

Lent



REFINED IN THE WILDERNESS

*A Spiritual Formation Guide
for the Lenten Season*



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Refined in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Formation Guide for the Lenten Season

Matthew 4:1-11

This year, we will consider what happened to Jesus Christ while he was in the wilderness. During his sojourn there, he was tempted by Satan in three specific ways. Satan began provoking and prodding Jesus to consider what was missing and lacking in His immediate situation. Through the pangs of hunger and scarcity, he urged Jesus to turn stones into bread. The next temptation tested the measure of Jesus' relationship with His Father.

The third and final temptation asked Jesus to consider if an exclusive relationship with God the Father is suitable. Satan offered Jesus the world if only He would overlook God's call for exclusivity and worship him. In each of these temptations, Satan was testing the power of Jesus' relationship with God the Father. Was their bond strong enough to withstand the absence of resources? Was trust deep enough to know that God's plans were good enough? Was worship of God enough to fill the void of longing?

These questions and more will be the focus of our writings and reflections for the Lenten season. Not only will we consider the temptations that Christ endured, but we will also look at His responses to those temptations. In other words, how did Christ respond to Satan, and what characteristics did He exhibit through His responses?

In the wilderness, Christ shows us not only how to handle temptations that lead to sin, but also what types of character traits we should possess for holy living. Tests and trials do not exist simply to be heartaches and struggles, but they are moments to build up a resistance and response to the desire to sin.

The wilderness experience as seen in Matthew 4 compels us to become something different. In the wilderness, our lives are being forged to produce a new way of thinking, being and relating to others, and, more importantly, to God. According to sources, forging "is a manufacturing process involving the shaping of metal using compressive forces." There are three steps to forging:

1. Drawing out or increasing the length of the metal
2. Upsetting or increasing the width of the metal
3. Squeezing in closed compression dies or using specialized tools to shape the metal to produce better quality and flow.

In this case, the three temptations and responses act in the same way as the mechanical process of forging. Our faith is stretched and drawn out beyond our poor perception to the power of possibility. Our understanding is upset and distressed so that we might exhibit the characteristics of one whose life is a testimony to the graciousness of God. Finally, through this process, the pressing, upsetting, and drawing out of our convictions are confirmed. In this way, our faith, our lives, our souls are refined in the wilderness, and we become like the One who showed us that sin and death are truly destroyed by holy and faithful living. Through the example of Christ, we can follow a path through the thorns and thickets and wilds of the wilderness. A path that enables us to resist sin, and fills our hearts, minds, and souls with the meditations, thoughts, and words that will lead to the Father.





Ash Wednesday *Do What The Spirit Say Do*

By: The Reverend Craig T. Robinson, Jr., Senior Pastor

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Matthew 4:1 “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

We're gonna do what the Spirit say to do,
We're gonna do what the spirit say do
What the spirit say do we gonna do, oh Lord,
We're gonna do what the spirit say do.

The words of this spiritual, and the pointed language of the first verse of Matthew 4, encapsulate the call of the Lenten season. The call of Lent is yielding to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The hard reality is that sometimes the Holy Spirit's call is to be tempted, tried, tested, refined, strengthened. Jesus' experience in the wilderness is a crucible of sorts. A crucible is an apparatus that heats metal to very high temperatures to refine it and make it stronger. Jesus has to go through a moment of relentless temptation in a quest to fully embody the fullness of his power on earth. The season of Lent is our opportunity to be refined. Through prayer, fasting, worship, and other spiritual disciplines, we also confront the temptations of our time to grow deeper in our relationship with God.

Howard Thurman, a noted theologian, mystic, mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and spiritual guru often talked about having “growing edges.” Our growing edges are those areas of our lives that have not reached full maturity. We all have growing edges. We all have areas in our life that need improvement. Like metal before the crucible, which has many impurities that make it weak and brittle, we go through the fire to strengthen our spirituality. Lent challenges us to confront ourselves in true reflection and introspection as to how we come forth stronger, wiser, and better than we were when we started.

When I think of the work of the Holy Spirit, I immediately think about how the Holy Spirit is represented by fire. Jesus, in his final preparation for ministry, is led by the spirit into the fire to make him ready for his ultimate purpose. During these weeks of lent, we invite you to answer the call of the spirit. Use this small guide to focus your attention on Jesus' spiritual journey through the wilderness crucible. After you have read the devotional essay, take time to pray and to reflect on where you are in your spiritual journey. What areas are solid? What areas need further fortification and refinement? Is my spirituality at the level that God wants it to be?

The answers to the aforementioned questions will help you become all that God wants you to be.

