

*And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.<sup>1</sup>*

## **OPENING:**

“What did Jesus give up for Lent?”

That’s a trick question, of course, and an anachronistic one.

Lent is a tradition of the early Church; so that question is like wondering how Mary got her Christmas shopping done during Advent.

“What *would* Jesus have given up for Lent?”...

might be a better question, if a little heretical.

Jesus is without sin, according to Church doctrine. So Jesus did not need to lose 10 pounds, or get off social media, or ramp up his prayer life, or clean up his language.

*We*, on the other hand, need Lent, that’s for sure; a period of self-examination and repentance and returning to God.

And Jesus can absolutely help us with that, Jesus can provide a model for what this season of renewal might look like. Jesus’ life, and particularly our story today, can invite us more deeply into a Holy Lent.

## **TESTING**

SO, again: “What did Jesus give up for Lent?”

For starters, he gave up a promising career as a carpenter, he certainly gave up a normal life with his family.

In our story, Jesus got baptized and then “BOOM” it was off into the Wilderness, starting his “Lenten” journey (little air quotes) with a time of challenge and danger. Notice how our Gospel mentions nothing here about Jesus doing any fasting or prayer or meditation.

Mark the Evangelist mentions nothing of that inner psychological work during Jesus’ “Temptation.” (Big Air Quotes on that one.)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1.13

That's because Mark seems to understand Jesus' time in the Wilderness less as a time of temptation, with its connotation of modern sin and morality and psychology, and more of a time of testing.

(The word in Greek, for what it's worth, can actually be translated either way: "test" or "tempt."<sup>2</sup>)

For Mark, it seems like Jesus goes out to the wilderness less to contemplate who he was or to agonize about his identity (that you can find in the other gospel accounts) and more to engage in "battle."

So, if you've come this Sunday looking for a discipline for this Lent, or you have already been derailed on your original one, you won't find anything like an inner journey here, but instead something more like an outer adventure.

The question "what did Jesus *give up* for Lent" might be changed then to something like "What is Jesus *taking on* Lent?"

There's already been a shift in the church world recently to shift that focus from "giving up" to "taking on".... That shift might parallel the distinction between tempt and test, or it might seem a little like semantics.

Obviously, Lent can be a time for both, it can be a time to understand what temptations in our lives are holding us back from God, and it can also be as an arena for something else, something more public, something more collaborative.

## **WILDERNESS**

My Lenten image of Jesus from this story is this one:

Jesus has just been baptized, has just been commissioned, he's inducted into God's team, and then he goes out to do the work.

Like a boxer in a 12-round bout, he goes to the Wilderness to spar with none other than the Devil.

He is not withdrawing for 40 days, he's putting himself in harm's way.

He's not fasting, he's carbo-loading for strenuous exertion.

He's not trying to improve himself, he's proving who he was in this title bout for the ages.

To continue the boxing metaphor, Jesus is sweaty and tired/ bruised and battered from fighting. When he retreats to his corner of the ring, angels "wait on him"—

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<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring "Exegetical Perspective" in Jarvis, Cynthia A., and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospels*. (Mark 1.12-13) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 15.

Raphael is his “cut man” patching up the wounds;  
Gabriel is whispering strategy to him about what to do in the next round;  
Michael is there with a water bottle for hydration.

So, “what did Jesus *take on* for Lent?”

Jesus took on the “powers and principalities” of the whole world.

He took on his public ministry. He took on the sick and possessed, the poor and the lonely. He took on the religious establishment, and the Roman Empire.

Mark does not actually specify those things, he does not elaborate the nature of Jesus’ battles with Satan. I think he does that to allow us to make it our own “tests.” We don’t have to do Jesus’ Lenten journey, God knows we can’t; but Lent does not have to be a retreat, it can be a time of advance and active testing.

### **COMMUNITY:**

Back to that verse about Jesus having the angels with him, I have never really thought about that before.

It says something important about our Lenten journey though, that we don’t have to engage in our disciplines by our lonesome. Jesus didn’t; he had the angels there waiting on him, helping him, guiding him.

“What did Jesus give up for Lent?”

He did not give up companionship or help or guidance. Mark’s very human Jesus needs that company and friendship.

And, do you know what the first thing that Jesus does when he gets out of the wilderness? When his Lent is over? When the angels are no longer with him?

Jesus goes and calls the disciples.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says to himself: “I am going to need some help.”

Still he says: “I will take literally anyone. I can’t do this alone, I needed the angels in the wilderness; during my ministry, I need some friends.”

I think that shows us that we don’t have to be alone in Lent, or ever in our journey, but especially in Lent and especially this year, and this time of year.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 1.16-20

## **PUBLIC**

Now when you make it into a group thing, that brings up the paradox in on our Lenten discipline where you are not supposed to “show off your Ashes” and you are not supposed to brag about it.

“What did Jesus give up for Lent?”

There might be a tendency to answer that question with “that’s none of your business” or “why do you need to know?” that’s between me and God.

There’s a fine line between that and making Lent a public discipline by trying to hold yourself accountable and the reality that we can’t do this by ourselves.

I thought about all this when I was posting our parish’s Ash Wednesday pictures. Those “ash selfies” are adorable and hilarious so they were hard not to share, but again did not want to brag. Ultimately, I think we need that testimony and witness. Good Shepherd needs each other, we need to remind ourselves who and whose we are, and that we are not alone during Lent, or ever.

## **CONCLUSION**

I know that the Gospel (or a Sermon) calling us to take on something MORE, in the time of pandemic, at this moment where parts of the country don’t even have water and power, might seem like a lot.

You might be saying “I have been giving up stuff and taking on stuff for a year, thank you very much.”

Maybe your bandwidth is limited, and you can only take on a minor battle: maybe try Lent Madness, or our Adult Formation Series.

**STILL:** Testing, rather than Temptation. Public, rather than Private.

Community, rather than Individual.

Those are the emphases from our Reading today, as I see them. Next year you will get Luke, and the next Matthew, and there will be different ones to draw, just as our context next year will, God willing, be much different.

If you are keeping score, last year the context was different, then we were entering a Lenten journey of uncertainty and fear, that we really had no idea the lengths and depth of. We were entering a wilderness of unimaginable constraints.

In this Lent and for all Lent, God never promises that there won’t be times of wilderness, times of testing, times that we seem ALONE. God does promise that God will be with us throughout, that the Kingdom of God is near, and that the Good News is here. **AMEN.**