

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*March 1, 2020 – First Sunday of Lent*  
*Matthew 4:1-11*

Lent is the Church's season of testing. It begins with Jesus having to survive three tests - which also might be called temptations to do what was wrong. Years ago, I taught in three Catholic universities. During class time, I encouraged students to ask questions if they didn't understand the mysterious topic I was discussing. I enjoyed this give and take between myself and the students.

But there was one question I never liked, and it came up all the time. "Doctor Thomas, is what you are talking about today going to be on the test?" I knew the attitude that was behind that question. If I said that it wasn't, the students would put down their pens and fall asleep. If I said it would definitely be on the test, their attention peaked.

Today we hear about three "tests" that Jesus had to pass. We might call them the test about human need, the test about human trust and finally the test about human power.

First, he was tested to turn stones into bread. After all, Jesus was hungry after forty days of fasting. The desert land was covered with stones so why not use his power to change them into a quick lunch. Jesus said that's not how it works. We survive by living in accord to God's word and not by searching for an easy way around what we are required to do. We must work for the bread that sustains us. That's how God arranged things for us.

Next, Jesus was tested by being challenged to test God. Jump off this high place and trust that God's angels will catch you before you hit the ground. Again, Jesus holds fast to how he knows things work. Of course, he trusts God, but he doesn't have to create some crazy stunt to prove that trust.

Finally, perhaps the biggest test of all, the temptation to power. Jesus is taken to a remarkable viewing place from which he can see all the magnificent cities of the world. They all will be his if he only worships Satan. Again, Jesus responds by affirming that only God is in charge. The tempter is a fraud and can only produce empty promises.

These three tests come to us in all kinds of ways. Usually in some form of taking the easy way to meet the challenges that come our way. All of them include an invitation to trust God and to give of ourselves to others who need our help. God gives us the power to do this. Each day we will be tested. In fact, everything will be on the test. So, pay attention.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*March 8, 2020 – Second Sunday of Lent*  
*Matthew 17:1-9*

For hundreds of years faithful Jews prayed that God send to them a saviour, one who would come amid an impressive display of power and might. Perhaps God could arrange for major fireworks in the sky, or at least, a fully equipped army marching ahead that would destroy God's enemies. But that's not how it happened although there were a few moments that impressed those who were faithful to God. But many wanted more. They wanted to impress (and perhaps scare) God's enemies. But that's not how it all happened.

Today we hear about the transfiguration of Jesus, which took place before a small group of disciples, and far from the television cameras. Jesus gave his followers a brief glimpse of his identity and his closeness to God. He took on the appearance of a divine being and, of course, those present were suitably impressed. So much so, in fact, that they didn't want to leave that mountaintop scene. They said that they wanted to build tents (like the one that once sheltered the Arc of the Covenant) for Jesus and for Moses and Elijah. Something a bit more permanent.

And just when they sought to preserve this miraculous event, it was over. The sky that glowed disappeared; the words that seemed to come out of the cloud became silent and the two important figures from their history all departed. The show was over. It was time to go back to normal. Jesus said something to the effect that they should get back down to earth and head for Jerusalem where something even more wonderful (and difficult) awaited them. No doubt, the disciples descended the mountain with even more questions than they had before they climbed earlier that day.

Yes, they had a glimpse of new possibilities, but first, they needed to accompany Jesus on his way to his great act of giving himself fully for them and for us. Along with Jesus they would face the full force of sinfulness and evil. What Jesus had mentioned to them right before they climbed that mountain awaited them. Something about suffering and dying. And a cross.

Our lives, like that of Jesus, take place on the hard edges of each day. He had to carry his cross as we do ours. But it's also good for us to recall moments when we experienced the goodness of life. Like his disciples on the mountain that day, there are blessings to enjoy and moments to recall. They are all part of God's loving plan for each of us. And God is always with us in both good times and those when we're not sure.

David M Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*March 15, 2020 – Third Sunday of Lent*  
*John 4:5-42*

What would you rather have? A thousand-dollar bill or a bank account that gave you money whenever you needed it? This is the kind of question that is suggested by today's gospel, certainly one of the most unforgettable narratives in all of Holy Scripture. Commonly called "the woman at the well," most know the main points of this part of John's Gospel.

I want to focus on that part of the gospel where Jesus and the woman have a discussion about the need for water. They meet at a famous well -- it's the same well where Jacob, an important Jewish figure in history hundreds of years previous, shared water from this well with Rachel, the daughter of his kinsmen. In that part of the world, with scarce rainfall, wells were needed for survival. They were also social gathering places, a bit like pubs in England and Ireland.

