

## A Meditation for Feb 26/23, 'the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent' – pg. 1

*By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church*

Hello and welcome to this meditation! Last week's trip up the mountain for the Transfiguration story took us all the way up to the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel. Today, we turn all the back to the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, to a section that we had skipped over when we first opened Matthew after the Epiphany: the account of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness! Then we're going to have four weeks of readings from John's gospel, before we go back to Matthew for the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Well, God is with us in our wilderness moments as well as our mountaintop experiences. Come, let us open ourselves to heaven's touch now as we turn heavenward in prayer:

### **God of mercy:**

**as your Word was a life-line for Jesus in his Wilderness time,  
so, guide us now that we may better understand that Word,  
and live its hope into creation. Amen.**

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 4:1-11 'The temptation of Jesus' (NRSV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus replied, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Finally, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left Jesus, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

### **'Our Lenten Journey Begins'**

*We recall today, O God, how Jesus said we cannot live by bread alone. So, make us hungry for your heavenly food in this time, that we may come to be nourished in your ways, and find all that we need to find this Lent to become who you need us to be. Amen.*

Today is the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in the Christian Season of Lent, that time of 40 days (and 6 Sundays!) that, traditionally, was set aside to prepare for Easter. So, off the proverbial top, let's remember that the number '40' has a very, very special significance within the world of the Bible. Can you think of any biblical situations where '40' is at play? Well, of course, there were forty days of rain in Noah's story, wasn't there? And there were forty years of

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wandering in the Sinai wastelands in the story of Moses and the Israelite's escape from slavery in Egypt. Today, Jesus is tested for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Forty is not so much a number that is one more than thirty-nine, or one less than forty-one, as it's the metaphorical amount of time that's absolutely necessary to get done what spiritually needs to get done. Well, in years gone by, the forty days of Lent have been associated with things like penitence, remorse, and contrition, things like repentance, confession, perhaps even self-flagellation (where people would whip themselves in memory of Jesus' time of agony). Yet, even though most of those of those activities are far from fun, and even though some of them I don't even find to be at all helpful, the fact is that Lent has come to be my second most favourite season in the Christian calendar, second only to the season of Easter. So, on this first Sunday of Lent, let's begin with a few words about this season – what it is, what it isn't, and how it can make a difference (a huge difference) to our experience of this year's Easter.

Think of a time when you set a goal. Not a wimpy, easily-achieved goal, but a really, really difficult one. Now think about all the hard work that you did, all the consistent and persistent effort that was needed, in order to achieve that goal. Now recall the deep satisfaction, and the abiding sense of accomplishment you felt, when that goal was met. Well, that's exactly how we'll be better able to appreciate Easter IF we have first done the work that we need to do in order to truly belong there. Lent is all about taking ownership of Easter's new life!

That word 'lent' comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'lente,' it's directly related to our word 'lengthen,' and is all tied up with what happens at this time of year in the northern hemisphere as we move to, and through, the vernal equinox and every passing day get a little bit longer. Well, will our days lengthen with value, meaning, and hope this Lent, regardless of what might come our way to 'shorten' them? The answer to that question, of course, is up to us. Will we use Lent as a time of preparation for what Easter holds?

Now then, I have to warn you (you already know this, don't you?) that that whole business of lengthening our days with meaning is neither easy nor convenient. And today's gospel reading sure illustrates that. It illustrates it to a tee. The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert comes with breath-taking speed right after the joy and affirmation of Jesus' baptism, where we heard God voice, "You are my beloved." Then, in a heartbeat, we're whisked away into the lonely agony of a desert wasteland for forty days and nights of testing, the exact amount of time that was spiritually necessary. Now then, who sent Jesus into the wilderness? Well, the bible's brutally clear about that: Jesus was sent by the very Spirit of God that had just blessed him so profoundly. As Matthew's gospel puts it, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Mt. 4:1). In a fabulous book entitled Transforming Mission by a theologian named David Bosch, it's pointed out that how the Japanese character for 'crisis' is a combination of the characters for danger and opportunity. Crisis equals danger and opportunity – what a great way to illustrate the business of Jesus being sent to the wilderness!

