

Lent 1 sermon: Meeting God in the Wilderness

(Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Lent is not a loud season. It's quiet. Slower. A time for musing and reflection. It's a time when the Church gently invites us to bring our real selves before God. Not the polished version of our selves nor a robust version, but the real one that may be a bit fragile. And today's readings meet us there – not in strength but in weakness.

In our first reading, Paul speaks about Adam and Christ. And Matthew shows us Jesus in the wilderness. Both readings whisper the same truth that God takes on board our frailties, our weaknesses.

When Paul speaks about Adam, he is not trying to shame us. Rather, he is trying to help us acknowledge the truth that deep down we recognize ourselves in Adam's story.

We know what it is to doubt God's goodness. We know what it is to reach for control. We know what it is to hide when we feel exposed. Most of us don't rebel dramatically. We drift quietly. We get tired. We get afraid. We get hurt. And slowly without noticing, our trust in God becomes thinner, flimsier. It's not gone, just fragile.

And that fragility shows up in so many ordinary ways, such as worry that keeps us awake at night, or resentments we carry too long, or habits we wish we could break, or shame we don't know how to name. This is what Paul means when he says sin entered the world through one man. He is describing the human condition we all share which is a life that is beautiful but bruised.

And then the Gospel provides us something tender. We see Jesus. He's not preaching or healing, not shining in glory, but tired and hungry and alone in the wilderness. And this matters a lot because it means God chooses to meet us not only in our strength, but in our exhaustion.

Jesus does not begin His ministry at a feast. He begins it in the desert. If you feel like you are in a wilderness right now, know that you are not outside the story of Jesus. You are right in the midst of it.

Some of us know the wilderness well. It may not look like barren ground littered with sand and stones and the occasional wizened plant. Rather, it may look like a hospital waiting room, a silent house after loss, a season of unanswered prayer, a faith that feels dry, or a future that seems uncertain.

Wilderness seasons are the times when life feels stripped down - when distractions fall away, when certainties loosen, when we feel more vulnerable than we care to admit. And in those moments, a quiet fear may creep in with the question, "Where is God now?"

But today's gospel passage answers that fear gently but firmly – God is here. He is already here because Christ has been in the wilderness too. One of the most comforting truths in Scripture is this, that Jesus knows temptation from the inside. He knows what it is to be hungry, to be tired, to be tested.

And the temptations he faced are deeply human ones - not strange, dramatic temptations, but familiar ones such as the temptation to take care of oneself first; the temptation to demand certainty; and the temptation to choose the easy road instead of the challenging one.

These are the same temptations we carry. And yet, Jesus meets them not with force, but with trust; not with anxiety, but with surrender as in his weakness he holds onto our heavenly Father. And that is very good news for us because it means faith is not about never being tempted. It's about holding on to God in the midst of temptation.

Some people enter Lent quietly discouraged. They think, "I should be stronger than this by now" ... "I should have more faith" ... "I should be further along in my Christian life than this." But the wilderness story tells us something different. Struggle is not failure, and weakness is not rejection. Temptation is not abandonment. Remember, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit. Not because He had failed but because God was doing something deep and holy.

If during this Lenten season you feel weak, hear this clearly: your weakness does not disqualify you from God's love. It may be the very place where you discover his love most deeply.

Paul tells us that where Adam brought death, Christ brings life. But notice how Christ does it. Without loudness or violence, or by crushing humanity. He saves us through faithfulness, through quiet obedience, through steady trust, through love that refuses to let go. Jesus saves the world not by avoiding suffering but by walking through it with love. And that means our story, too, can be a place where grace works quietly through love and trust.

Sometimes we treat Lent like a spiritual test. Did I pray enough? Did I fast correctly? Did I give up the right things? Lent is not about impressing God. It is about coming closer to Him. It is not about proving our strength. It is about discovering His gentleness. The Lenten season invites us not to perform, but to return. To return like children coming home, with honesty and simplicity, and with open hands.

Paul tells us something deeply hopeful, that we are no longer trapped in Adam's story. We are invited into Christ's story. That means our past does not get the final word, and our worst moments do not define us, and our failures are not our identity.

In Christ, a new humanity has begun. A humanity that is shaped by grace and not by fear; by being found and not by hiding; by life and not by death. We are invited into that life, not because we have earned it but because Christ gives it.

So, how shall we walk our journey through Lent? Let's do it gently. We pray simply even if our words feel inadequate. We turn towards God quietly even if our faith feels fragile. What matters most is not how strong our grip is on God. What matters is that His grip on each of us is strong. And it always is.

My hope and prayer for each one of us is that we realise we are not alone in our wilderness. Christ is not watching us, observing us from a distance. He is, in fact, walking beside us. When we are tired, he understands. When we are tempted, he understands. When we feel lost, he understands. And besides understanding, he stays. Our Lord does not leave when we need him. He draws closer.

The passage from Romans ends with a breathtaking promise – where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. Not a little more but abounded. Grace is abundant. It's larger than our regrets, stronger than our fears and deeper than our wounds.

This is the hope we carry into Lent, that Christ is faithful and he is gracious and he is with us. As you walk your Lenten journey, come as you are. Come tired. Come unsure. Come carrying whatever this season holds. Bring your wilderness with you because the One who stood in the desert now walks beside you.

He invites you to stay close. And when you do so, you will find life growing quietly within you. From Adam came the story of our brokenness. But in Christ, a new story has begun. And that story is full of life that is still unfolding, even now, even here, even in us. Amen.