

**Reflection on the Gospel-First Sunday of Lent Year A
(Matthew 4:1-11)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Lent comes around each year and presents us with its usual challenge to take stock of our lives, to see more clearly what is in our hearts, and to discover what might be calling us out of our comfort zones. It is a time for personal as well as group reflection, a time for entering into the “wilderness” and grappling with the mysteries of life, as well as a time of preparation for Easter. Today’s liturgy invites us to reflect on Jesus’ forty-day experience in the wilderness. Jesus is “filled with the Holy Spirit” and, like so many humans before and since, is “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness of life to be “tested” there. [“Tested” is a more accurate translation of the Greek than is “tempted”].

Forty is a significant number in Israel’s story: the great flood lasts forty days and forty nights; Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain of God; Israel wanders for forty years in the wilderness; King David reigns for forty years; the prophet Elijah travels forty days and forty nights in the wilderness on his way to the mountain of God. Explanations of its significance vary: a round number for long time; a time of testing or trial; totality or fullness.

The wilderness is ever so real and at the same time symbolic. In Israel’s story, it is the place of testing for God’s people: “Remember the long way that your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness... testing you to know what was in your heart” (Deut 8:2). In Matthew’s account, the “devil” is the “tester” or “tempter”, the instrument of God’s testing. In each instance, the test is expressed in terms of Jesus’ relationship to God: “If you are the son of God....” The Matthean Jesus passes the tests that the people of Israel have failed in the wilderness of Sinai. He refuses the way of special favour from God, the way of status or self-aggrandisement. He is prepared to suffer whatever it takes to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world. In other words, he chooses the way of God’s empire or the empire “of the heavens” rather than the brutality of the Roman Empire. Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed “of God”.

Most people of faith would agree that being “of God” right now has more than a little to do with the way we relate to all of Earth’s human and other-than-human inhabitants, the value we ascribe to Earth’s precious resources, and the respect we show for life through our responsible use of those resources. Lent calls us to reject the path of domination or greed or status so that, like Jesus, we may be truly “of God”.