

Mercy on the Wilderness Road

February 22, 2026

Psalm 32

¹ The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy! ² The one the Lord doesn't consider guilty — in whose spirit there is no dishonesty — that one is truly happy! ³ When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long — every day, every night! — ⁴ because your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. ⁵ So I admitted my sin to you; I didn't conceal my guilt. "I'll confess my sins to the Lord," is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin. ⁶ That's why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times, so that a great flood of water won't reach them. ⁷ You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of rescue!

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I'll advise you and keep my eye on you. ⁹ Don't be like some senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that! ¹⁰ The pain of the wicked is severe, but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord. ¹¹ You who are righteous, rejoice in the Lord and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!

Matthew 4:1-11

¹ Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. ² After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

⁵ After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶ "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone." ⁷ Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God."

⁸ Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."
¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, "You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."¹¹ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.



As we come to this first Sunday in Lent, we come into the wilderness anew, ready to pay attention to God's work in and through us, and to experience God's mercy in the midst of temptation, distress, and division. In our wilderness moments and experiences, we find one truth that stands above the rest: God's persistent mercy and grace never leave us alone in our struggles and failures. Just as we prayed on Ash Wednesday, we trust that God will again and again create a new and right spirit within us. As we prepare to connect to Jesus' wilderness experience and to be reminded, as the psalmist was, that God is our protector and deliverer as well. As we prepare to spend this time together, let us pray...

God of love, we are tempted by many things, many urges and voices and powers. Help us listen to you, to trust you and serve you. As we hear your Word we return to you. Help us always to return to you, in the Spirit and the company of Christ. It is with this desire that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

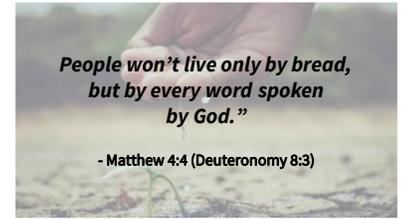
Please turn with me to Matthew 4 as we begin this time together. In the opening verse, we see that God in the Spirit has led Jesus into the wilderness for a purpose: to allow Satan to tempt him. Almost as if on Satan's side, God has Jesus fast for 40 days before Satan arrives.

At the end of verse 2, we read that Jesus was indeed “*starving*.” Jesus was weak, hungry, and worn out from spending forty days and nights in the solitude of the wilderness. At this point, Jesus is a prime target for the devil’s temptations. As I thought about this scenario, I began to think about when I am a prime target for succumbing to the tempter’s lures. Maybe some of these are true for you. And, likely, more could be added to this short list of when I am most susceptible to the wiles of the devil.

After a long day at work, and especially when things didn’t go particularly well, I am a lot more likely to act on that little frustration or annoyance, lashing out at Kristin with unkind words. When my Huskies or Vikings haven’t played well at all and I’m disgruntled with the players or the coaches or the outcome of the game, then that bottle in the cabinet seems to call out just a bit louder. When I’ve been moved by someone’s story and have helped them with some gas or groceries and then two more people call the church the next day with just about the same story, then anger rises up in me and I must resist the urge to say what I am thinking in my mind. When are you a prime target for Satan’s temptations?

In verse 3, we see Satan’s first temptation of Jesus. It begins with these words, “*Since you are God’s Son...*” The second temptation begins with the same words. Through these words, we recognize that Satan knew exactly who he was dealing with. The Son of God has the power and the ability to do all that Satan asks of him. As verse 3 continues, the devil challenges Jesus, inviting him to turn stones into bread. Forty days without food, without adequate rest, without any creature comforts, the devil reminds Jesus that he has the power to make stones into bread. While none of us can turn stones into bread, we all can think of our own needs and wants first and foremost. While none of us have Jesus’ power and ability, we can sure take things into our own meager hands in attempts to get what we want or “need.”

Jesus responds to Satan, *“People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.”* Yes, we physically need bread to survive – along with many other things. But here Jesus is drawing back upon his last forty days, where God’s word has sustained him as he denied self as he fasted. While we too will have real needs in our moments of temptation, whether for food or drink or finances or relationships, our first step should be the same as Jesus’ first step: turn to God, place one’s trust in God, and then go from there.



In the second temptation, the devil brings Jesus to the high point of the temple. The tempter invites Jesus to toss himself off, adding a quote from Psalm 91 as the icing on the cake. In these verses from the Psalm, God promises to send angels so that you *“won’t hit your foot on a stone.”* While this may very well be true, Jesus responds with these words from Deuteronomy 6:16: *“Don’t test the Lord your God.”* While none of us would ever really think that God would amazingly rescue us if we were to do something as crazy as jumping off a building, we can at times do things that we know we should not do. We can seek the thrill of something sensational, and we can try to find pleasures in the things of this world – all the while knowing that we are “testing” the Lord our God. Again, our first step in these moments of temptation should be the same as Jesus’ was: turn to God’s will and way, think of how God calls us to live and be in this world, and remember that God is with us.



