

3/6/22 WORSHIP SERVICE (FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT)

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Good morning! And welcome to this worship service. This first Sunday in March is also the first Sunday in the season of Lent – the forty days before Easter. Lent is a time to repent – to turn around, to recommit ourselves to God's ways, as Jesus revealed them. May these next weeks offer space and encouragement to find greater faithfulness, individually and as a congregation.

What do you have to share with one another – opportunities for celebration or service...

CALL TO WORSHIP –

Leader: Together we seek the way of God,

People: through the wilderness of Lent, through the wilderness of life.

Leader: We crave the safety of God's shelter,

People: the breeze under God's shade, the refreshment of living water.

Leader: God offers the care of angels,

People: the life of creation, the protection of love.

Leader: God is trustworthy to all who call on that holy name,

All: So come, let us seek Jesus' way of trust.

INVOCATION – Jesus, we trust in your presence with us as we worship you. Send your Spirit to enter each mind and heart, bringing whatever is needed to each of us here, this morning. Amen.

The **prayer for peace** this morning is one that we can all say together and is specifically for the people of Ukraine. Delton will put the words up on the screen. Together...

All: Our hearts and prayers go out to the people of Ukraine,

One: as they seek refuge from the terrible effects of war.

All: May they find shelter in God's arm,

One: as they try to calm their fears.

All: May they find comfort in God's arm,

One: as they worry about where to find food and shelter.

All: May they find comfort in God's arm,

One: as they witness death that war brings.

All: May they find solace in God's arm,

One: as they leave their homes behind to find safety.

All: May they find strength in God's arm.

One: Deliver us all from the madness of believing good can come from violence.

All: God hear our prayer.

One: Give us the courage to resist the myths of violence.

All: God hear our prayer.

One: Forgive us our pride as a super military power.

All: God hear our prayer.

One: Give us the compassion that gives birth to generosity and hospitality.

All: God hear our prayer.

One: Let us show love and mercy for those fleeing war.

All: God hear our prayer.

One: Mold us as a people of peace.

All: God hear our prayer.

May God hear our prayers and the cry of the Ukrainian people. (light the lamp)

GATHERING SONG – God of Our Strength VT 47

CHILDREN'S STORY – Chrystiana

MORNING PRAYER – (Di Suderman has moved now to Regent Park Rehab Center. Lee will be moving to Kidron-Bethel as soon as possible.)

Dear God, we thank you for the opportunity to gather as your people for worship, to study and learn, to discuss and fellowship and enjoy one another's company. We don't ever want to take for granted this gift of coming together in safety. Thank you, God, for your faithfulness to your children, no matter what our circumstances are – we can trust you in all things. And we are grateful.

In a position of humility, O God, we ask you to hear our prayers.

We pray for those who are sick – with physical ailments, broken bones or disease. We pray for continued healing and guidance for Di and Lee Suderman as they make big changes much faster than they had anticipated. We pray for those whose illness is emotional, broken hearts, depression or addiction. We pray for those who are sick with grief or despair. We think especially of the families and friends of the Tabor College students who were killed last Sunday and the young man who sustained serious injuries. Comfort them, God. Send your Spirit of healing and mercy to all who feel that pain.

We pray for Tabor Mennonite Church as they begin their search process for a new pastor. Grant them wisdom and openness to the leading of your Holy Spirit in their search. We pray for our own congregation here at Alexanderwohl as we continue to discuss and discern together the ways forward as your faithful followers. We pray for the broader Church, our conference and denomination and for all who are striving to follow Jesus. Grant patience that we would extend grace to one another even as we don't always agree with one another. Help us to remember and to focus on the most important commandments - all of which center on Love.

Thank you, God, for the gift of new life – we're particularly grateful for Sierra and Jerrell's new baby girl, Orly and we ask your blessing on them as they begin this new chapter of their lives. We pray also for Brittany and Garrett as they prepare to welcome Elliot's sibling very soon now.

Be with us, God, as we continue to worship, to pray, to sing, to hear your word for us this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Each week during Lent we will have a short prayer of corporate confession. This confession is not terribly specific, as we each find ourselves with somewhat different tests or temptations. In the silence that follows, consider what is on your heart that you might give to God.

During the moment of silence, Pastor Lois will extinguish one of the candles, which we will continue throughout extinguishing one candle each week throughout Lent.

Leader: Holy One, we seek you while you may be found.

People: **We call upon you while you are near.**

Leader: Have mercy on us, O God, for our thoughts are not your thoughts and our ways are not your ways.

People: **Forgive us for prioritizing our own security and control. Lead us into your way of profound trust.**

Leader: With Jesus as our guide through our own wilderness, let us see your way more clearly

All: ***and follow your way more faithfully.***

OFFERTORY PRAYER

(Psalm 63 adapted)

O God, you are our God, we seek you,
our soul thirsts for you, our flesh faints for you
as in a dry and weary land.

Yet we have seen your glory,
your steadfast love has poured over our lives,
our lips sing your praise.

We will bless you as long as we live.
Through the breath you have given,
the words that we utter,
the work of our minds and hands,
and the gifts of our inheritance,
we give back to you
so that all may sit in the shadow of your wings
and share the joy of your abundance. Amen.

