

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 March 10, 2019, Lent 1C
 Deut. 26: 1 – 11; Luke 4:1 - 13
 Wilderness Companions
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In her book, Kneeling in Jerusalem, Ann Weems introduces us, welcomes us on our Lenten journey through poetry:

Lent is a time to take the time

To let the power of our faith story take hold of us.

A time to let the events

Get up and walk around in us.

A time to intensify

Our living unto Christ.

A time to hover over

The thoughts of our hearts,

A time to place our feet in the streets of Jerusalem

Or to walk along the sea and listen to his word,

A time to touch his robe

And feel the healing surge through us.

A time to ponder and a time to wonder...

Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God.

And so we gather today – fresh off the reminder of Ash Wednesday that we are from dust and to dust we shall return. And we also gather face to face with the promise of meeting the Risen Christ on Easter morning.

What, then, of the road between these two stations? We begin our 40 days of preparation, of a time of reflection, of prayer, of entering the great mystery of our faith. A time when we are especially called out of ourselves – a time when we are called into ourselves – in order to open ourselves to see that fresh new face of God.

To enter the mystery of our faith can be a challenge – so often words do not provide the doorway to the mystery – it's art, music, images, symbols that can touch us in these deep recesses of our beings. It's using our senses of smell, sight, taste, hearing, touch, that can bring deeper meaning to this Lenten journey that we share. For Lent is a time of solitude as well as a time of community. As time of solitude, it's a time of making the space to listen to that still, small voice within. As a time of community, we make a stronger effort to pay attention to other

persons' needs, to look at our life together at St. Paul's. That's certainly appropriate today especially as we gather at our Annual Meeting – a time of looking back, recognizing our present, and looking at our goals and dreams for the future. All surrounded by the love and grace and presence of God – what is that still small voice saying to us in our life together?

Today, our gospel reading takes us into the wilderness with Jesus – the wilderness of temptation. It's as if we begin our Lenten journey with a heavy dose of reality of what it means to be human – falling into temptation can be devastating – we've all experienced it – we've all seen it – temptation is a booby trap in life's journey.

To live is to be tempted. Sometimes mildly. Sometimes with gut wrenching severity.

The good news is that Jesus is available to us in every circumstance. No matter how difficult or painful the circumstances we face, Jesus is with us in the midst of it. He's very much in touch with the depth of our struggles because he's been there – in our personal lives and in the life of St. Paul's Congregational Church. And as we travel through this season of Lent, by the time we reach the joy of Easter morning, hopefully we will have discovered in a fresh new way that there never is a time when Christ is not with us, available to us.

Our gospel reading takes place at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Before he speaks anything, before he calls one disciple, before he touches one hurting life – he is slammed with crushing temptation – at a time when he is extremely vulnerable. Powerful temptation shows up, doesn't it, when physical strength is depleted, emotional and spiritual strength are sapped – we know how that is – temptation hits us when and where we are weakest, when we're least likely to turn aside. It strikes when we are hurting, tired, strung out, depressed, financially distressed – we're all too familiar with these feelings. And Jesus knows how that is too.

And listen again to the last verse: when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Until another opportune time. That's pretty sobering news for all of us, isn't it – that temptation is never over. We will all deal with temptation until the day we leave this planet. But there's good news here too: Jesus has, as the expression goes, been there, done that. And Jesus can help us through it, no matter how bad it all is.

Let's look at the three temptations Jesus faced: three striking issues we too face more than we'd like to admit as we begin our Lenten journey.

First: who needs the spiritual? Do we really need this spiritual thing? And I'm using the term "spiritual" in the context of our faith journey – not as we so often here it these days – I'm spiritual but not religious – for me, spiritual

speaks of my relationship, our relationship with God – so, how are we doing on our spiritual lives – as individuals and as church?

After 40 days when Jesus came out of his time of trials, he was famished. So the devil tells him, no need to wait – turn that rock into a loaf of bread and eat. Jesus' response: "One does not live by bread alone." Jesus sees through the deception: sure, the physical dimension of life is important but there's more to life than that – if we don't eat physical bread we may die but if we don't get spiritual bread to feed our spirits, we die spiritually.

