

INTO  THE
WILDERNESS

A LENT SERIES



HOW TO USE OUR MINISTRY PASS SERMON SERIES GUIDES

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

- > This guide isn't a set of sermon manuscripts. While sermon manuscripts can be both useful and a powerful training tool, our sermon series guides are different. Rather than tell you what to say, our aim is for this material to spark your imagination, assist you in planning your sermon, and offer a boost to your study time.
- > This guide isn't ironclad. While we hope you use our material, the pieces of this document are designed to be moved, tweaked, and altered. As you study the suggested passages, and pray through your message, this guide will hopefully be a launching pad, rather than a landing net.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

Included in each guide is:

- > A sermon series outline that breaks up the teaching set into a specific number of weeks.
- > A "big idea" of the series.
- > A passage, "big idea" of the sermon, topic list, and a number of illustrations and talking point ideas are included in each weekly section. The "Sermon Ideas and Talking Points" area is filled with observations about the text, relevant applications, creative ideas, and illustrations.
- > A small group discussion sheet (located in a separate document in this bundle).

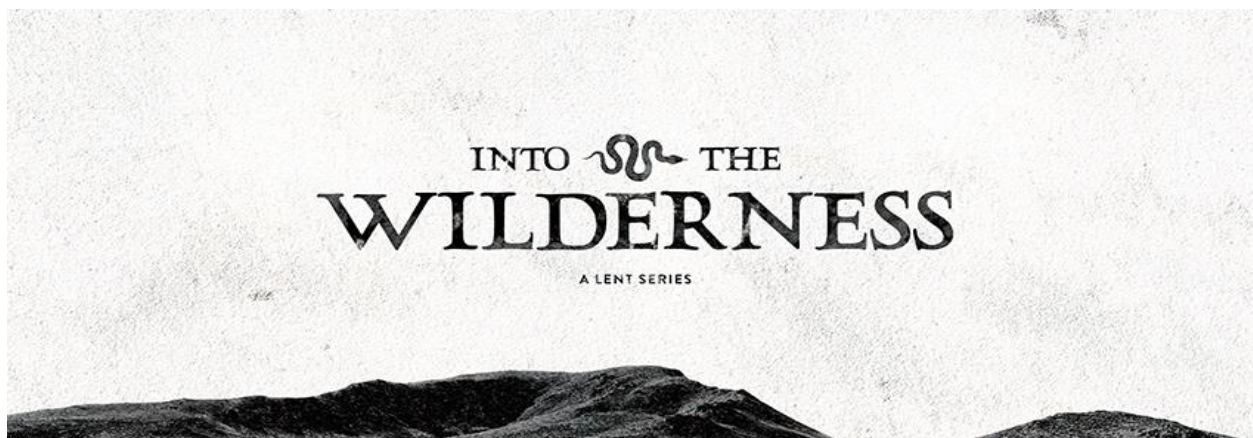
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- > Plan ahead. Our guides are best utilized in advance versus the day or night before. Read over the ideas and illustrations provided, thinking through how you can possibly utilize them in your message. We've purposely kept our guides simple so as to give you the best opportunity to create your own, unique message.
- > While we give you a passage and "big idea" of the message, take time to study the text.
- > Utilize the media contained in this bundle to promote and communicate your series message.

Note: Although we've worked hard to verify the accuracy of the material in this guide, we encourage all pastors to carefully review the information before sharing it with their congregation.



MINISTRY PASS



Into the Wilderness

Big Idea of the Series: This Lent series brings us into Christ's wilderness experience and examines the temptations he faced and overcame.

Ash Wednesday

Text: Matthew 3:1–10; Luke 3:3–14; John 1:19–24, 35–37

Topics: Ash Wednesday, Repentance, Confession, Baptism

Big Idea of the Message: John the Baptist was called by God into the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus's arrival by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Application Point: Followers of Jesus should be ready to receive forgiveness through humble confession and genuine repentance of sin—and to guide others in doing the same.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Today is Ash Wednesday, beginning the season of Lent. Lent is the period of forty days before Easter Sunday (not including the six Sundays), when followers of Jesus "set aside a time each year for similar fasting, marking an intentional season of focus on Christ's life, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection" (Kelly Givens, "What Is Ash Wednesday? Why Christians Celebrate It," *Christianity.com*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-is-ash-wednesday-why-do-christians-celebrate-it.html>). Throughout this series, we will explore Jesus's journey into the wilderness and the temptations he overcame in Matthew 3–4. But before we get to Jesus in the wilderness, we must start with Jesus's cousin John the Baptist, who was sent into the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus's arrival.
2. Have you ever found yourself frantically cleaning your house in anticipation of guests arriving? Perhaps it was when you received a surprise text message from out-of-town friends announcing they were on their way over, or after a late-night gathering with friends while your parents were out of town, or to ensure that everything is perfectly in place for an important event or celebration. Whether the

cleaning is frantic or calm, the goal is to prepare a welcoming environment for your guests to feel comfortable when they arrive.

