

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*Create in me a clean heart, God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me out of your presence,
or take your Holy Spirit away from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 51.10-12)

HYMN: Through all the changing scenes of life ...**PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:**

Almighty, holy, and righteous God:

We are conscious that we have entered your presence — not by going to a particular place, though, but by turning our thoughts toward you. We have come in response to your call, but also because we recognize our need for you. Grant, then, that our time of worship may help to strengthen our relationship with you, and to equip us for a new week in your service.

Merciful God: You call us to be your people, but we confess that we still desire to write the script of our life, a script in which things turn out the way we would like them to, not necessarily the way you would. We are more inclined to walk along the broad way of self-gratification rather than along the narrow way of self-discipline and self-denial. We find it easier to accept the ways of the world around us than your ways.

Gracious God: We continue to struggle against our sinful impulses. Forgive us, we pray, for the times we have given in to them, and failed to do or be what you want. In this season of Lent, renew our desire to be the people you want us to be; and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, guide and empower us to live in your ways more and more faithfully.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Just as through the disobedience of one man — Adam —
the many were made sinners,
through the obedience of one man — Jesus —
the many will be made righteous.*

(Romans 5.19)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,

let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Deuteronomy 26.1-11 - A thanksgiving offering
In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives the Israelites final instructions before they enter the Promised Land, the land of Canaan.
In this reading, Moses gives them instructions for a thanksgiving ceremony they are to observe, to thank God for his gift of the land.
- **Psalm:** Psalm 51.1-12, 16-17, “Have mercy on me, God”.
Psalm 51 is a *penitential* psalm — in fact, it’s the *classic* penitential psalm.
In it, the writer confesses his sin to God, and asks for God’s forgiveness.
Actually, this is the traditional psalm for Ash Wednesday; but, since we don’t have a service on Ash Wednesday, I thought it would be appropriate to read it today.
- **Letter Reading:** Romans 10.5-13 - Believing and professing
In this reading, Paul emphasizes the essential message of the gospel: that people are made right with God by believing in Jesus — that is, by accepting that he is Lord, and believing that God has raised him from the dead.
- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 4.1-13 - The temptation of Jesus
This reading is Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus.
The temptation takes place right after Jesus is baptized, and right before he begins his ministry.

HYMN: Lord Jesus, who through forty days ...

SERMON: “Choosing the Right Path”

With Easter Sunday being late this year, the Season of Lent also begins later than usual. This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, and so today is the first Sunday in Lent — the first of six Sundays, that is.

Lent is a season of preparation for Easter. The preparation doesn’t have to do with putting up decorations, but rather with getting ourselves back on the right path in our relationship with God and our relationships with the people around us. Living in God’s ways is challenging, if not downright difficult. We do the best we can, but, over time, we get slack, and perhaps even careless. So, from time to time, we need to renew our commitment to living in God’s ways, and to do so with renewed energy. This is essentially what the season of Lent is all about: giving up bad habits that we’ve gotten into, and replacing them with good habits, as we prepare to commemorate Jesus’ death, and to celebrate his resurrection.

In the early centuries of church history, Easter was the time when new converts to the Christian faith — primarily adults — were baptized. So the period leading up to Easter was a time during which they received their final instruction in the Christian faith, in preparation for their baptism. During the Middle Ages, this period gradually evolved into a time of penitence and spiritual renewal that was binding on all church members. Inspired by the Gospel accounts of Jesus' forty days of fasting and being tempted in the wilderness, the season metamorphosed into an austere forty day period — excluding Sundays — in which church members were expected to fast, to be more disciplined in prayer, and to give extra attention to charitable giving. The season was given the name “Lent”, which comes from an old English word for “spring”, since the season always occurs in the late winter and early spring.

During the Reformation, some of the newly-created branches of the church — including our own Reformed tradition — either de-emphasized the observance of Lent, or did away with it altogether. Over the past fifty years or more, though, Reformed churches have been rediscovering Lent, and recognizing that observing a period of spiritual renewal leading up to Easter is indeed worthwhile.