A Prayer for Lent:

Lord, you have called us into a time of refinement. Reveal to us our growing edges. Show us the places in our lives that need improvement. Let us be confident in the knowledge that we can make it through the fire just like you did. Keep the promise of your forgiveness and the fact of your loving-kindness at the forefront of our minds during this season. Let this Lenten season lead to a better me. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.



The First Week in Lent

The Power of No

By: The Reverend Craig T. Robinson, Jr., Senior Pastor

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Matthew 4:2-4

² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

One of the most difficult words to say in the face of difficulty is the word no. The bible says that Jesus traversed the wilderness hungry and alone. He was perfectly vulnerable, thus, susceptible to the machinations of the enemy. In his vulnerability, the devil took advantage and invited Jesus to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread. The decision Jesus had to make would set the tone for his entire wilderness experience, and it teaches us that there is tremendous spiritual power in saying no to temptation.

The temptation that Jesus faced was made greater by the lack of food. It was a desperate time for our Lord, and, as the saying goes, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” We can often compromise our integrity, moral standards, and even our faith in God when our backs are against the wall. Yet Jesus shows great strength of character even while he grappled with his own very urgent personal needs. Jesus knew his purpose. Jesus knew why God had put him on earth. Jesus understood that his assignment was to save the world from sin, and show God’s people how to live holy lives. No trick of the devil was going to knock him off track.

How does one maintain their strength of character in the face of temptation? How does one say no to the enemy of our souls? Jesus gives us the key in his response to Satan. Jesus tells us to lean into the word of God. God’s word is “a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway.” As we traverse our wildernesses, let us hide the word of God in our heart, so we might know God’s will for our lives, live into our godly purpose, and work out our soul’s salvation.

Prayer:

God of grace and mercy, we follow Jesus into the wilderness during this Lenten season knowing that sometimes our back will be against the wall. Give us the strength to hold fast to our character to say no in the face of temptation. May we hide God’s words of life in our hearts so that we will not compromise our purpose or sin against our most gracious savior. Amen.



The Second Week in Lent Self Discipline

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By: The Reverend Erica Weathers, Associate Minister

Matthew 4:4

“Jesus answered, It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

During this second week of Lenten season, let us reflect on how much self-discipline was required of Jesus Christ our Savior. As you reread the words ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Think of all the instances in your life that have required self-discipline. Self-discipline is defined as the power to manage a person’s thoughts, emotions, or behavior in the face of temptation to achieve a specific goal. This definition is defined perfectly in our scripture text.

Jesus gives us the perfect example, you cannot accomplish anything by relying on one source of nourishment. Living requires both physical and spiritual nourishment. The physical bread for your physical body and the spiritual bread for your spirit man. However, it is the spiritual food which is the word of God that can sustain you. For this week of Lent, let us allow this look at self-discipline in Jesus, remind us to reflect on the areas in our own lives that need the same amount of self-discipline.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for providing us daily with both physical food and spiritual food for my body. Help me to be aware of the areas of my life in which I need to have the same type of self-discipline that Jesus exhibits. Lord, just as your word gave Jesus the self-discipline to withstand the temptations from Satan, thank you that only your word gives us the same self discipline to withstand the temptations in our own lives. Thank you, Lord, that when our thoughts, emotions, and behavior are set in your word we can achieve whatever task is before us. Lord, in Matthew 4:4 you said that we shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from you. Lord, thank you for the nourishment, sustainability, and self-discipline that come when I feed my spirit with your words. In Jesus’ Name, we pray amen!!!





The Third Week in Lent *Yield Not To Temptation*

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By: The Reverend Beverly Murray, Associate Minister

Matthew 4:5-6

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Every Christian at one time in their journey of life will experience a desert place or a wilderness situation. A wilderness can appear when we feel alone, deserted, misunderstood, or confused. A desert or a wilderness can appear when we feel neglected by family, friends, or even God. When we are in a wilderness, we can or sometimes will doubt who we are and who God is. Our wilderness experiences are not an accident. These times in our lives are not to destroy us, instead, it is an opportunity to strengthen our faith and build our trust in God. Even with a strong faith in God, through Jesus, we can find ourselves in a wilderness place, and the question is how do we pass the test and find the victory?

Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and was confronted with three temptations or put to the test 3 times. The above scripture verses reveal to us the His 2nd test. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." In other words, if you are whom you say you are, prove it and jump. Jesus didn't have to prove who He was, He knew who He was. If you are a child of God you don't have to prove it. Whatever trials come to challenge us, whatever temptations come to test us, we have to know who we are and who we are. When the test comes, declare to yourself, "I am a child of the Most-High God, Jesus is the name and I have the victory in this and over this."

