

February 22, Lent 1A (Matthew 4:1–11)

This is Jesus' story, after all, and not ours. Unless it is.

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

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A doctor buddy of mine, who is no biblical literalist, is nonetheless convinced that the story of Jesus in the wilderness is both factual and true. His assumption is that this wilderness is the same wilderness Jesus traversed in search of John, full of the selfsame angels and beasts and temptations, only unseen until after he found his cousin and was baptized by him.

Jesus fasts for 40 days and nights, however one might construe the facts and figuring of the actual experience. At the end of that period of fasting, he enters a kind of altered state of consciousness in which he does spiritual battle with the tempter. The wilderness Jesus enters still wet with his baptism is a blast furnace that burns away all that might confuse the basic issues of his life and ministry. At the end of his fasting he is able to hear and answer clearly: whether to eat or not to eat, to flex or not to flex, to worship God or not to.

It is such a great story. The bare environs, the *diablo y hombre*, the eternal versus the temporal—all these basic binaries are amplified by an order of cosmic magnitude.

But so what? What does it have to do with us really? “Nothing” is the first answer.

I mean, yes, how thankful we are that, spent as he is, Jesus musters enough strength to make a final declaration of filial loyalty before he begins his work. He chooses well, in other words, and faithfully. For which we are all in his debt, to be sure.

And, yes, we are tempted, too, but not like he was. No, he did not yield, though we most often do. Yeah, well, whatever.

And so we read it but pass over it. Our horizons do not fuse with his. And part of the reason, my friend says, is that when we come to this story we have barely started our 40 days, if in fact we intend to. We have an unaltered consciousness, the ashes on our heads notwithstanding. In all probability we have trouble remembering our baptism, trouble seeing our circumstance as a desert or our choices as quite so binary.

So yes, we appreciate the story, always have, and we may even be thankful in a general sort of way. But it is Jesus' story, after all, and not ours.

Unless it is. In Lent we may find that we too are nowhere we haven't been already. But if we pause, if we fast and pray, if we attend not only to where we are but how we got there, we may see and hear what at other times our blind eyes and deaf ears have failed to notice: urgent, inescapable alternatives.

This year I am especially mindful of what happens to Jesus between his baptism and his wilderness sojourn. Between wet and dry. How he goes back, again, to where he has been and stays there till the conflict is over. I am trying to be mindful of the ways that my baptism leads me into the desert where there are life-and-death temptations, if also angels to comfort me after encounters with the devil.

Recently, while working on another project, I discovered something I never noticed before. It was so shocking to me that I called my old Greek professor for some remediation. Yes, he said, Luke does use a verb that could be translated, “As Jesus *brought himself back* from the Jordan and into the wilderness, for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.” If that is what Luke intended, then entering the wilderness is Jesus’ choice. Alone. He has full agency, and there falls victim to the devil’s machinations. Unless he marched in to face them.

Mark, conversely, removes Jesus’ agency altogether. The Spirit heaves, hurls, throws, drives Jesus into the wilderness.

Matthew splits the difference. There is external agency here, but it is gentle: “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” And I can only imagine his experience fuels the prayer he later teaches us: Lead us not . . . there. Save us from that.

Suddenly, Jesus’ story, one way or the other, is my story too. And yours. It is precisely here where my consciousness of temptation and a fusion of horizons with Jesus’ can occur.

Which is to say, sometimes I bring myself into situations where my faith will be tested. Other times I land where I have been launched. And then come those time and seasons when, though I have prayed not to be, I am led into places where there are alternatives, and to be faithful I have to muster strength and scripture and focus enough to escape the devil’s hunger and desire to consume me.

Our first temptation on this first Sunday of Lent is to observe and evaluate from a distance—maybe do a quick compare and contrast of the three stories or, as I did, the three verbs. But if we stay there, we have failed the first test.

Which begs the second answer to the question as to what this story has to do with us: everything. All the whats and whys of Jesus’ story help us to discern our own stories of temptation. The truths, if indeed there are truths, that will tell us how we got here and how we should respond if we wish to continue our journey in faith, not only through these 40 days but every day following our baptism.