Since the Season of Lent was inspired in part by Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, that story is the traditional Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent. There happen to be three accounts of this event, found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; although not in John. And so, each year we begin Lent by reflecting on the temptation of Jesus. Last year, we read the account in Mark's Gospel; this year, we're looking at Luke's account.

The first thing we need to notice about the temptation of Jesus is that it took place right after he was baptized, and before he began his ministry. For this reason, the temptation, along with the baptism, is understood to be part of the process through which Jesus was prepared for his ministry. In his baptism, of course, he received the Holy Spirit, and was declared to be the Son of God; in his temptation, he was confronted with choices that would determine what his ministry would be like.

What links the two stories together is the action of the Holy Spirit. Having come upon Jesus in his baptism, the Spirit then causes Jesus to head out into the wilderness, where he experiences temptation. Mark's account, which we read last year, puts it very forcefully: *At once, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan* (Mark 1.12-13). Luke's account puts it more gently than that; he says, *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where, for forty days, he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them, he was hungry* (Luke 4.1-2). The temptation wasn't a chance happening, then, but an experience that the Holy Spirit led Jesus to undergo.

Unlike Mark, Luke tells us something of what Jesus' experience of being tempted was like. In Luke's account, the devil tries to get Jesus to do three specific things: to turn a stone into bread in order to relieve his hunger; to worship him in order to gain possession of the kingdoms of the world; and to jump off the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, trusting that

God would prevent him from harming himself. If this doesn't quite sound the way you remember the story, chances are you're more familiar with Matthew's account. In Matthew's account, we find the same three temptations, except that the second and third ones are in the opposite order.

Presumably, these three temptations are *examples* of the kinds of temptations that Jesus was subjected to, rather than the *only* ones, since Luke says that he was tempted by the devil "for forty days" — that is, for the entire forty-day period.

It's worth remembering that the Greek word for "temptation" also means "testing". The Gospel writers use the same word later on, for example, when they speak of Jesus' adversaries asking him questions in order to "test" him — such as the question that prompts Jesus to tell the parable of the good Samaritan. The time of temptation in the wilderness thus was for Jesus a time of testing. What was being tested, then? Presumably it was Jesus' understanding of the ministry that he would be undertaking, as well as his commitment to carrying out that ministry according to the plan. Presumably, the devil's goal was to get Jesus sidetracked; that is, to sabotage Jesus' ministry by getting it off to a bad start.

I like to think of Jesus' experience as a kind of "boot camp". Just as would-be soldiers are subjected to strenuous physical training to prepare them for the rigors of combat, Jesus was subjected to strenuous psychological and spiritual testing, to prepare him for his ministry. Add to that the fact that he was by himself in the wilderness — an uninhabited, desolate, lonely, inhospitable location. I'm sure it wasn't a pleasant experience.

Two of the temptations that Jesus had to deal with had to do specifically with his identity as the Son of God. In both the first and third temptations, the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, do such and such". It appears that those temptations were about what it meant to be the Son of God. Did being the Son of God mean that Jesus should be able to do anything he wanted? Did it mean that he should use his power for personal gain? That's what Jesus needed to sort out.

The first two temptations definitely promise personal gain. The first one was to turn a stone into bread in order to relieve his hunger; the second was to gain control of the whole world by worshiping the devil. We can appreciate that Jesus might've seen some advantage to himself in doing what he was being tempted to do.

The third temptation, though, is more difficult to figure out. Was he being tempted to put on some kind of spectacular demonstration for the worshipers at the temple? Or was he simply being tempted to demonstrate his trust in God to keep him from physical harm? We can only guess; and interpreters don't all come to the same conclusion on this question.

In any case, Jesus chooses *not* to do any of the three things he is tempted to do. He chooses not to turn a stone into bread in order to relieve his hunger. He chooses not to worship the devil in order to gain control of the world. He chooses not to jump off the highest point of the temple in order to demonstrate his absolute trust in God's protection.