3. John was called by God to preach a message of repentance, in preparation for Israel's promised kingdom and King to arrive (Matthew 3:2). The Jews were anticipating the fulfillment of a new exodus, according to the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3, "when God would again deliver his people and lead them back to Jerusalem from all the nations among which they were scattered" (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 52). John was sent ahead to preach "near the Jordan River in the northern part of the wilderness of Judea, a barren wasteland extending along the west shore of the Dead Sea" (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 933). Matthew 3:4 reveals that John's attire resembled that of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and he ate food that was common to those who were poor (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 52). By presenting himself in this way, the people would identify him as a prophet.
4. John's message offered a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). People of different religious backgrounds were going to the wilderness to confess their sin and be baptized by John as a sign of their repentance (Matthew 3:5–6). Even those who were considered the worst of sinners were repenting and being baptized (Luke 3:12, 14). Who do you know who has sinned so badly that it would be hard to consider anyone forgiving them? God can rend even the hardest of hearts to come to confession, and he redeems their past actions through repentance. No one is so sinful that they cannot receive God's forgiveness when they humbly confess and repent of their sins!
5. T. B. was homeless after his struggle with alcohol led him to lose multiple jobs and destroy his relationships. But when a believer of Jesus began to befriend T, he professed salvation in Jesus a few weeks later. However, T's addiction to alcohol still had a hold on his life—leading him periodically back to drugs and homelessness. Eventually, T agreed to attend Durham Rescue Mission where, over time, God convicted him of his sin and he grew in a more intimate knowledge of his Savior. Since then, T has been baptized—publicly declaring he is a new creation in Christ—and received a scholarship to attend a Bible College ("The Goodness of God Leadeth Thee to Repentance—A True Story," *Joyful Abundant Life* [blog], accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.joyfulabundantlife.com/the-goodness-of-god-leadeth-thee-to-repentance-a-true-story/>).
6. The forgiveness of sin that John preached required both confession *and* repentance. Confession frees us from guilt. It provides an avenue to apologize for the wrongful actions we have committed, and when we seek forgiveness, it can become the first step to reconciling broken relationships with God and others. Confession of our sin holds immense spiritual power, with great church revivals tracing their roots back to a time of confession. A student testimony at Asbury University in 1950 led to 118 hours of nonstop revival with student confessions and testimonies. According to Asbury University, "It is estimated that

50,000 people found a new experience in Christ as a result of this revival and witness teams that went out from it” (“Revivals,” Asbury University, accessed December 30, 2022,

<https://www.asbury.edu/academics/resources/library/archives/history/revivals/>).

7. Repentance is more than apologizing for our wrongdoings, and it’s more than a religious ritual. When the religious leaders came to John, he warned them they must bear fruit as a sign that their repentance was genuine (Matthew 3:7–8). The Pharisees and Sadducees had relied on tracing their genealogy to Abraham as insurance that they would be spared any divine judgment. They did not see a need for themselves to be baptized, as baptism was used by Jews to welcome non-Jewish proselytes into the community of God (Pfeiffer and Harrison, *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 934). To be baptized would be to acknowledge that they were not already accepted into the family of God, despite their lineage. Repentance is not just offering lip service to God; it is turning *from* ways that lead to sin, and turning *to* ways that follow what God says is best. It is a complete change of what we say and do as an outward display of our inward commitment to remove the destructive habits that lead to sin (“Repentance Bible Verses,” Bible Study Tools, July 23, 2021, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/repentance-bible-verses/>). Are we just offering God lip service in our commitment to repent and follow Jesus?
8. John clearly denied being the anticipated Christ when he was questioned by the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem (John 1:19–24). Rather than elevate his own ministry, John used his influence in the community to point people—including his own disciples (John 1:35–37; 3:25–30)—to follow Jesus. How are we leveraging our influence to encourage people to follow Jesus? Vincent Hancock—an American skeet shooter and winner of three Olympic gold medals—believes winning is not his driving motivation for competing. In an interview with Baptist Press in 2016, Hancock said, “God has given me this amazing ability to do what I do, so I’m going to go out and I’m going to take a hold of it, and I’m going to do it because it’s more than just winning a gold.” He also says, “It’s for me to have a platform to introduce people to Christ, to show people what He’s capable of in us and to set an example” (Tim Ellsworth, “Olympics: Nightly Prayers Keep Skeet Shooter’s Focus on God,” *Baptist Press*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/olympics-nightly-prayers-keep-skeet-shooters-focus-on-god/>).
9. John’s ministry was to prepare the hearts of the people to receive Jesus when he arrived. As followers of Jesus, we too should be willing to share the Good News with those we know. Are we creating opportunities for others to meet Jesus? As we seek to share the Good News, be intentional to (1) pray for God to bring people across your path who are open to receiving Jesus as their Savior; (2) demonstrate God’s love through acts of kindness; (3) invite people to a worship service where the gospel is presented; and (4) share your testimony of God’s goodness in your life (Scott Pauley, “10 Ways to Begin Bringing Others to Jesus,” *Enjoying the Journey* [blog], October 28, 2017, <https://enjoyingthejourney.org/10-ways-to-begin-bringing-others-to-jesus/>).

Week 1

Text: Matthew 3:13–17; John 1:25–34

Topics: Unqualified, Calling, Equipping, Baptism

Big Idea of the Message: John the Baptist considered himself unworthy and unqualified to baptize the Son of God. Feelings of inadequacy can force us to shrink back from pursuing the call God has placed on our life.

