilderness, the people of Israel had real problems keeping alive their trust that God really was with them. All they had was tasteless manna to eat, they were in danger from desert animals, and they certainly had not

achieved the political greatness that they thought the Promised Land would bring. So they turned aside from trust in God who set them free to worship an idol.

The test Jesus faced in his wilderness experience is similar. The tempter says: If you are God's son, you don't really need to trust God. You have the power to satisfy your hunger by turning stones into bread. You don't need to trust that you are God's beloved. Trust in me, says the tempter, I will give you political glory. Thankfully, Jesus's response to these tests is very different from Israel's. Jesus says no to each of them, declaring "Get behind me Satan--I will trust in God and God's love alone, not in your illusory suggestions that more bread, more glory, or more power can bring the fullness of what God's love promises."

Israel's and Jesus's wilderness days tell us a lot about what the 40 days of Lent can be for us. During Lent we are called, as Israel and Jesus were, to trust in the one who is "with us always, even to the end of the age." In this challenging vocation, Jesus has already gone ahead of us, even to the most forsaken places of the wilderness; he meets us in the most difficult tests of our own lives. No place is so desolate, so distant, or so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it. Let's pray during Lent that our trust in God's love will help us follow with Jesus in trusting God's love for us even as we move through those moments of life that seem like the desert.