

Looking evil in the face

By [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#)

February 11, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes the current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

This week's readings are generally about the faithful. Deuteronomy describes God's faithful care of a "wandering Aramean" or "Syrian about to perish"—most likely Jacob. The psalm echoes God's faithful care of God's own, safely abiding in the shadow of the Almighty. Paul reminds the Romans how uncomplicated it is to come by salvation: it only takes faithful hearts and faithful speech. And we see Jesus' profound faithfulness as he survives the devil's temptations in the wilderness.

Preaching these texts looks easy enough, maybe even uninspiring. It doesn't get much more basic than faith.

But upon closer inspection, we have a decidedly un-basic situation here. It requires more than simple eloquence about faith to preach Psalm 91:9—"If you say 'The Lord is my refuge' . . . no harm will overtake you"—when children are being shot to death in their own schools, playgrounds and homes. How can we proclaim God's faithfulness to the Israelites without also dealing with those still living under oppression, without addressing today's stories of gang rape, racial-ethnic profiling and hate crimes?

And then there's Lent. Lent literally means "spring," when the dead of winter starts to give way to fresh sprouts and renewed life. But the start of the liturgical season seems to call for something different: burrowing into the ground, harshly searching ourselves, being honest about pain and hurt and acknowledging where our faith has been lacking.

Our Gospel text is the quintessential one for the start of Lent: Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. Sent by the Spirit into a lonely and harsh place, on a trip marked by hunger, thirst and wrestling with evil, the Jesus we see here is inescapably human. A month and a half of fasting has left him tired and vulnerable.

In comes the tempter to wrestle Jesus out of God's grasp when he's least able to resist.

The word translated as "wilderness" or "desert" here means "solitary" or "desolate"; it refers to places that are uninhabited and uncultivated. According to Strong's it also refers to *people* who are alone, abandoned, lost or denied care and safety.

What if we thought of Jesus as sent not to a place but to a state of isolation and insecurity? He's just been baptized, exposed by a voice from heaven as the Son of God, and now he is alone and suffering. The faithful are not faithful in a vacuum; they are faced with the task of being faithful while looking evil in the face.

That's why even though our readings are about the faithful, this week's real lesson might lie with Satan—with looking evil in the face.

Satan only asks Jesus the same questions we find ourselves asking God. When I've gone so long without nourishment, why not take whatever I can find and make it food? If I can get money, fame, and power by being self-centered and opportunistic, why follow God at all? When I face danger and death, isn't God supposed to make sure nothing ever hurts me?

These aren't just temptations designed to kick a man while he's down. They're *our* questions, begging God—daring God—to show us where God is in the midst of all this suffering. We can use the season of Lent to wrestle with these questions—and with the simple fixes toward which our feelings of fear, loneliness and desolation tempt us.

When Jesus responds to Satan with the word of God, the point isn't just that it's important to memorize scripture. It's important to *learn the character of God*—and the character of the faithful.

Deuteronomy talks about a God who delivers, but not before real suffering takes place—a life of wandering, centuries of slavery, decades of being lost in desolate places. Psalm 91 is attributed to David, who saw his share of sin and

suffering—chased by kings and armies, murderously pursuing another man’s wife, the death of one child and the rape of another. Paul writes that all who call on God will be saved, but clearly not from years of persecution, shipwrecks and jail time. Yet in each case, the faith, failures, and struggles of the faithful transform them and their communities.

I suggest we let the Spirit send us into desolate places when we preach these texts. God willing, we too can proclaim faith that outlasts wilderness—and good news deep enough to transform it.