Application Point: God promises to equip those he calls with everything they need to accomplish what he asks them to do through submission to his Word and his will.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Have you ever started a new job and felt unqualified, or underqualified, for the role? It can be overwhelming and demoralizing to your confidence when you don't know how to accomplish what you have been paid to do—sometimes even leading to irrational thoughts that you are a fraud and should quit before someone finds out! But Katie Douthwaite Wolf has a different perspective. She says, “You should *never* take a job you feel qualified for.” Feeling underqualified in your workplace provides the push you need to step outside your comfort zone and rise to the challenge placed in front of you (Katie Douthwaite Wolf, “3 Key Facts to Remember When You Feel Underqualified for Your New Job,” *The Muse*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.themuse.com/amp/advice/3-key-facts-to-remember-when-you-feel-underqualified-for-your-new-job>).
2. We may feel self-conscious when we consider ourselves unqualified in our workplace, but we can also feel self-conscious when we think we are unqualified to fulfill God's call for our life. If you feel that way today, be encouraged because even a biblical hero like John the Baptist felt unqualified in his ministry! When Jesus seeks to be baptized by John (Matthew 3:13), John recognizes Jesus as “the Lamb of God” who would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29); the one whose sandal he considered himself unworthy to untie (John 1:27); and the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11). John did not consider himself worthy of baptizing the Son of God—even attempting to prevent Jesus from being baptized and arguing with him, claiming that Jesus should be the one to baptize him, not the other way around (v. 14).
3. It can be easy to shrink back from pursuing God's calling when what God asks of us makes us feel out of our depth. However, the writer of Hebrews encourages us that God will work in us to “equip you with everything good that you may do his will” (Hebrews 13:21). Likewise, Paul reminds Timothy that God's Word is essential to see “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). Paul also instructs the church in Ephesus that it is the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers who are to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). God uses Scripture—taught within a Christ-centered community—to equip us with everything we need to fulfill the good works he has prepared for us.
4. For a long time, Kathryn felt called to serve on the worship team at her church; yet, she believed the lie that she wasn't talented enough to be on the team. She

was left feeling inadequate and unqualified to pursue God's calling. However, it was only after God revealed to her that he *had* equipped her to accomplish what he had called her to do that she had the confidence to apply to serve on that team (Kathryn Dyer, "When You Feel Inadequate, Read This," Life.Church [blog], accessed December 30, 2022, <https://finds.life.church/feel-inadequate-read-this/>).

5. John's baptism was for the repentance of sins (Matthew 3:11), so his hesitation to baptize Jesus was valid, given that Jesus was sinless and did not need to repent. However, John consented when Jesus said his baptism would "fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). For though Jesus is without sin, it is through this baptism that Jesus humbly "identifies with the sinful people of Israel, and he identifies with their sin, because he is coming to be both the final sacrifice and the final high priest" (Vern Poythress, "The Baptism of Jesus," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-baptism-of-jesus/>). Once Jesus went up from the water, God the Father showed his approval for Jesus's obedience by opening the heavens and sending the Holy Spirit to rest on him; and God told those present that he is pleased with his beloved Son (vv. 16–17). Sometimes God calls us to fulfill his kingdom plans in ways we don't expect!
6. When God's calling feels too daunting to complete in our own strength and ability, we must be willing to submit to God's will and the way he is leading us to accomplish the task. Be diligent to (1) seek God's wisdom through Scripture; (2) listen to the wise counsel of godly friends; and (3) spend time discussing it with God in prayer. When we follow God's will and God's Word to accomplish his calling, we can be confident that God will never set us up for failure. God promises to equip those he calls with everything they need to accomplish what he asks them to do (Donna Mitchell, "He Equips the Called," *The Life* [blog], updated July 2019, <https://thelife.com/he-equips-the-called>).

Week 2

Text: Matthew 4:1–2

Topics: Led by the Spirit, Temptation, Fasting, Prayer

Big Idea of the Message: Following God can lead us to unexpected places to build our trust in him.

Application Point: We mustn't give up when we are lost in the wilderness! Faithfully seek God through prayer and fasting to discern the areas of our lives where God may be leading us to trust him more.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Following Jesus's baptism, we see the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus and empowering him during his public ministry (Matthew 3:16–17). It was the Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus to fulfill the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61 "to proclaim good news to the poor," "liberty to the captives," and "the year of the Lord's favor," while bringing healing to the blind and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19). "Jesus is in some respects like a prophet or a king, who receives the Holy Spirit for the purpose of ministry to others" (Vern Poythress, "The Baptism of Jesus," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-baptism-of-jesus/>).
2. Though he was fully divine, "when Jesus entered our world He set aside the power and the privileges of Deity. He consciously limited Himself to live here as a man" (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987], 534). Jesus sought to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit rather than to satisfy his own fleshly desires. He chose not to do anything on his own accord but only to do the things he saw his Father doing (John 5:19). Likewise, Jesus was careful to say what his Father had commanded him to say (John 12:49). Jesus was fully submissive to his Father's will and the Holy Spirit's leading, wherever it would take him. As followers of Jesus, we have his example of complete submission to his Father. How open are we to following God's will when he calls us to go somewhere we weren't expecting?
3. Have you ever made a commitment—or recommitment—to follow God and put him first in your life, only to find that life gets harder, not easier? Often our expectation is that God should bless us and make our lives easier when we give more, worship more, and serve more. While that does sometimes happen, it is not always the case. Sometimes a commitment to greater faith in Jesus leads to suffering and persecution (John 15:20). This was the case for Nokseng, the first Christian convert from a community in Meghalaya in India. According to P. P. Job, when Nokseng's tribe found he was a follower of Jesus, the village chief threatened to harm him if he did not renounce his faith. Nokseng responded by declaring, "I have decided to follow Jesus." Following the execution of his children, he continued, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow." This led to the execution of his wife. Finally, before his own death, Nokseng sang, "The world behind me, the cross before me." The unshakable faith of this new Christian in the face of persecution led to the chief's conversion to Christianity and became

the foundation of the hymn “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” (“The Story Behind the Song ‘I Have Decided to Follow Jesus,’” *Bibliatodo Reflection* [blog], August 21, 2022, <https://www.bibliatodo.com/En/christian-reflections/the-story-behind-the-song-i-have-decided-to-follow-jesus/>).

4. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). Though we often expect that God will lead us straight to the promised land when we surrender our will to follow him, sometimes God chooses instead to take us on a scenic route through the wilderness to get there. The Israelites were led by the Angel of the Lord into the wilderness of Sin when they left Egypt (Exodus 16:1). It was during this time in the wilderness that the Israelites were to build their trust in God’s provision and protection. We see that seven times in Numbers 11–21, however, they were tested and found wanting (Tim Mackie, “Israel’s Rebellion in the Wilderness,” *BibleProject* [blog], accessed December 30, 2022, <https://bibleproject.com/blog/israels-rebellion-wilderness/>). Likewise, the Holy Spirit directed Paul’s steps on his missionary journeys, even taking him to places he had not planned to go (Acts 16:6–8). God can lead us to unexpected places to find how strong our trust in him really is and to grow our faith through the experience. Has God ever led you into the wilderness to grow your trust in his provision, protection, and faithfulness?
5. The wilderness was a place where you were thought more likely to encounter a demon (Michael S. Heiser, “Idolatry in the Bible: Animals, Demons, and the Desert,” *Word by Word* [blog], Logos, October 22, 2019, <https://www.logos.com/grow/idolatry-in-the-bible-animals-demons-the-desert/>). Jesus is led into the wilderness to face the temptation of the devil (Matthew 4:1) so that he may succeed in remaining faithful to God where both Adam and Israel had failed.
6. The devil tempted Jesus as he had tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and as Israel was tempted in the wilderness of Sin. The devil leaned on Jesus’s humanity in each of the three temptations in “an attempt to force him to set aside his complete obedience to the will and purpose of God by adopting an easier means to the fulfillment of his mission” (Howard C. Kee, “Matthew,” in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982], 613). This is why the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).
7. Jesus prepared for the devil’s temptations by fasting for forty days (Matthew 4:2). Jesus knew the battle he was about to face was not against fellow humans but “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). The way to ensure that he was spiritually ready to fight was to fast. According to David Mathis, “Fasting is voluntarily going without food—or any other regularly enjoyed, good gift from God—for the sake of some spiritual purpose. ... Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it’s fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone’s salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for

a greater taste of Jesus” (David Mathis, “Fasting For Beginners,” *Desiring God*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fasting-for-beginners>). Fasting for a spiritual purpose is more than simply not eating—that’s starvation. Rather, it is important to replace the time you would spend eating (or enjoying another good gift of God) with time in a spiritual discipline. In doing so, fasting draws us into a deeper trust in God—fixing our eyes on the eternal nature of God, rather than our temporary struggles on earth. Jesus also taught that some answers to prayer can only come through prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21). Is there something you are praying for that the Lord is also prompting you to fast for?

8. Fully surrendering to God means being willingly led by God’s Spirit wherever he takes us. Allowing God’s Spirit to direct our steps is a sign that we belong to God’s family (Romans 8:14). When trusting God takes you in an unexpected direction, don’t panic or give up on God! Rather, be intentional to (1) discern where God is leading you through prayer; (2) prepare for what’s ahead through fasting; and (3) trust that God is with you and has your best interests in mind.

Week 3

Text: Matthew 4:3–4

Topics: Hunger, Lust of the Flesh, Righteousness

Big Idea of the Message: The devil first tempts Jesus by appealing to the lust of his flesh. Yet Jesus overcomes the temptation by hungering for God’s righteousness instead of satisfying the needs of his physical body.

Application Point: Followers of Jesus must fill their lives with the eternal nourishment of God’s righteousness that comes from God’s Word and Christian community, rather than the temporary pleasures that satisfy us only for a moment.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Have you ever been so hungry that your stomach hurts? Perhaps you’ve been so hangry that you did or said something totally out of character. Or perhaps you have overheard someone complain, “I’m so hungry, I think I’m going to die!” when it takes more than ten minutes to get your meal at a fast-food restaurant? Though it might seem like we can’t go more than a few hours between meals, your body can survive for long periods without food or water. According to Amanda Barrell, an average healthy adult could survive for one to two months without food—although there are many factors that determine how long an individual may endure (Amanda Barrell, “How Long Can You Survive without Food?,” *Medical News Today*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/how-long-can-you-go-without-food>).
2. Jesus had been without food in the wilderness for forty days. He was hungry (Luke 4:2). So it should be no surprise that the devil presses Jesus to satisfy his desire for food. He appeals to Jesus’s divinity to meet his human physical needs, but by illegitimate means. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (Matthew 4:3). The devil was not asking Jesus to

prove his claim of divinity by turning rocks into bread; rather, the devil knew exactly who Jesus was. With this in mind, the devil's first temptation could be interpreted as "Since you are the Son of God and have the power to do anything you want and provide yourself with anything you need, why not use that power to feed yourself when you're hungry?" (Allen Ross, "6. The Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1–11)," *Bible.org*, March 16, 2006, <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-temptation-jesus-matthew-41-11>). Turning stones into bread may seem extraordinary to us, but it may not have seemed so in the first century. There were claims of ancient magicians who could not only shape-shift into animals but could also turn substances to bread (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993], 53–54).