Even though we can read and understand how Jesus dealt with Satan’s temptations as they came at him, there will be times when we fail to apply these lessons to our lives. There have been, are, and will be times when we fail, when we sin. Please turn with me to Psalm 32 as we walk with the psalmist in his struggles.



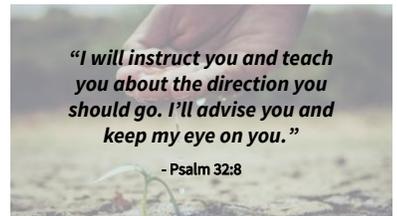
David begins this Psalm with a reminder of who and what we are supposed to be. In verses 1 and 2, David notes how truly happy are those whose sins have been forgiven, who are honest and guilt-free before the Lord. This is something that we have all experienced.

Whether on a communion Sunday or on a day when we have confessed, repented, and felt the weight of sin lifted, we have all felt the true happiness that David describes here.

Turning to verses 3 and 4, David confesses what he feels when he has *“kept quiet,”* when he has not brought his sins before the Lord. He feels worn out; he has no energy. David feels the Lord’s hand heavy upon him. Remaining in his sin, David feels the weight of the separation that he has created between himself and God. At times, we all feel this weight. At times, we all have our wilderness wanderings. And, as we press on, turning to God, we have also felt the weight lifted as David did. David admits his sins, confessing them to the Lord. God responds by removing David’s guilt. In this response, David felt God’s rescue and protection. He felt God’s love making him new again.

Verse 8 reveals the depth and true nature of a relationship with God. Here God says, *“I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I’ll advise you and keep my eye on you.”*

This is God’s intent for our relationships too. When we confess and repent of our sins, when we close the gap that we had created between ourselves and God, it is then that God will instruct and teach us, that God will guide our path, that God will direct our words and actions, that God will *“keep my eye on you.”* What joy we find when we live in a right relationship with the Lord our God. How our hearts sing with joy when we are surrounded by God’s love and steadfast mercy and presence!



This attitude of living in a right relationship with God is the source of Jesus' strength as he faces the devil's third temptation. Please turn with me back to Matthew 4 as we continue, beginning in verse 8. In this third temptation, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world. Seeing them in all their glory, the devil makes Jesus this offer: Just worship me and all this can be yours. Just bow down and worship the prince of this world, and everything in this world can be yours. Oh, how familiar this sounds!

No, Satan does not offer you or I all the power in the world or all of the riches of this world. But the evil one does offer us success, material possessions, titles and status, popularity and beauty, and much more if we will just succumb to walking in the ways of the world. Satan dangles that nice promotion in front of our eyes and tempts us to cut a corner or to do something unethical to gain an advantage. The devil entices us with more popularity or status if we'll just add to the gossip circulating about our rival. The tempter makes it seem so easy to get that new car or phone or whatever if we just step a little deeper into debt or a bit further out on the credit line. The lies are that it will all be better if we just...

In his moment of temptation, Jesus turns to the words of Isaiah. When tempted by the riches and splendor of the world, Jesus tells the devil to go away as he says, *"You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."* In focusing on the only one we are to worship and serve, Jesus has no need of Satan or his temptations. He can just go away. When God is the focus of our worship, of our living, and of our love of neighbor, then the Lord our God is with us in all of life – in the highs and lows, in the good and bad, on the mountaintops and in the valleys, and everywhere in between.



As the gospel passage concludes, the devil leaves Jesus and angels come and take care of Jesus. The angels tend to Jesus' physical needs. He has "passed the test," so to speak, and God becomes present to Jesus in a different way. I say 'different way' because God has been present to Jesus all along, just as God was present to David even in the midst of his suffering in Psalm 32. God's Spirit brought Jesus the words to say and gave him strength in his battle with Satan's temptations. God's Spirit brought David the conviction – the weight of his sin – that led David to a place of confession and repentance and back into a right relationship with God. Both Jesus and David experienced God's mercy on their wilderness roads. Our God is faithful and true. Our God will be with us when we need mercy on our own wilderness roads. For God's constant presence and unconditional love, today we say, thanks be to God. Alleluia and amen.



Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you've recently found yourself lost in the wilderness, weighed down by sin, how did you experience God's mercy? How can you share that story with another?
- 2) *Pray*. Sin is ever crouching at the door of our hearts. The desire for power, possessions, privilege, popularity... is a constant battle. Pray for your specific battles this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 4:1-13. Name two different things that stand out to you in Luke's account of Jesus' temptation. What might account for these differences?