

Jesus in the Wilderness

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on February 22nd, 2026, (Matthew 4:1-11))

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Today marks the first Sunday in Lent and for the first time in 33 years it coincides with the beginning of both the Lunar New Year and Ramadan. All three of these are significant culturally for the groups that mark it. For Christians Lent is the forty days leading up to Easter and traditionally has been the time in which we reflect on our journey of faith. Often people give up something, I guess in order, to reflect the story we read today, they give up something that tempts them, for the period of Lent.

In our story today we find Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted and prayed for 40 days (and as 'N' commented during reflective prayer, he fasted and stayed there without complaint, compared to the Israelites who spent 40 years in the wilderness and did nothing but complain).

After he had finished his forty days Jesus was famished, and only then we find him tested. Three tests or temptations – food, power and safety. All tests are rejected by Jesus who uses Scripture to refute them, even when the tempter uses Scripture to tempt in the first place. All three tests reveal that Jesus is completely human and completely divine and provide guidance for us when we find ourselves tempted.

However, this morning I want to take us back to the forty days before Jesus was tempted and try and explore what might have been going on for him.

The wilderness or desert can be a challenging place. A place where you are at mercy of the elements – baking sun during the day, cold at night, all kinds of animals – some dangerous and some not. It would be quiet and perhaps a bit lonely. There are surprising things – little flowers poking through the cracks of the earth.

What did he think about in that time, what was the nature of his prayer? Was he out there thinking about how he would live out his ministry in the coming years? Was he thinking about who he was? Was he thinking about how he might best convey God's love to the people he would meet? Was he thinking about the opposition he would encounter?

To help us explore these questions I would like to show you some images by Stanley Spencer, who produced a series of paintings called Christ in the Wilderness. Again, you may not like the images, and they may be confronting, but I invite you to look at them and see how they might inform your understanding of who Jesus is, who God is and who you are. We will spend a minute or two with each image.



1. Driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness (1943)

¹ All images are from Stanley Spencer 'Christ in the Wilderness'

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All of the gospels suggest that Jesus was led or driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus seems determined to go into the wilderness, to go to a place of discomfort and solitude and as we know, where he is tempted to give up who he understood himself to be, for food and comfort, for power and for safety.

Where is the Spirit leading you?



2. He Departed into a Mountain to Pray (1939)

Here we have Jesus kneeling on the ground as he prays. Eyes looking upward. For what is he praying? Is he unsettled or comforted?

What will be your prayer during this Lenten season?



3. The Scorpion (1939)

In the gospels we will read of Jesus's saying, that no one would give a child who asks for an egg, a scorpion. Yet in this image Jesus lovely holds a scorpion.

It suggests to me that God in Jesus has a loving concern for the entire creation. Or perhaps it suggests that God has beaten the sting of death (the venom of a scorpion can kill).

How will you respond to the needs of others this Lent? How will you care for all of God's creation this Lent?



4. Foxes have Holes (1939)

We will hear Jesus say he has nowhere to lay his head and yet the foxes have holes, but he has nowhere. Is Jesus contemplating where his home/place in the world is.

Do you feel at home in God?



5. Consider the Lilies (1939)

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Jesus says, when asked about worrying, consider the lilies of the field, they have nothing to worry about, the Lord of creation looks out for them. Here we see Jesus delighting in some ordinary daisies, he lovingly gazes upon these ordinary flowers.

Will you allow God to lovely gaze upon you this Lent? What will that feel like? Will you give your worries to the one who cares for the entire world?



6. The Hen (1954)

Our final image today, here we have Jesus enfolding a mother hen and her chicks. We know that as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, he stands on a mountain overlooking the city and weeps for the people, wanting to gather them up under his wing as a hen does her chicks. An image of loving protection.

All of these images highlight experiences and teachings that will follow in the gospels. I like the way Spencer invites us to think about what Jesus was considering in those forty days. They show an earthy and human Jesus, one who is not scared to get down into the dirt with creation, one who is led by God's Spirit and one who looks both loving and vulnerable.

How will you use these forty days of Lent? How will you respond to the challenges and tests that this Lenten period throws up for you? What will you discover about God, about Jesus and about yourself as you journey through Lent? I have a handout for you with some suggested activities for you to use during Lent as you reflect on what it means for you to be a follower of Christ in 2026. Amen.



(This is a picture depicting Jesus in the wilderness by Stanley Spencer. It is called 'The Scorpion'.

LENT

Lent is traditionally a time for reflection and often people are asked to give up something for 40 days until Easter. Rather than depriving ourselves I wonder if this year we might take up a new habit or practice. Below are some suggestions.

- Pray for a different person each day
- Practice a random act of kindness each day
- Choose a word from a bible reading each day and meditate on that word – what does it say about God, what does it say about you, what new thing is revealed
- Choose a word associated with Lent (eg. temptation, wilderness, led by the Spirit, questions, dark, light) and mediate on that word as suggested above
- Choose one of the 'I Am' sayings about Jesus and meditate on that

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- I Am the Bread of Life; I am the Light of the World; I am the Gate; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the Way, Truth & Life; I am the Resurrection and the Life
- Buy something extra each week and put in in the Open Pantry
- Give money each week to a charity
- Meditate on the three responses Jesus has to his testing in the wilderness
 - One does not live by bread alone
 - Worship God and serve only Him
 - Do not put the Lord your God to the test