Not only that, but Jesus accompanies each of his refusals with a quotation from the scriptures — specifically from the words of Moses, recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. To the temptation to turn a stone into bread, he replies, *Man shall not live on bread alone* (Luke 4.4; Deuteronomy 8.3). To the temptation to worship the devil, he replies, *Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only* (Luke 4.8; Deuteronomy 6.13). And to the temptation to jump off the highest point of the temple, he replies, *Do not put the Lord your God to the test* (Luke 4.12; Deuteronomy 6.16).

It's clear, then, that Jesus saw that each temptation violated an important principle, and that each principle was attested in Israel's scriptures. Not only that, he also had the self-discipline to respect the principle in question each time.

In resisting each of these temptations — and presumably others as well — Jesus made important choices as to what his ministry was going to be all about, and as to how he was going to carry it out. This becomes clear as we follow him through his ministry in the rest of Luke's Gospel. As things turned out, he didn't use his power or authority for his own advantage, but rather for the benefit of others. Much later in his ministry, for example, he would say to his disciples, *I am among you as one who serves* (Luke 22.27). I'm reminded also of the famous passage in Philippians, in which Paul says of Jesus,

... *being in very nature God,*
[he] did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he emptied himself,
by taking the very nature of a slave,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death —
indeed, death on a cross (Philippians 2.6-8)

It seems to me that this is what was being sorted out in Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. A lesser person than Jesus might very well have chosen to *do* the things that Jesus was tempted to do. Jesus himself, however, resisted every temptation, and chose the path that we read about in the rest of the Gospel.

One detail that is unique to Luke's account is the way the story ends. It *doesn't* say that the devil gave up, and left Jesus alone. Rather, what Luke says is, *When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time* (Luke 4.13). What this implies, of course, is that the temptation wasn't finished; that there would be more tempting later on. Even though this is the only appearance that the devil makes in Luke's Gospel, there would be plenty of times during the course of Jesus' ministry when he experienced temptations of one kind or other. Perhaps the toughest temptation took place in Gethsemane, when he prayed that he wouldn't have to go through the terrible ordeal that lay ahead of him. But even then he resisted temptation, praying, *Yet not my will, but yours be done* (Luke 22.42).

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is relevant, of course, because we experience temptation, too, although not many of us actually have conversations with the devil! Our temptations come mainly from our desires and our fears. They come also from pressures we experience from the people around us, or from society in general, to hold certain attitudes, or to behave in certain ways. What then can we learn about temptation from today's story?

In the first place, the fact that we experience temptation doesn't mean there's anything wrong with us, or that we're spiritually weak. If Jesus himself experienced temptation, it shouldn't surprise us that we also do. There's nothing wrong with *experiencing* temptation; what *is* wrong is when we give *in* to it — whether it's temptation to do something we shouldn't, or temptation *not* to do something we should.

The thing that served Jesus well in his experience of temptation was a thorough knowledge of the basic principles he needed to follow. Where can we get that? From a good overall understanding of biblical teaching. This doesn't mean that we need to be able to counter every temptation with a relevant quotation from the scriptures, as Jesus did; but a good grounding in scripture goes a long way. It enables us to recognize temptation when we experience it, and to know how we need to respond to it.

Of course, to *know* what we should do, and to actually *do* it are two different things. In addition to knowledge, we need motivation to live by God's principles, as well as self-discipline. These are resources that the Holy Spirit provides. Although Luke doesn't actually say so, I believe that the Holy Spirit, who led Jesus into the wilderness in the first place, also accompanied him, and strengthened him as he was being tempted. The Holy Spirit also offers us the motivation and self-discipline we need to resist temptation, to choose the right path, and to live in ways that are pleasing to God.

The season of Lent is a period in which we seek to get ourselves back on the right path spiritually, as adopted sons and daughters of God — that is, to get our relationship with God back in order, along with our relationships with the people around us. One of the issues that we need to deal with in Lent, then, is temptation; because giving in to temptation can do damage to our relationships — both with God and with our fellow human beings. If we have gotten slack in our response to temptation, Lent is the ideal time to give it proper attention — to recognize temptation when we experience it, and to resist it.