Jump? No! God does not expect us to be Super-Christians. The temptations in our Christian walk can sometimes appear to challenge us to do what God has not asked us to do. Beware of those voices that tell you to do what the Lord has not spoken. Jesus was tempted to put his life at risk by doing something to prove who He was and to put God's word to the test. The scripture that the tempter spoke was misquoted. Too often we rely on being told what the true word of God is, and lack of knowledge of the true word of God can put us at great risk. Don't take anything from the word or add anything to it. It does not matter what the trial, what the temptation, what the test. Know who you are! Know whose you are! Know the Word! And you shall obtain the victory!

Prayer:

Lord God of all creation, your word promises that we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear. Strengthen us to be able to stand against temptations each time we encounter them. We need you in those battles. Always give us strength to walk away from temptations, but if we must stand give us the true word to declare. Help us to know whatever the test or temptation, this too shall pass. Give us victory in any trial. Give us grace and show us mercy through any test. Thank you, Lord, for being a faithful deliverer. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen



The Fourth Week in Lent *Trusting in God*

By: The Reverend Peter Igiametse, Pastoral Intern

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Matthew 4:7 "Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Life is tempestuous, moving in different directions with the same wind, making the world more challenging and life more cyclical. Yet, those same winds that hurl us through life's cycles, we must also learn to trust so that we can grow to be all that God has created us to become. The same air that animates us puts us in a place where temptation becomes real. A temptation is a tool employed by the enemy to divert us away from what God has in store for us and designed for our lives as our creator. The enemy knows our frailty and will use tools of deceptions that challenge God's call on our lives. And when we entertain doubts about the mercy, goodness, providence, and truth of God, the enemy is happy.

We should be mindful of the deceptive practices of the enemy, for the goal is to alter, seduce or attract our sinful nature and prevent us from following the path towards our destiny. We have to learn not to complain but cultivate new ways and avenues to grow. We should gracefully and carefully cultivate the grace that God has woven into our hearts. We can learn new skills that will reorient us for better living. There is no doubt that life contains much pain and many tears. But, to attain the mystery of the great truth, we must hold steadfast to God's word so that we do not fall prey to ungodly goals. We should, therefore, not indulge in the notion that we can learn without discipline. We should prayerfully seek guidance and encouragement with a partner or someone who can genuinely support us when we are feeling weak.

Life is not about failures but the many challenges we have overcome through careful consultation with ourselves and the people around us. Mercy and the divine presence have often reconnected people with helpmates who can lift us out of the challenging situations in our lives. God gave the gift of life to Jesus Christ, called love for humankind. Furthermore, this love has stood the test of times and is available to share. We should not deny this love made available to all. It can be received by all who faithfully trust God. In this world, we should learn not to fight with each other but to plant seeds of love that others can cultivate and spread. We must trust that God has a divine plan for our lives and that when we trust God, God will never forsake us nor abandon us. The kingdom of heaven is within our reach if we just trust in God.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, teach us to be content and not covetous. Teach us to look to the lord's mercy as we support each other to grow in grace and experience the lord's presence both in the good and bad times. We pray this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen



The Fifth Week in Lent *The Problem With Our Ego*

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By: The Reverend Melvin L. Jones, Jr., Associate Minister

Matthew 4: 8-9

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Lent, the season when we remember that we are: “dust, and to dust, we shall return” is marked by the practice of extreme fasting and self-denial. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, lasting approximately 40 days, many of the Christian traditions forsake meat, sweets, and on extreme occasions even sex. This is usually to be viewed as holy, spiritual, and saintly. This forty-day odyssey is a test of willpower. There is nothing wrong with extreme aesthetic practices if it draws you to a deeper connection with the Divine. However, extreme practices for the sake of vainglory are troubling. The problem with our ego is that it seeks external validation that covers up a lack of a deeper intimate connection with God.

The tempter in the Matthew text has three trails to test Jesus’ ego. The tempter’s test all revolve around power, authority, and control. Jesus’ forty-day preparation period empowers him to manifest an internal connection with God rather than to fall for external trappings of success. Jesus does not deny physical needs or desires but integrates spiritual awareness in the dark wilderness. By leaning into the dark spaces, he demonstrates the power of confronting and checking his ego, to experience and manifests the righteousness of God.