3. Jesus was tempted to give in to the *lust of his flesh*. This scheme had worked for the devil before, in the garden of Eden. In Genesis 3:6, Eve saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "good for food." She thought its fruit was going to satisfy her physical need for food, but it only led her—and every generation after her—wanting more to quench the insatiable desires of their flesh. These desires of the flesh do not submit to God's moral law; rather, they seek to control our actions to please ourselves and disregard God's righteousness ("What Is the Lust of the Flesh?," *Got Questions*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.gotquestions.org/lust-of-the-flesh.html>).
4. Have you gone out to dinner with someone who has a severe food allergy? It can be hard to find places with allergen-free menu items that both look and taste good to eat. And then there's the embarrassment many adults and children feel when they ask what is in their food—even if it contains something that will send them into anaphylactic shock. Lianne Mandelbaum describes the day her son's throat began to close up following his exposure to peanuts. "He clutched his throat, and he was so very frightened. Seeing the light slowly fade from his eyes did not inspire laughter from me. No one asks for this condition. No one" (Lianne Mandelbaum, "Food Allergies Are Not Funny," *KevinMD* [blog], July 20, 2020, <https://www.kevinmd.com/2020/07/food-allergies-are-not-funny.html>). Like with Lianne's son, something that seemed good for Eve to eat had deadly consequences for her and her children.
5. Jesus did not give in to satisfying his hunger in an illegitimate way. He responded to the devil by quoting from Deuteronomy 8—a passage reflecting on the hunger of the Israelites in their forty-year journey in the wilderness. The hunger the Israelites experienced during that time was to test if they would trust God's Word to provide their daily needs through the manna that came every morning (Ross, "The Temptation of Jesus"). Their hunger led them to recognize their need to depend on God as the source of their bread, rather than on the bread itself. Likewise, Jesus depended on God to provide for him, and he would not perform a miracle to satisfy his physical hunger (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 935).
6. What is satisfying your hunger? What are you filling the empty spaces of your soul with when you are lonely, tired, scared, or depressed? The example of

Jesus shows that we are to fill our lives with the things that nourish and sustain our soul, rather than what satisfies the temporary needs of our flesh. Jesus taught his disciples that it is those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that will be satisfied (Matthew 5:6). What temporary and earthly desires do you need to give up in order to be fully satisfied in your relationship with God?

7. So what does it mean to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness? When we hunger and thirst for something, it denotes a sense of urgency to provide for our basic needs. We must passionately seek God and his righteousness first, above all other pursuits, believing God will provide us with everything he already knows we need (Matthew 6:33). We show our desire to live under God's holy rule through submitting to his Word and surrounding ourselves with Christian community (Daniel Doriani, "Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness," *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 2017, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2017/06/blessed-are-those-who-hunger-and-thirst-for-righteousness/>).

Week 4

Text: Matthew 4:5–7

Topics: Half-Truths, Pride of Life, Signs

Big Idea of the Message: The devil then tempts Jesus to give in to the pride of life to prove that God is with him in a powerful way. Yet Jesus overcame the temptation by refusing to put himself in a dangerous situation to test God's faithfulness.

Application Point: Followers of Jesus must personally know God's Word in order to recognize the half-truths that lead us to test God and doubt his presence with us.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Have you ever experienced a prolonged season when it feels like life keeps knocking you down—no matter what you try to do to stop it? Have you ever felt like bad news is always lurking around the corner? If so, you're not alone! As we'll see today, just because you withstand one attack from the devil doesn't mean the battle is over. While Zac and Jennie Allen had become accustomed to facing spiritual attack as church planters, they walked through a particularly hard season where the intensity of the attacks went to a new level. Over just a few months they experienced marital fighting, betrayal, behavioral issues with a child, church conflict, and unexpected temptations. The attacks felt so hard for so long that Jennie locked herself into her bathroom to cuss and punch the air in her frustration with the devil, begging God to send in backup to help them. But as followers of Jesus, we should not be surprised when life gets tough, for "When you are truly about the things of God, there is always attack" (Jennie Allen, "Are You under Attack? God Is with You!," FaithGateway Store, July 5, 2016, <https://faithgateway.com/apps/fireamp/blogs/christian-books/are-you-under-attack-god-is-with-you>).
2. Jesus overcomes the first temptation, and the devil then takes Jesus to "the pinnacle, or *wing* of the Temple in Jerusalem, perhaps the porch towering above

the Kidron valley” (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 935). It was so high that certain death would await anyone who would fall from there (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993], 54). Satan wanted to take Jesus to a public location to test the obedience to God that he showed in the first temptation. What better way for the devil to make Jesus prove his trust in God than by convincing him to throw himself off the temple for angels to save him? (Allen Ross, “6. The Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1–11),” *Bible.org*, March 16, 2006, <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-temptation-jesus-matthew-41-11>).

