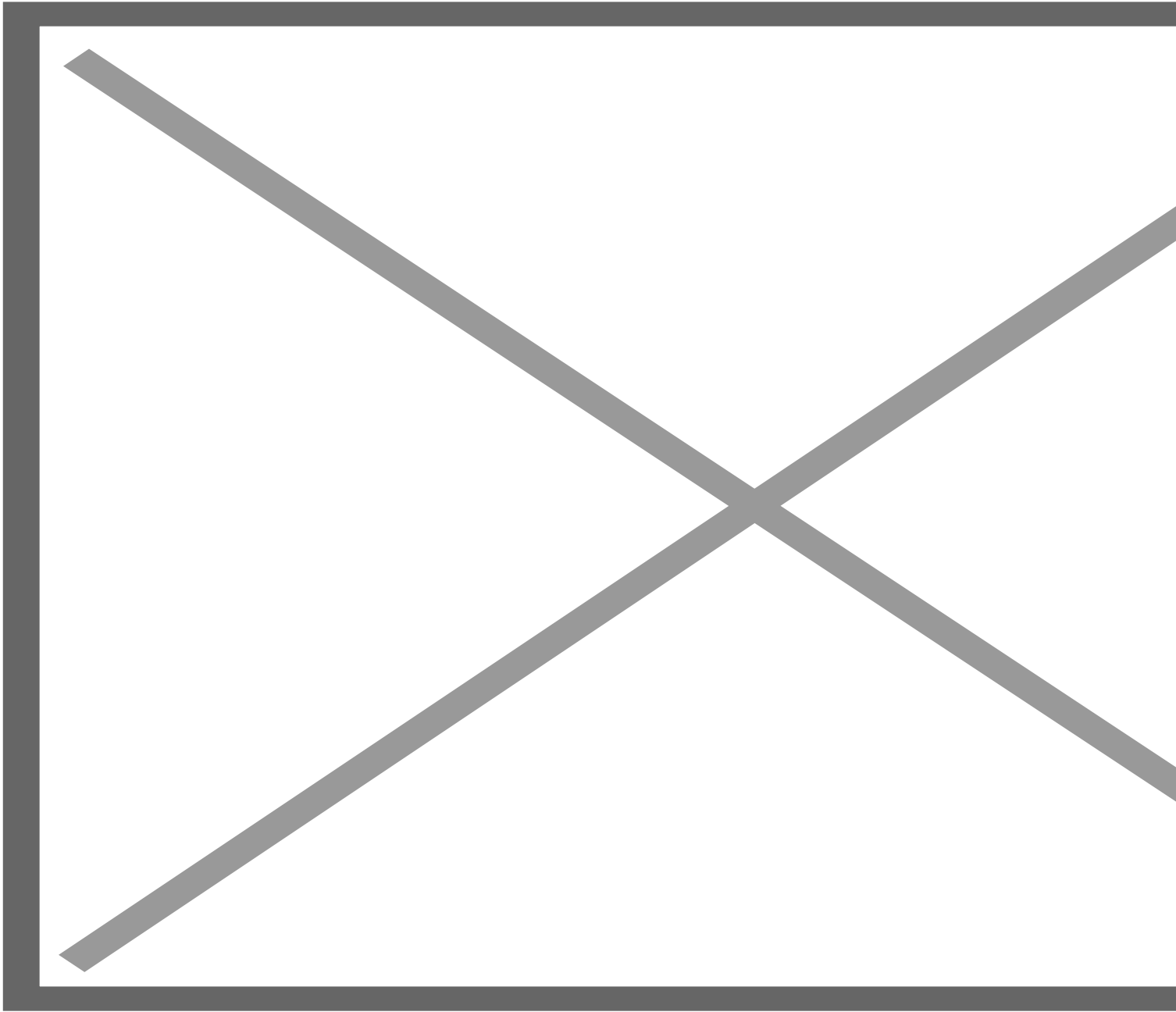


Jesus and the wilderness of trans identity

I am struck by how Christ's desert experience relies on inner convictions resisting an external voice.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

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It is a symptom of my deep, unresolved caution about the Bible that I continue to ask whether it holds good news for trans people like me. One of my hermeneutic tics is to ask of any passage—after the great Phyllis Trible, who died last fall—is this a “text of terror”? During Lent, my attention fixes on Jesus’ 40 days and nights in the wilderness, that great arc of love and mystery that signals his formation for adult ministry. In the desert’s wide-open spaces, he figures out who he is and what that might mean. Could that be good news for trans people?