We all have ego needs that must be tempered by our spiritual awareness. Jesus integrated the body and the spirit in the wilderness and calls us to a similar journey. As we become integrated into mind, body, and spirit we shall be like trees planted by the rivers of water, bearing our fruit in due season, as we worship in Spirit and Truth. God invites us to a deeper connection and not to the false impermanent ego needs attached to external objects of authority, power, and control. Jesus confronted his false self (ego) to manifest his True Self. May this Lenten season be one of spiritual awakening and integration for us all.

Prayer:

Dear God, as you lead us through the wilderness of this Lenten season, we confess that we too readily fall for external impermanent objects of authority, power, and control. Our egos often trip us up and get us into trouble. We need your presence, power, and provision to keep us when we can’t keep ourselves. In this season of reflection and introspection open the eyes of our hearts that we might see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more sincerely. Amen



The Sixth Week in Lent *A Dance with God*

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By: The Reverend David Wilson, Associate Minister

The title of this reflection was inspired by a book written by a black woman theologian, Karen Baker – Fletcher in which she describes the challenge of existing with God, in a world of both good and evil, as a majestic and wonderful dance. Dance is a powerful art form that expresses human emotion through the rhythmic movement of the body. Inspired by many cultures and backgrounds, motivated by the human spirit, and touched by God dance has carried humanity throughout thousands and thousands of years of existing with God in a world of both good and evil.

In Matthew 4:10, we read a refrain that concludes Jesus' walk or dance through the wilderness. In this dance, Jesus was led by the spirit, tempted by the devil, and stood on the word of God. Jesus concludes his time in the wilderness by saying, "Away from me Satan." As we dance through our desert, like Jesus, we must choose and re-choose where our influence comes from. Throughout the chapter, Jesus defends his position by using scriptures from the book of Deuteronomy signified by the phrase "it is written." However, when the Tempter returns Jesus' effort with also quoting the word of God we must ask ourselves what encourages Jesus' faith then? The passage would suggest that in addition to scripture Jesus possessed an inner fortitude. Simply put, yes, we should read the scripture so that we have the truth of God to stand on, but we must also experience moments of spiritual striving where we have the inner courage to say "AWAY FROM ME SATAN!"

Karen Baker-Fletcher writes, "Spiritual striving is the dance of life encouraged by the dance of the spirit." I believe that God wants us to know that as we struggle toward freedom from temptation, freedom from oppression, and freedom from the hold of the enemy, there's something special that happens when our spirit joins with the Holy Spirit in a dance led by God.

Prayer:

Right now oh God we come to you humbly bowed down in spirit. We praise, Lord, because you stepped out into the void and created life, then breathed the breath of life into us. We call You faithful because, since the moment of inception in our mother's wombs, You have never left us nor forsaken us. We invite the presence of the Holy Spirit to dwell among us, not to only dwell, but to dance with us. As we move to the rhythm of life's beat and shimmy through the ebbs and flows of our own wilderness experiences, we will hold on to our faith. We know that you are leading our thoughts, guiding our steps, and influencing our struggles toward freedom. Today, we can declare with confidence and clarity, "away from me Satan in the name of Jesus." Amen.



The Seventh Week in Lent (Holy Week) *Watching and Waiting on God*

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By: The Reverend Dr. Shakira Sanchez-Collins, Assistant Pastor

Mathew 4:11 “Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”

“I feel my help coming on!” One thing that all humans have in common is the fact that life will at some point present challenges. Challenges come in all forms. Challenges can be the loss of a job, the onset of an illness, or conflict within a relationship. Challenges bring stress, exhaustion, and hopelessness because often they appear to be insurmountable and difficult to overcome. These moments in life can be both discouraging and also disheartening. But these moments in life can also be opportunities to grow in our faith in God.

Similar to us, Jesus faced his challenges and obstacles during the course of this life. In our text, Jesus faced temptations that were brought on by the devil in his wilderness season. The devil tried to tempt Jesus multiple times using multiple methods hoping to break Jesus. Yet, despite facing the devil’s many attempts, Jesus held strong and denied every temptation that was presented by the devil. Even in the wilderness where he was tired and hungry, Jesus was able to persevere through his interaction with the devil. Eventually realizing that his efforts were in vain, the devil finally left Jesus.