3. Followers of Jesus are not the only ones who read Scripture. In Matthew 4:5, we see the devil quote a portion of Psalm 91 to Jesus. It is clear that the devil knows God’s Word. The Bible also teaches that demons believe in one God (James 2:19) and recognize Jesus as “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). There were also rabbis who “acknowledged that the devil and demons could handle Scripture expertly” (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 54). But here the devil uses the Scripture out of context. “The psalm is a psalm of trust, telling how God protects his people. It was never intended to be claimed apart from practical wisdom. God promises to protect His people; but He has also given them common sense” (Ross, “The Temptation of Jesus”). Psalm 91:9–12 says that no evil will come upon those whose dwelling place and refuge are with the Lord, for God’s angels will protect the servants of God who have trouble *come upon them*, not those who deliberately put themselves in harm’s way to see if God would save them (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 54). The devil twists Psalm 91:11–12 out of context to try to force Jesus to jump from the temple to confirm that he really does live by every word that comes from God (Pfeiffer and Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 935).
4. This wasn’t the only time the devil twisted God’s words to get someone to do his bidding. He used this technique in Genesis 3 to deceive Eve in the garden of Eden. God had previously warned Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17). But the devil’s deception was in his half-truth. While the devil did speak *truthfully* to Eve by confirming she would not die if she touched the fruit (3:4), it was his additional statement—“God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5)—that was a *lie*. Eve was drawn to the lie by the offer of being *like God*—even though she was already made in the image and likeness of God (1:26–27). “Here is the essence of the pride of life—anything that exalts us above our station and offers the illusion of God-like qualities, wherein we boast in arrogance and worldly wisdom” (“What Is the Pride of Life?,” *Got Questions?*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.gotquestions.org/pride-of-life.html>). Has your prideful desire to be *like God* ever led you to be dissatisfied with the many blessings and freedoms God has given you?

5. When we are not confident or don't know God's Word for ourselves, we can believe wise-sounding sayings to be Scripture, even when they are not! These half-truths might sound like Scripture and might even contain elements of biblical truth but are not found anywhere in the Bible. According to Adam Hamilton, some of the most popular half-truths Christians believe include, "God helps those who help themselves"; "Everything happens for a reason"; and "God won't give you more than you can handle" (Adam Hamilton, "New Book, Half Truths, Helps Christians Fully Experience Jesus" [blog], April 15, 2016, <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/new-book-half-truths-helps-christians-fully-experience-jesus/>). How well do you know God's Word? Is it possible that you have mistaken a half-truth for God's Word?
6. The devil tempted Jesus to give in to the *pride of life* to emphatically show the people that God was with Jesus. But Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. He refuses to put the Lord to the test with a dangerous and foolish act at the devil's prompting and instead remains content in his trust of his Father (Ross, "The Temptation of Jesus"). While the context of this passage in Deuteronomy 6 was dedicated to teaching the Israelites how they were to honor God when they lived in the promised land, Jesus specifically selects this verse because it referred to the time when the Israelites tested the Lord at Massah (Exodus 17:1–7). They refused to believe that God was with them until he provided water from a rock as a sign that he was leading them (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 54).
7. Have you ever asked God for a sign that you are following his will? Many followers of Jesus have! Perhaps it was requesting that God do something unexpected to confirm to you which college to attend, whether you should leave your job, if you should date that person—or, in Gideon's case, if you should rally the Israelites for battle (Judges 6:36–40). But what about asking God for a sign that he will miraculously intervene in our time of need? Jenna was in need of a sign from God when her young son was diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening condition. As she wept in the hospital, she asked God to give her a sign that her son would be healed. She opened her Bible randomly to Psalm 41 and read, "The Lord protects them and keeps them alive ... the Lord sustains them on their sickbed ... in their illness you heal all their infirmities." While she knew this might be a coincidence, she kept holding on to hope that maybe God had spoken to her. She would find that it was from God, as her son was fully healed (Jenna, "When God Gives You a Sign," *Jenna's Everything Blog*, April 24, 2019, <http://www.jennaseverythingblog.com/2019/04/24/when-god-gives-you-a-sign/>).
8. God can and does give signs to show that he is present with us, but we should not rely solely on these signs to discern God's will and direction. Signs are often given to *confirm* a decision based on (1) the truth of God's Word, (2) wrestling with God in prayer, (3) the leading of God's Spirit, (4) the wisdom of God's people, and (5) the potential changing of your circumstances. By telling God he must perform *this task* by *this time* in order for us to hear him, we are seeking control of the situation rather than following God by faith (Vanessa Pizutto, "Does

God Give Signs?," *Hope Channel*, June 1, 2011,
<https://www.hopechannel.com/au/read/does-god-give-signs>).

Week 5

Text: Matthew 4:8–11

Topics: Lust of the Eyes, Idolatry, Impatience, Worship, Serving

Big Idea of the Message: The devil attempts to lure Jesus to worship him by appealing to the lust of his eyes. But Jesus chooses to serve his Father's will to receive the kingdom promised to him—even if it leads to death on a cross.