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Well, today I want to highlight three things from Jesus' desert experience all those years ago that have very important roles to play for you and me this very day. First of all, let's notice that Jesus was fully human, that the pre-Easter Jesus faced all the same struggles that you and I face. He had the same struggles with the lure of ego that you and I do. He had the same difficulty that you and I have in identifying the truth. Jesus had the same struggles with how to use power that you and I do. And here's the bottom line on all that: if Jesus could handle those struggles in his wilderness time, then there's nothing – (NOTHING!) – that we can't handle in our wilderness times **IF** we handle them with God.

Secondly, let's recognize that Jesus' advice is something that we can trust. You see, the spirit-life to which Jesus' teaching points is filled with spiritual tools like peace, strength, confidence, and endurance – the very tools that will help us find our way through whatever deserts we must cross. In today's story, it's as though God is saying, "Don't be afraid, my love is stronger than your fear! Just keep on keeping on in faith, and we'll get through this together!"

Finally, the third thing that I believe we'd do well to recognize is that the temptations Jesus faced were the same temptations that you and I face every day. You see, every day we have to recognize that we simply can't manage on our own. Every day, we have to recognize that our own 'bread' for the journey is not sufficient, because only God's nourishment enables us to do what needs to be done. Every day we have to recognize that power corrupts unless it's used in the service of God's love. Every day we have to recognize that we only really have love when we first learn to give it away. In and around all of that, Jesus shows us that the only way to control the human ego is through relationship with God.

I once read about a person who was enslaved in a body harness, and forced to drag a very heavy box on chains through a dessert wasteland. It was so hot and dry; the work was so hard and futile, that the enslaved person couldn't help but wonder, what's the point, why not just give up, and let the slave driver put me out of misery? But, as the poor enslaved person keep pulling – and pulling, and pulling! – the friction of the box moving over the sand slowly, but surely, eroded the chains until, eventually, they fell completely away! Well, by doing what's right over, and over, and over, again, we can wear down all that holds us back until we're free in God's love!

Oh, may we learn that Lenten lesson again this year! May we keep on keeping on until we're free of all that would hold us down and keep us back! In the name of God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer, amen!

Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

God of all, in your pattern for life there is a time for keeping, and a time for losing, a time for building up, and a time for pulling down. In this holy season of Lent, as we journey to the cross, help us to discern in our lives what we must lay down, and what we must take up,

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what we must end, and what we must begin. And, God, grant us the strength to live a disciplined life through this season. Grant that we may live with more and yet more trust in you. Grant that Lent may bring your covenant closer to us, and that we may learn to love you, and our neighbour, even as Jesus taught, even as Jesus showed with his life.

We also pray that this Lent may be a time when truth, justice, and peace, may assert their power, when each household may know strengthened bonds of love, when those who suffer may know healing, when those who cannot find physical healing may find spiritual acceptance, when those who are hungry may be fed.

We pray now for all who are facing difficulty this day and we pray, too, for all the places where there's difficulty. From within our church family, O God, we continue to pray for Dave Kelly, and his various treatments for throat cancer, that he may live cancer-free. So, too, we also pray for Wayne Kett, O God, that he may know your strength and endurance as he struggles with the latest outbreak of his pulmonary fibrosis. We also pray for Anne and Walt Perrin, that they may know your strength and comfort through these days.

In the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence*. All that I have named with my words, all that lies yet too deep for words to touch, we bring to you, God, as we take those words that Jesus once taught us and pray together the following contemporary version of Christ's Prayer:

**Holy God, who is heaven: hallowed be your name, followed be your way and done be your will throughout creation. Feed us with the bread that we need for today and forgive us for the hurts that we cause others, even as we learn to forgive those who hurt us. Strengthen us in times of temptation and free us from the grip of all that is evil, for you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever, amen.**

Bless us through this year's Lenten journey, God – bless us that we may become blessings in the work of your love! In the name of God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer, amen!