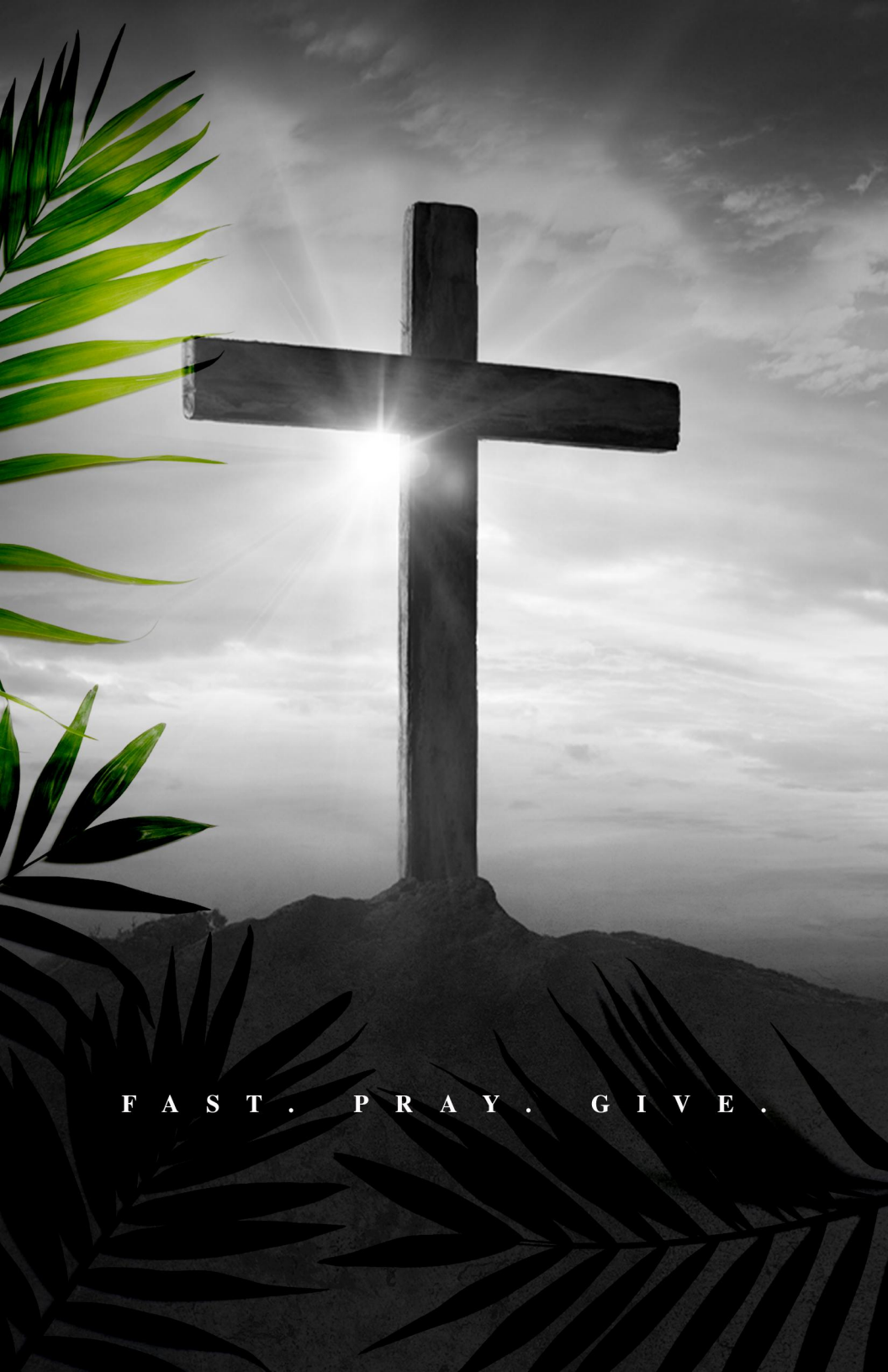
It was after the devil left, that there were angels that came to care for Jesus. The angels fed Jesus. The angels comforted Jesus. The angels surrounded Jesus and took care of his needs. Perhaps, Jesus withstood the temptations from the devil because he knew that he had some help coming—the angels. Perhaps, Jesus knew that he had to just hold on for a little while longer. Jesus knew that God would send some help.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness should encourage you to know that, eventually, the angels do show up. Right now, you might be in the midst of your wilderness season where you are facing many difficulties and challenges. You might be in a season where you feel burned out and worn out by all that life has thrown at you. But you have to remember that the angels are on their way. Everything will not happen when we want it to happen. Everything will not always happen in the way that we want it to happen. However, God will still show up. Your help is on the way. Don’t give up on yourself. Don’t give up on your dreams. Don’t give up on your purpose. Your help is coming.

Prayer:

God, we thank you for the angels that you send to us to love us and to comfort us. We thank you for showing up in our time of need. Help us to remember that our help is on the way. Help us to remember that you will not leave us alone and that you will not have us face these battles by ourselves. Send your angels, dear Lord. Send your help, dear Lord. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. Amen.





F A S T . P R A Y . G I V E .