

Bedrock truths: Matthew 4:1-11

The Tempter will return again and again. But we are never left alone.

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

Lent tears us from the glow of Christmastide and Epiphany and propels us into a harsh new season. The early warning signs—the flight into Egypt, Rachel’s uncontrollable wailing, the talk of the cost of discipleship—were easy to gloss over while the “Noels” were still ringing in our ears. But now it is Lent, and the same Holy Spirit who gave Jesus life has led him to the Place of Devastation, that he might be tested.

What a rapid descent from that mountaintop of Transfiguration to this desert of Temptation. Even as the disciples saw a different face of Jesus revealed in the high presence of God, another face will be unveiled at sea level. The Son of Man now wears a face of sheer determination and conviction. Pared down. Transparent. Uncompromising. In the wilderness, all music stops and the silence is deafening.

The silence is broken, after 40 days and nights, by the verbal combat of two worthy foes. This is not a word game, a test of wits, a scriptural quiz show to reveal the weakest link. It’s not a question of who knows the Bible better. When people employ scripture as a tomahawk missile, it never is. On that score, the contestants are equally skilled. And when the bell rings, both are left standing in a draw.

Bread? Of course hungry people must be fed. But bread comes from the hand of God and not from you, Satan. Physical safety? God takes no interest in foolish bravado. Political power? It will be central to the justice of the new realm of God. But not at any price. And not for its own sake.

Having fasted 40 days and 40 nights, Jesus knows to cling to bedrock truths and commandments. This confrontation is about ultimate allegiance and purity of heart. Worship the Lord your God and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Jesus affirms the value of Satan's bait: security, food and power. But he will not compromise integrity. He stands firm and checks his power. He prevails with words, not with force. And he steadfastly refuses to take credit or cast himself in the role of hero. *Soli Deo gloria*. To God alone be the glory.

The real battle, Jesus teaches, is to be waged and won in the believer's heart. The foes are internal: the temptation to apathy, indifference, selfishness and self-promotion. The temptation to confuse ends with means. To annihilate the foe. To rationalize it all, every step of the way, in the form of a reassuring triumphalistic faith to which the righteous ought to be entitled.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the church sets aside 40 days and 40 nights as a time of self-examination and a setting aright of priorities. Ash Wednesday's traditional prayer called for any who had committed "notorious sin" to repent and do penance fitting their deed, that they might be returned to the fold.

Most of us will be relieved by this verbiage, for we assume that none of our sins are exciting or dramatic enough to be counted as notorious. But the church crafted this language out of its early experience of persecution and repression. Those not strong enough to resist, those who had betrayed their Lord or informed on their neighbors or paid bribes to be left alone, had, in the eyes of the church, sinned "notoriously." And sin had public and political consequences. Lent became a season to refocus on love of God and love of neighbor that a kind of homecoming might become possible and community restored.

Today the church wrestles with notorious sin and its consequences in South Africa, in Rwanda, in the former Yugoslavia, in the former Eastern bloc nations and Russia, Guatemala, Argentina, the Philippines and China. In places where the church has been persecuted, where the church has been complicit in illegitimate brutal power, where fear and survival drove neighbors to hate and betray one another—in all of these places, the church agonizes over notorious sin. The challenge is to create healing through confession, truth-telling and repentance, in order that reconciliation and restored life might become possible.

But lest we imagine that Lent is only "for someone else," our own fasting and listening and reflection should lead to self-examination and penance as well. The false gods of vengeance, self-righteousness, arrogance, isolation and blood lust are right by our side, ready to lead us to notorious sin.

The Tempter will return again and again. However, we are never left alone in the wilderness of our struggles. God sends angels to us, heavenly messengers who bring sustenance and restore strength. They will come to us suddenly, when we are exhausted and vulnerable. When we most need them, they will come and lift us up. In the second century, a desert father wrote: “The devil cannot lord it over those who serve God with their whole heart and who put their hope in him. The devil can wrestle with them, but cannot overcome them.”

Notorious sin, public and private, can be forgiven. In the wholehearted service of God, the work of ministry remains—preaching, teaching and healing. We do not languish in the Place of Devastation. With ash on our foreheads, we move on. To Galilee, to Capernaum, to Jerusalem, to our neighbor, to our enemy, to all the ends of the earth and the inmost places of our hearts.