Application Point: Don't let an impatient and comfortable lifestyle stop you from worshipping Christ alone for your salvation.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Have you ever had the opportunity to get ahead in life, business, or social status by befriending the right people? Or perhaps you simply found yourself being in the right place, at the right time, saying the right thing to the right person? It is said that *who* you know, not *what* you know, can bring promotions and new job opportunities. Fredric Neuman writes, "Every day, I hear of someone being promoted because he was recommended by a powerful friend of the boss, or, most recently, that an unqualified man was promoted to a managerial position because he was the lover (secretly) of the man who ran the company" (Fredric Neuman, "It's Not What You Know. It's Who You Know," *Fighting Fear* [blog], *Psychology Today*, June 11, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fighting-fear/201406/its-not-what-you-know-its-who-you-know>).
2. Befriending the right person—and pledging allegiance to them—was the devil's final temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:8–10. The devil showed Jesus the grandeur of the worldly kingdoms that were under his influence as "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4) and "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). As a usurper, he offered all these kingdoms to Jesus in exchange for his worship (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 935). Though Jesus will one day reign over every earthly kingdom, the devil suggested that there was a shortcut: by simply bowing down and making the devil his lord, Jesus could rule over the world *now*—without the pain and suffering he would endure by bearing the sin of the world (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* [Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, 1987], 535).
3. It was with the *lust of the eyes* that Satan tempted Jesus, just as he had lured Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. Eve saw that the tree was "a delight to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6). This lustfulness is a sinful desire to possess something that we are drawn to visually. "This coveting of money, possessions, or other physical things is not from God, but from the world around us" ("What Is the Lust of the Eyes?," *Got Questions?*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://www.gotquestions.org/lust-of-the-eyes.html>). We are drawn to want

something that looks better than what we currently have—even if what we have is amazing!

4. Have you ever witnessed a group of children opening Christmas presents at the same time? As a child tears away the wrapping paper, they are filled with excitement to begin playing with their new gift—that is, until they consider the gift another child received to be better than their own! Suddenly, this new gift that only minutes earlier brought excitement now feels like a disappointment. When we compare what we have to what we wish we had, we can quickly become jealous and lust for someone else’s possession.
5. Jesus knew the devil to be a murderer, a liar, and “the father of lies” (John 8:44); so it was doubtful that the devil would even give what he promised if, in fact, Jesus did worship him. But even if the devil did give him the kingdoms of the earth, anything he could offer Jesus would be a cheap substitute compared with what the Father has in store for his Son (Allen Ross, “6. The Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1–11),” *Bible.org*, March 16, 2006, <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-temptation-jesus-matthew-41-11>). Our impatience can lead us to trade what will be of future value for an insignificant substitute that only satisfies our momentary desires. It was this same impatience that drove Esau to give his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29–34), and the Israelites to fashion a golden calf to worship when Moses delayed returning from Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:1–4). Even in our fast-paced, high-tech culture, we can’t stand to wait for anything! We grow impatient when an app or website takes more than ten seconds to load or a meal takes more than a few minutes to microwave, let alone taking years to complete a degree, apprenticeship, or work your way into your dream job. When has your impatience to have something *now* left you disappointed *later*?
6. Jesus again responds to the devil’s temptation with Scripture from Deuteronomy 6. Remember last week that this passage taught the Israelites how they were to honor God when they lived in the promised land? Well, Deuteronomy 6:10–15 was to remind Israel not to forget God when they are living in comfort, and not to turn to the idols of the inhabitants they conquer. Israel is to worship and serve God alone. Jesus’s response showed that only his complete submission to serving God will lead to the crown that awaits him, even if it means bearing a cross (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher’s Commentary* [Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications], 535). Has living comfortably led you to stop serving God as an act of worship? How might God be calling you to step up to serve him and his church in this season of Lent?
7. The culmination of the temptations surrounds worship. Satan desires to receive praise and worship to set himself up as the god over creation. He has always desired it! It was this desire and pride that motivated his scheme to overthrow God from his throne (Isaiah 14:13–14)—revolting against his creator and fighting the Archangel Michael (Revelation 12:7–8)—before being removed from his rank as guardian cherub (Ezekiel 28:16) and thrown down to the earth with his fallen angels like lightning (Luke 10:18). It was why he tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, disrupted God’s redemptive plan by constantly fighting against Israel, sought to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, and now seeks to kill, steal, and

destroy anyone who worships God as Lord (Dolores Smyth, “Why Was Lucifer, Satan, Cast Out of Heaven and Banished to Hell?”, *Crosswalk*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/why-was-satan-banished-in-the-bible.html>). Who is most worthy of receiving our praise and glory? Whom are we going to bow down and pledge our allegiance to? Will it be the devil, who deceives with half-truths, offering to satisfy our physical desires in an instant if we join him in turning our back on God; or will it be our loving Father, who, though he allows struggles to befall us during our time on earth, graciously offers salvation from sin and death, giving us abundant life in his presence now and forevermore? May we follow Jesus’s example and commit, or recommit, to worship God alone—bowing down to him as our first and only Lord. Only then may we stand before God’s throne and praise him with all God’s people from every nation and language and generation, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:10).

Week 6

Text: Luke 4:14–30; Matthew 21:1–11

Topics: Palm Sunday, Homecoming, Prophecy Fulfilled

Big Idea of the Message: Jesus’s return from the wilderness almost led to people in his hometown throwing him from a cliff! Yet Jesus’s return to Jerusalem would see him sentenced to death by those he came to save.