HYMN: When voices are confusing ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Faithful and loving God:

On this first Sunday in Lent, we begin our annual journey to Golgotha and the empty tomb. We remember today the choice each of us has made to follow Jesus, to live by his teachings, and

to take part in his ongoing ministry in the world.

We begin our Lenten journey with Jesus in the wilderness, and we watch again as he resists temptation after temptation, with single-minded determination not to be swayed or side-tracked from the ministry that he came into the world to do. We acknowledge that we are not as strong or single-minded as he is. We often give in to temptations that seem attractive or inoffensive at the time, only to discover later on that we have made a mistake.

By the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, help us to recognize the temptations that come our way for what they are. In each case, help us to understand exactly what we are being tempted to do or not to do, as well as the possible consequences of giving in to that temptation. By experience, may we become wiser, more discerning, and more faithful to the path that you have called us to follow. Help us not to underestimate the power of evil in the world, but help us not to be afraid of it, either. May our relationship with you continue to grow stronger and deeper, so that your attitudes, values, and priorities become ours, also.

May this season of Lent be a time of renewal, not only for each of us individually, but also for your church as a whole, throughout the world. Inspire and guide both its leaders and its members, so that the church may renew its commitment to your purposes, and strive to fulfill your purposes in its ministry.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation and others close to us who find themselves in situations of difficulty; in particular, those whom we now name before you in silence: _____ . You know each one's needs, gracious God; and we pray that you would bless and strengthen each one. Enable us to be conscious of the needs of those around us, and guide and equip us to reach out to offer support and encouragement.

We pray for the world around us; and today, the war in Ukraine is foremost in our thoughts. We pray that you would strengthen those who are fighting against the invaders; that you would bless those who are fleeing to safety; that you would protect those who have nowhere to go, and must face whatever happens. We thank you for the economic pressure that NATO countries and others are placing on Russia, and pray that it may convince the Russians to break off the invasion. We thank you for military aid that is being provided to Ukraine. We thank you for humanitarian aid being provided to Ukrainian refugees, and pray that they may find safe refuge in neighboring countries, as well as in distant countries such as our own.

We give thanks for the broad support that has been shown for Ukraine around the world, and we pray that it may go a way toward healing divisions that have taken place in our society in recent years. May this crisis remind us all of the things that are most important in life, and may it enable everyone to be more compassionate and understanding toward those who see things differently than they themselves do.

We give you thanks that the inquiry into the mass shooting in Nova Scotia has finally gotten underway this past week. We pray that it may both satisfy people's desires to know exactly what happened and why, and that things may be learned that can prevent a similar tragedy from happening in the future.

As we observe International Women's Day this week, we pray for your guidance and blessing on all efforts to promote equality between women and men, to do away with discriminatory

attitudes and practices, and to give women the opportunity to realize their full potential. We continue to pray about the pandemic. We give thanks that the situation in our province and across our country appears to be improving, and we look forward to the further easing of restrictions. We pray for the struggle against COVID-19 in other parts of the world; that vaccines may become more and more available, and that more and more people may receive them. We pray for your ongoing blessing on those who are most severely affected by the pandemic, that they may receive the support and assistance they need. We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Gracious and generous God:

We thank you that, through the Holy Spirit, you are with us whenever we experience temptation, offering us discernment to recognize temptation, and strength to resist it. We thank you also for the blessings you give us each day, through which you both preserve and enrich our lives.

In gratitude, then, we present these offerings to you, dedicating them to support the ministry that the church does in your name. Guide and bless the uses to which they will be put, we pray, so that your purposes may be served, and your will done.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Seek ye first the kingdom of God

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue serving God

as his people and representatives in the world.

And may God bless you:

May he give you wisdom to recognize temptation,

and strength to resist it;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.