Without going into the wonderful details of this story, I will focus on the meaning of water as it was described by Jesus. It's the way he will provide water to those who are thirsty. An important prop in the story is a bucket. She brought hers from her home and Jesus had none. He offers to supply her with water from the well, but she responds that he can't do that because he happens to be without a bucket. This leads to his describing the water of life that he can offer her. He calls it "living water," which will actually be "a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Why does he describe his water that way? Without going into a long discussion of the relationship between water and life, I will only affirm that you can't have life without water. What I find most interesting is that the water Jesus offers comes through a spring that keeps giving and giving and giving. Not just now, but forever. How incredibly wonderful is that?

Clearly, Jesus is talking about water in a sense that is much more than the simple water we take from our faucets. It is life-giving water that comes directly and abundantly from God. It provides all that we need to continue living, not just here on Earth, but forever. It is water from a source that is God's love for all that lives in Creation, and most especially, for you and me. That life comes to and flows through family life is a message that Pope Francis loves to repeat. What a beautiful thought that is central to the message of Lent, when new life arises around us. And for us, the life we have received will never be taken away from us, never. God's spring never ceases to flow.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*March 22, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Lent*  
*John 9:1-41*

Today we hear again a familiar biblical story. A man was born blind. People wondered why this had happened. The narrowness of the time suggested that blindness, and other misfortunes, were caused by evil and sin. Bad things happened to bad people. At least, that was the general opinion.

In the gospels there are more than one cure of blindness, although the one read for this Sunday is the most striking because of its details. First, there's the contrast. A man who never saw anything during his whole life suddenly can see. Next, there is the way Jesus performed it. He covered the man's eyes with clay that he had moistened with his own spit. Then the man was directed to wash his eyes in a nearby pool. Suddenly he can see for the first time in his life. We are not told what he looked at, but that's another interesting feature of the story. It makes us wonder what it would have been like for us if we had been blind and then we could see. What would be our reaction? More about that later.

Woven throughout this story are arguments about what had happened. Many theological positions are mentioned about blindness, miracles and miracle-workers like Jesus. One I find interesting concerns the fact that Jesus did this good work on the Sabbath. The Bible at that time forbade work on the Sabbath. Jesus obviously believed that there were exceptions. It's always timely to do something good. His "enemies" did not agree. Make note of this, they said. We might be able to use this against him. (Later they did at his trial.) They also judged the blind man as a sinner. They believed that anyone born defective was a bad person. More narrow-mindedness. Jesus called them to re-evaluate their religious positions. They seemed much too narrow.

Let's here think about the man who was given his sight. Imagine the rest of his life. When he opened his eyes each morning, perhaps he saw his wife and children gathered in their small home. He might have looked outside and noticed trees and bushes laden with leaves and perhaps ripening oranges or lemons. He would gaze up to the sky and be astounded by its fierce blueness or the clouds of many hues that slowly passed overhead. He would see everything! And be amazed.

We who have been gifted with sight from birth would not likely experience near the delight of this fortunate man who had spent so many of his days in the dark. But we could if we realized the countless miracles that flow through us each day. If we notice!

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*March 29, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Lent*  
*John 11:1-45*

Although I live in a quiet corner of the United States, we enjoy regular train service. The Empire Builder is one of Amtrak's remaining great passenger trains and each day it visits our town, once in the morning heading east and once each evening traveling west. It's not always on time. In fact, when it is, locals notice.

In today's gospel we are reminded of one of the greatest miracles of Jesus, his bringing his close friend Lazarus back to life after he had been entombed four days. Jesus was criticized because it was thought that if he had come earlier, he could have prevented the death of his friend. Maybe he could have, but he chose not to. Jesus was following his own timetable. In his view he was right "on time."

Of course, the death of Lazarus saddened Jesus. He even wept as he approached the sealed tomb, a clear reminder of his humanness. But now it was time for Jesus to get to work. Later in John's Gospel he will say that he is the way, the truth and the life. He is the Lord of life. He came to us on Earth so that we might have life in abundance. Thus, he would call Lazarus forth from the tomb. And in the presence of many, Lazarus came out. There is no record of the crowd's response, or that of his sisters, Martha and Mary. Fittingly, the gospel today ends with the note that because of this miracle, many began to believe in Jesus. If we were there, we would likely do the same.

God's most precious gift to us is that of life. Our existence does not begin with our words, "Make me be!" No, our coming into the world is because God wanted you and me to be. God wanted to share life with each of us. God arranged that the way we come into the world is best through a family's love, although sadly, we know that this intent of God is not always realized. Still, God's love for each of us is a constant. Every breath we take can be traced back to God saying, "I love you."

Having the power of giving life, and supporting it in us, remains God's doing. We are also informed in John's gospel that God does not will that our death be the end of us, but only a transition from this life to the next. Deep within us is a hunger for our lives not to end. To go on forever. This hunger for continued life was implanted in us by the One who loved us long ago. When Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he was creating a sign of things to come. That he did this, perhaps his greatest miracle, for a family he deeply loved is also worth thinking about. It is not surprising that the authorities became more intent on getting rid of Jesus. Their claim to power was insignificant when compared to his.

David M. Thomas, PhD