Application Point: Our religious expectations and preconceived ideas about Jesus can prevent us from seeing him as he is. Allow God’s Word and Spirit to reveal Jesus to you.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Have you ever had a homecoming you would rather forget? No, we’re not talking about a bad night at your high school homecoming dance! Rather, have you ever come home from an out-of-town vacation, only to realize you had left your windows open and now there’s water damage from a storm? Or have you ever returned to your hometown after a semester at college, only to find that your favorite restaurant has closed and all your friend groups have changed? When Bilbo Baggins returns to the Shire after a thirteen-month adventure at the conclusion of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (directed by Peter Jackson, Warner Bros., 2014), he finds his possessions being auctioned off after being presumed dead! Not exactly the homecoming you would expect after a heroic battle!
2. But sometimes after returning home, you realize that you have changed while everyone else has stayed the same. Perhaps your studies have opened your mind to new ways of tackling old problems. Or maybe an experience on a mission trip has given you a new perspective and appreciation for the blessings you have where you are! That was the case for Bilbo Baggins’s nephew Frodo Baggins at the end of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (directed by Peter Jackson, New Line Cinema, 2003). After fulfilling his quest to destroy the

ring of power, Frodo realizes the experiences he has been through have deeply changed him, and he no longer feels like he belongs in his hometown when life goes back to *normal*.

3. Having overcome the devil's temptations and been restored to strength by angels, Jesus leaves the wilderness (Matthew 4:11). Jesus travels to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, where he teaches in the synagogues, since "visiting rabbis were often given opportunities to teach" (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993], 199). Reports about his powerful teaching spread to neighboring towns, and Jesus is glorified by all who hear him (vv. 14–15). But his hometown of Nazareth already knew Jesus from his early years. And while they likely heard the reports about him, their personal experiences with him would leave them less willing to see Jesus in a new light (Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 199).
4. One Sabbath, Jesus was asked to read at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–17). Faithful Jewish members were frequently invited to read Scripture in the services and remark on the passages (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 1036). While synagogues would later follow a lectionary for their readings, here Jesus is given the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and had freedom to choose where he would begin (Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 199). Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1–2, a Messianic prophecy, outlining the ministry of preaching, healing, and salvation that the one empowered by God's Spirit would bring, and proclaiming that the year of the Lord's favor now will be fulfilled (William Baird, "Luke," in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982], 680). We too can receive this promised salvation when we place our faith in Jesus as our anointed Savior!
5. It is no surprise that there was a major uproar in the synagogue when Jesus confirmed that "today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). While they all "marveled" at his words (v. 22); some listeners doubted, knowing him to be Joseph's son (v. 22). By the time Jesus had finished speaking in the synagogue, his fellow townspeople were "filled with wrath" (v. 28) and sought to throw him off a cliff (v. 29)! The people who had known Jesus the longest already had preconceptions about who he was, and they couldn't fathom that their carpenter was now claiming to be Israel's prophesied Messiah (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* [Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, 1987], 653–54). Though Jesus had returned from the wilderness full of the Holy Spirit, his hometown could only see him for who they had known him to be in the past, not for who he was now. Have we been holding on to preconceived ideas about Jesus? Are we willing to allow God's Word and God's Spirit to shape the way we see Jesus?
6. The apostle Paul's conversion from stout opposition to Christianity to being a follower of Christ was hard for many in the early church to believe. Paul was a persecutor of Christians, with a license from the religious leadership to hunt down, threaten, and imprison those he found (Acts 8:3; 9:1–2; 26:10–11). Such

was Paul's reputation that it took God's supernatural prompting for other Christians like Ananias to take his conversion seriously (Acts 9:10–16). This dramatic transformation in Paul's life led to the kingdom of God spreading across the Roman Empire in an unexpectedly new way. When we limit our expectations of what God can do to only what we have seen him do in the past, we can become blind to celebrating and encouraging the new ways God chooses to move in the present and future. How many times have we been too slow to recognize a fresh movement of God until it has already passed us by?

7. Jesus's bold claim in the synagogue changed everything in the way he was viewed by his own people. One moment he was surrounded with fanfare, everyone hanging on his words; the next, he was carried to a cliff by a mob in preparation for an illegal execution by stoning (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 200). Yet this wasn't the only time in Jesus's ministry that there was a sudden shift in the crowd's perception of him following a dramatic statement in a place of worship. "Just as Jesus is rejected in his home town, so he will be destroyed by the rulers of Israel" (Baird, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 680).
8. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem upon a donkey's colt, to the waving of branches and the shouts of "Hosanna!" by the adoring crowd (Matthew 21:7–11), clearly fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that announced the arrival of Israel's long-awaited King. Generally, many of the Jews were anticipating that this King would be a conquering political and military leader who would lead their nation out from under Roman occupation. Jesus's focus in Jerusalem, however, was solely on the Jewish temple. "He did not go to the Fortress Antonia or to Herod's palace. Secular power was not the concern of the Messiah of Israel at this time" (Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary*, 625). Jesus entered the temple courts—driving out those who were buying and selling, overturning the tables of the money changers, and challenging the chief priests who were indignant with him (Matthew 21:12–16). By the end of the following day, the religious leaders were already looking for an opportunity to arrest Jesus (Matthew 21:45–46). Just as the people from Nazareth had preconceived ideas of who Jesus was, so the chief priests in Jerusalem had already set their expectations on what Israel's coming Messiah was going to do and say when he came. Jesus simply didn't fit their mold. By delivering Jesus to the Romans only a few days later, the religious leaders of that time denied the servant of God and killed the Author of Life (Acts 3:13–15). The point is not to condemn them but to look through their actions to see our *own* tendencies to reject Jesus when he doesn't fit our preconceived ideas. Are our religious expectations of Jesus preventing us from engaging with him?

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