

## **Matthew 4:1-11**<sup>vivii</sup>

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." "Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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### <sup>vi</sup> **About the Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11**

Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation works out the implications of the voice present at Jesus' baptism, declaring him to be the Son of God. For Matthew, sonship is manifested in perfect obedience to the Father's will. Israel was also called the son of God, but failed to obey God despite the time of formation in the wilderness. Now Jesus, the true Israel, is led into the wilderness to be tested. Like Moses and Elijah, he fasts for 40 days and nights.

The mountain and the ministry of angels also point to Jesus as Messiah. He is tempted to doubt his sonship ("If you are the Son of God..."; vv. 3-5) and to use the power of that relationship for selfish ends. From the narrative of Israel's testing in the wilderness, Jesus responds to the tempter, affirming his complete trust and obedience to his Father. Jesus has

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manifested the perfect obedience that he teaches his disciples and has shown the Church how to respond to temptations concerning the power entrusted to the Church.

## <sup>vii</sup> Reflection and Response

To enter into today's gospel, meditate on one word: bully. Think about folks with more money, more power, more education and better clothes who tromp blithely over the vulnerable and defenseless. We sputter, "That's not fair!" when someone's victory springs neither from justice nor merit, but from sheer power.

Just when we work up some self-righteous anger against the bully, let's look at the bully in ourselves. How often we force our will upon children or anyone beneath us in the pecking order for no reason other than "I said so!" Boss criticizes me, I yell at spouse, spouse yells at child, child kicks the cat. And so it goes, in repetitive spirals, until someone has the courage to call a halt and say, "enough."

In today's gospel, Jesus takes that step, even though he is weakened by hunger and isolated in the desert. The bully he confronts is complex, subtle, smart. Before Jesus begins his life work, he must confront the worst threat to it. He does so nobly, without any of the sarcasm we might be tempted to use as a weapon against such a formidable foe.

The Spanish have a Lenten custom to symbolize that confrontation with the inner enemy. They make a paper scorpion (a desert creature) with six (or 40) legs. Each week (or day) of Lent, they pull off one paper leg. On Easter Eve, they toss the legless scorpion into the church's bonfire. There is a certain satisfaction in naming gremlins that can be maddeningly hard to pinpoint: "Useless fretting and stupid anxiety!" Rip. "Nasty barbs and cruel put-downs." Rip. "Squandering money or time." Rip. "Doubting the gifts God gave me." Rip. Destroying forty legs could be a healthy exorcism. Now, scorpion, where's your sting?

Jesus wasn't afraid of the fight, and he leaves the desert triumphant. Nathan Mitchell writes: "Jesus' work as exorcist is a work of passionate liberation, a manifesto for human freedom. He strikes out against anything that makes human beings helpless, hostile and impotent."

We want to cheer for a hero who so roundly defeats a bully.

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Quietly consider: This Lenten season, may I confront the bullies—within and without—that keep me from freedom, hope and wholeness...