

**A Table Beyond the Wilderness**  
**A Homily for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Matthew 4:1-11**  
**March 5, 2017**

Today's lection is strange.

For starters, we're just beginning our 40-day journey through Lent (47 if you count your Sundays). But in today's text, Jesus has finished his. He spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. And he's famished.

Keep reading. Stranger things await. Satan makes an appearance.

And Satan, that tempter to top all tempters, sees an opening: "Let's see what this Jesus is made of." So Satan sets about trying to tempt Jesus in three separate acts.

"Prove that you are who you say you are," says Satan. "Use your power to turn these stones to bread."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

"Prove that you are who you say you are," says Satan. "Use your power to levitate like a real supernatural being."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

"Look around," says Satan. "All of this can be yours: mountains and kingdoms – the whole world and all its splendor. Just bow down and worship me."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

Keep reading. More strange things ahead.

And then Satan vanished. And the angels came. And I'm guessing they brought Jesus some bread. And he was no longer famished. And he was no longer weary.

So...what are we to make of this strange text? And what are we to make of this strange Lenten season? And what relevance does it have for the table we're invited to?

For starters, Matthew continues his trend of giving Jesus similar characteristics to Moses. You'll remember that Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights receiving God's law on Mt. Sinai. And you'll remember that Moses too, had to contend with demonstrations of power. Moses lived in a Show-Me world, but he followed a God who didn't believe in demonstrations of power for their own sake, and a God who worked on His own schedule.

In today's text, Jesus exhibits the patience of one who knows the law – you don't profane God by turning Her divinity into party tricks to build your credibility; nor do you demand that such divine power

prove its worth to you; nor should you be lured by false powers – those finite, flimsy trappings of this world. The story tells us that Jesus is worthy. And righteous. And disciplined.

And just in case we didn't know it – Jesus is of God. This Son of Man leaves Satan bewildered and even the angels wait on him.

But that's just the surface of this story. Because if we're honest, we're really not the type of people who care to actualize 40-day fasts in a lonely desert, and a literal devil and a literal host of angels. "It's a nice metaphor," we say.

But it's really not that nice. And it's really not that tame. For whether literal account, or fanciful fable, this text offers a biting truth: We seek power. But not God's power. We seek the flimsy power of this world.

We seek to make bread from stones, not by trusting that God's manna will be provided, but rather, by using our money, or our influence, or our stubborn determination to create worldly solutions. And somehow our hunger pangs are never stilled.

We seek to levitate, not in the hopes of experiencing the ever-surprising powers of the Holy Spirit, but rather in the hopes of finding the proof of our own making: tangible, indisputable, rational facts that tell us God is so.

We want to believe that God's love is enough. We want to believe in a Kingdom where our share is so full, and our neighbors' too, that we'll never have to worry about feeling left out. But those powers and principalities dangle their privileges right in front of our noses. And as much as we want to say "No thanks," we long to cozy up to them.

Jesus spent 40 days in the desert. Or if you cling to metaphor, he spent a long time discerning his call. And he came to realize that God is not about power. God is about love. And God is about community.

Today's story reminds us that we still think God is about power rather than love. And the story reminds us that too often, we seek to demonstrate our power as an act of love for God. And too often, Lent becomes our 40-day demonstration.

Well here's what I think.

Giving up chocolate or red wine or even Lent for Lent, may help you discern how and what it is to love God. But it won't make you love God any more or any less than you already do. Because God is not a transaction or a test. God is a process. God is fluid and mysterious and bigger than any season.

In the person of Jesus, we met someone who showed us our best glimpse, our best understanding of God. And he spent his entire life discerning that God, contemplating that God, seeking to make his life a demonstration of that God.

If we're not careful, we'll use Lent as an excuse to seek God in the wilderness – or should I say, we'll believe that God is only visible in the wilderness. But remember, today's story comes after the wilderness. Jesus went back into the world. And he didn't seek power, he offered love. And he offered it a table.

He's still at that table. And whether you are floundering in the desert, or lost in a proof text, or even experiencing your first caffeine headache from your Lenten adventure; He's waiting for you there. And he's there to tell you that when you come to this table, you needn't seek power; you needn't demonstrate the miraculous; you needn't worry about your status; or hoard the crumbs of your manna.

Because God's table is enough. It's big enough for every person and every experience and every season. And it's even big enough to outshine the darkness of a cross. And guess what? It does. Today. And every day. And you are invited. Amen.