Even in our very secular world and especially in the world of television, the spiritual dimension can break through. Remember the series *Touched by an Angel*? When it was first produced, the critics panned it – no way people will watch this sappy series about angels coming into their lives to help with pain and suffering. Well, those critics were wrong. Maybe under the surface of this secular culture is a hunger, a longing, for the spiritual dimension of life. Maybe there's a hunger for an anchor, a rock, in our lives – and the only rock I know that never changes, that is always there, is the love of God in Christ. Not drugs, no amount of "things", money, power, you name it – they all change. They go away or at the very least fail to meet the deepest needs of our soul. What's your anchor? We can't live by bread alone.

The second temptation of Jesus comes immediately after the first: the devil says, "Can't be tempted to neglect spiritual things by your hunger? Well, everybody has their price. Here are all the kingdoms of the world – to you I will give all the power and wealth you can imagine. Worship me and it's all yours."

Jesus slams the door shut to this second offer – "It is written: worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Whether it's a loaf of bread for a hungry person or the combined wealth of the entire world, what we worship will be our god. And if the god, the idol, we worship is not God, the consequence is spiritual bankruptcy. Here's a test of what we worship: ask the question, "Does the god you worship fill your life with meaning and purpose and can that god see you safely into eternity?"

Another question, "Am I more given to having what I want or wanting what I have...and what role does God play in this?"

Ann Weems calls us: Lent is a time to take the time to let the power of our faith story take hold of us. Are we taking the time to ponder these questions, to wonder about these questions in our own lives, in our life together here at St. Paul's?

And the third temptation: you say God is important? Prove it! Do a demonstration – let's have a miracle. Go ahead and jump off this roof – give us a miracle.

Jesus response: do not put the Lord your God to the test. There's no bargaining with God, is there. There's no saying to God, "Prove yourself to me and I will believe in you."

Maybe this is the toughest test for you and me – how many prayers have we all prayed: O God, if you will only do....then I will... Sometimes those prayers have to do with material things we want but more often, it's a heartbreaking plea for someone we love and want to see healed.

It's in these terribly tough times when the answer we want doesn't come – that we try to be open to something else, to the movement of the spirit in our lives. But that's so hard – we know that. Children tell about praying for a bike at Christmas and they don't get it. God didn't answer my prayer, they say.

A family watches one of their own suffer from a debilitating disease, watches as a loved one grows weaker – why does God do this? God isn't answering our prayer, they say.

Too often, the answer to the question "why" is known only to God. And that's hard to take, isn't it. But if we can open ourselves when the answer we want doesn't come, Someone else will come: the One who has been through every kind of test, every kind of temptation – one who never failed the test – the One will say to us, "I've been there. I am with you. We will get through this. I am with you in all things and I will never let you down."

Jesus is there when we are tempted. Jesus is there when we fall on our faces. Jesus is there in the everyday experiences of our lives, both in the heights of joy and in the depths of despair.

This Lenten season, instead of giving up something, add something to your life: make this a time of building your spiritual, your faith life, by being more conscious, more aware of how Christ has walked in our shoes.

The next time temptation sneaks up on you and grabs you – and it will – we know that – turn to the One who has survived what you are going through. Christ not only understands but he can guide you through this time of trouble – if you'll let him. Every time you turn to him and manage to get through a time of trial, you'll emerge just a little stronger. And so will we as church as we walk our own journey, discerning the direction of our ministry.

When that temptation comes, ask for help: Jesus, you have endured every kind of temptation and survived. Be with us now and give us strength to overcome. My favorite prayer is this: Lord, I can't do this. You have to. And then let God be God. Let Jesus be the Christ. That old expression "let go and let God" really has something to it.

We all need to answer the question, what will you worship? What do we worship? What role does God have in my daily life, in our life together here. Do I make room, do we make room, in our daily life even when we're most vulnerable –

that's when God is right there ready to hold us up, my friends. That's a promise. And isn't that good news.

Let's make this Lent a time for us to do some reflecting and renewal that puts Christ first – let's remember who we are and whose we are.

Lent is a time to make the time to let the power of our faith story take hold of us. A time to intensify our living into Christ. A time to hover over the thoughts of our hearts – a time to touch his robe and feel the healing surge through us. Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God.

So may it be for us all. Amen.