The temptations Satan places before Jesus are justly famous: he invites the famished Jesus to turn stones into bread, dares him to jump off the temple’s pinnacle, and offers him all the kingdoms on earth in exchange for his worship. Jesus, of course, resists him each time.

Satan invites Jesus to turn his back on his deepest, truest identity. In resisting this, Jesus shows how much he has begun to accept this unique identity and who he is destined to become. Christ begins to reveal where his true treasure lies. It is not in the immediate gratification of hunger, in a display of power on a temple wall, or even in exercising authority over the nations of the world. It lies in an identity focused on and oriented toward humble service. He may be God’s son, but he refuses to claim equality with his father.

As a trans person I am struck by how Jesus’ wilderness experience relies on inner convictions resisting an external voice, in this case Satan’s, which tempts him to treat them with disrespect or doubt them entirely. For Jesus, of course, those convictions focus on who he is being called to be by God. In the face of his hunger, thirst, and desperation, he finds the strength to resist being deflected by a false voice from his trust in God.

Not for a second do I want to claim that my experience of being trans is equivalent to Christ’s torment in the wilderness. But there are suggestive intersections. When I look back on the inner convictions that led me to transition more than 30 years ago, I think of the countless disbelieving voices I encountered, voices full of pushback. I get how hard it is to not give in and give up when times of trial come along. If Jesus was even half the extraordinary person I believe him to be, I cannot accept that he did not question or interrogate his convictions, even in the midst of his burgeoning ministry. I think he must have done so. Otherwise, I cannot see how he would have become the trustworthy and loving leader he became.

To dare to follow the inner voice of conviction is risky and dangerous. It may lead one into trouble; it may lead toward fuller life and the promise and hope that entails. Since transitioning I have faced unpleasantness, even downright nastiness. This is part of the deal when one seeks to live authentically, against the flow: it winds people up, not least because it disrupts their ideas about normality. It is also costly because it takes time, and not everything can be made neat or safe. If I have gained so much from becoming a little more myself, I have lost things too: friendships, paths my life might have taken. The challenge, I have found, is to let them go, because most of them were only ever ghostly temptations in the first place, haunting my dreams.

I also find it helpful to reflect on Jesus’ time in the garden of Gethsemane when, ahead of his betrayal and crucifixion, he asks God to take away the “cup,” his destiny on the cross. He asks God to spare him the ultimate truth of what it means to be the Son of God: betrayal, mockery, torture, and a criminal’s death. In Matthew Jesus asks three times to be spared this cup (26:44), and in Luke his torment is such that he sweats blood (22:44).

I think it takes a lot of honesty and courage to accept ourselves as we are, especially in a disbelieving world. Sometimes it is so challenging it leads us, metaphorically, to sweat blood. And sometimes it entails letting go of our desire, our need, to fit in with “normal” ideas of what it is to be human. Christ is someone who is worth following because, in the midst of the temptation to walk away from truth and his very human desire to be spared its cost, he is faithful. He takes the uneven, strange, and seemingly absurd path that leads, via his death and resurrection, to the complete reworking of the fabric of the world.

If Lent invites us to reflect on who we are and who we might become, where does that leave people like me who have undertaken significant adventures in identity? I want to believe I have learned to trust more in life's mess and mystery. When I was young, I needed to prove to the world that I was who I said I am and, unsurprisingly, this required a lot of focus and grit. Now that I am middle-aged and settled in my identity, I am more relaxed. I can sit more lightly with the fact that none of us quite fits or is quite as normal as we might like to appear. We are all, I think, normally abnormal. We are mysteries to ourselves and to each other, and if there is ever to be full disclosure, it is not in this life. In the meantime, perhaps the best we can do is learn to celebrate the mystery.