

# First Sunday in Lent

## February 22, 2026

### Matthew 4:1–11

Jazz legend Louis Armstrong's voice uniquely intones, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus." The author is unknown, but the song is attributed to the oral tradition of enslaved communities in the US. It is a testament to a people's resilience in the face of great adversity and turmoil. The song is not a sorrow song but a song of joy that affirms Jesus's solidarity with those who suffer.

We are in the first week of Lent, which is a time of testing. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, when we are reminded of our own mortality, we enter the story alongside Jesus as he is lured into the wilderness to be tempted by an adversary. This year feels especially Lent-y to me, so it does not take too much imagination to feel like you're in the desert, pondering the current state of our world.

Our text from Matthew's gospel tells us it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. This excursion immediately follows Jesus's baptism, showing how the Spirit's presence descending upon him compels him into a time of refinement before his ministry begins. In Matthew's Gospel, it is clear that the Spirit is the animating force of Jesus's ministry. And rather than leading Jesus away from the chaos, the Spirit sends Jesus directly into it. How ironic that we pray, "lead us not into temptation," when that is exactly what the Spirit does here!

Jesus is tested in three places: the wilderness, the pinnacle of the temple, and a mountaintop. The wilderness was known as a place where evil spirits lurked. The apex of the temple speaks of a place of ultimate religious authority and worship, and the mountaintop is the sacred landscape of the Law. At each of these locations, Jesus is challenged: to make bread in the wilderness, to summon angels at the temple, and to worship the devil on the mountaintop. Each enticement would require Jesus to assert his power. However, each time, Jesus confidently responds to the tempter with Scripture. After the third rebuttal, the devil leaves.

## Matthew 4:1–11 in context

I would like to offer three insights before considering how the story still speaks to us today.

First, it is imperative to understand what Matthew's narrative is telling us so we can ponder the passage's relevance for us today. Matthew's Gospel is concerned with situating Jesus in the Jewish tradition. For Matthew's author, Jesus is the fulfillment and embodiment of Moses and Elijah, that is, of the law and prophets (5:17).

Second, when we read that Jesus stayed in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, we should recall the Israelites who endured a time of testing as they roamed the desert for 40 years, Moses's 40 days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 18), and Elijah's 40-day journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Matthew continues to recapitulate Israel's history in the Jesus story.

Third, Jesus offers an example for how to respond to these temptations. With each escalating request, Jesus resists and overcomes this time of testing by quoting Scripture. Unlike the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf at Sinai, Jesus refuses to succumb to the attractive offers of the devil.

What can we glean from this story today?

As Louis Armstrong sings, Jesus does indeed know about our troubles. Our passage this week reminds us that he knew what it was like to be tempted and tested. His 40 days in the wilderness were not the end of his trials. He would be tempted by religious authorities throughout his ministry and finally in Gethsemane. It is the same for us today; we should expect trials and temptations.

Nevertheless, there are a few takeaways from the reading.

1. We do not enter the wilderness alone. The Spirit accompanies us there. There is nowhere where God is not. Thus, we have no reason to fear in times of trepidation.
2. Jesus shows us that when we are informed and transformed by God's Word – that is, the still-speaking, dynamic Word – we can resist the tempters and temptations of our age that make false promises.
3. As Lent draws us into the desert places, we can take heart. We can overcome just as Jesus did.

So, be encouraged! This is the good news for us this Lent.

Questions for reflection on Matthew 4:1–11

1. What temptations are you facing as you seek to follow the Spirit at present?
2. How can Jesus's example show how to resist and overcome these temptations?
3. Listen to Louis Armstrong's "[Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen](#)" as you consider the above questions.