FROM SHORTCUTS TO TRUST – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 4:1-13

The next number of Sundays, we consider our own journeys while journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem where he will face the cross.

This year, folks from Western District wrote the Lent worship resources in a magazine for worship planners called the *Leader*. I always like to use ideas whenever they seem to fit and sometimes take them a different direction.

The original idea for the theme of this week is “from security to generosity.” You might hear those words in what I say, but as I studied the temptations of Jesus, I chose to make this “from shortcuts to trust.”

In other words, it’s recognizing the different temptations we have to taking shortcuts to whatever we want in life, instead of basing our lives on a deeper trust on God to lead us through wilderness experiences that we have in our lives.

After his baptism and before the start of his ministry, Jesus spent time in the desert. 40 days in the desert. Without eating.

I have a friend that spent a whole summer in the desert in Arizona while he was in college. He spent the time to listen to God’s voice for his life. But I’m pretty sure he ate food during that time.

We’ve already discovered that our youngest, Josiah is a real explorer. We really have to keep an eye on him. We can only speculate on the literal wilderness experiences he may embark on as he gets older.

Believe it or not, human beings are capable of extreme things. Yes, it is actually humanly possible to go 40 days without food. I don’t think you can last that long without liquids. Actually, if your starting weight is 450 pounds, you can go over a year without any solid foods, so long as you take your vitamins and electrolytes. Just as the Guinness Book of World Records.

I don’t think what Jesus was after was winning any world records. Rather, Jesus’ time in the wilderness connects with the history of Israel. After the children of Israel escaped from slavery in Egypt, with God’s help, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They certainly had temptations, and unlike Jesus, succumbed to temptation.

40 is the symbolic number in the Bible representing testing. The season of Lent lasts 40 days when you subtract the Sundays. Often, we see these 40 days as a kind of test for Jesus before starting his ministry. A kind of bootcamp for Jesus.

But we’re going to see that the temptations of Jesus are really about what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. They are the temptations Jesus faced during his ministry, as he taught, debated, healed, and created a following.

Luke 9:51 says that “*When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” We don’t know if that journey was 40 days or how long it took, but this is the other journey that the season of Lent recognizes – the journey to the cross.

So, let’s take some minutes to look at the temptations that Jesus faced in his wilderness experiences, before asking what lessons are here for the temptations we face.

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS

Jesus faced three core temptations. The first of these is to turn stones into bread. Pretty understandable when you haven't eaten in 40 days. This isn't really about using special powers though; this is about what kind of following Jesus will attract.

Many leaders are good at bribing people in order to gain more ground. In Latin America, it isn't uncommon for politicians to have big public parties where they give people meat. They can afford to do this, when they've found corrupt means to rig the system already to gain wealth for themselves.

Jesus did in fact feed people, such as the feeding of the 5000. John's gospel says that the people afterwards tried to make him king by force, so Jesus withdrew. People also asked Jesus for more bread and signs.

Would Jesus stay popular by giving people what they wanted? Or would he stay focused on his message, whether popular or not? "One does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3).

Next, the devil tempted Jesus with all of the spender and power of the kingdoms of the world. This is the temptation to be a king through violent or coercive exercise of power. In its more extreme form, it is the nationalistic authoritarianism we see in Putin.

But Jesus refused to defend himself with swords in the garden of Gethsemane. He was mocked as a failed "king" at his crucifixion.

Finally, the devil tempted Jesus with jumping from the highest point of the temple and trusting God to save him. Now, this last time, even the devil quotes scripture – Psalm 91 –though it is taken out of context.

This temptation is a little harder to decipher. It could be about giving people an impressive sign to wow them. Several times in the Gospels Jesus refused to do that. I think it's primarily about Jesus' temptation to avoid the death of the cross.

In John 12:22, Jesus says: "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

When Peter challenged Jesus' anticipation of his fate, and said, "This must never happen to you!" Jesus responded, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matt 16:22 & following).

Even while hanging on the cross, mocking people brought up this temptation: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23:27).

A lot of people notice that each time, Jesus references a Bible verse, as we've seen. God's Word is key to finding our way through testing.

Some Christians have said it is important to memorize Bible verses so that you can withstand temptation. When you are tempted, you pull out the right verse so that you won't give in. This

certainly is helpful. But it's also true that in the realm of education, teachers know that teaching critical thinking skills is even more important than memorizing facts.

In the same way, we need to go beyond memorizing select Bible verses, to understanding the Biblical story at a deeper level to expand our vision of life to be the life God calls us to. Out of that sense of purpose, we resist temptation to take shortcuts to anything less than God's vision.

Instead of the easy path up to a modest overlook, being willing to take the longer, and harder path, because you trust someone who told you the awesome view is worth it, and you won't get there any other way.

OUR TEMPTATIONS

If you're like me, you might be thinking: But I'm not Jesus. I don't have messianic aspirations. I don't need to ascend to a divine throne. I'm can't heal my own ailments, let alone heal anyone else's. I struggle with my own problems, without being nailed to a cross.

I also don't have the devil appearing to me and whisking me off to different places. How do Jesus' temptations apply to my life?

That's a good question. No one's temptations, and no one's life's work looks exactly the same. We have different personalities, different gifts, and different circumstances. It's true, we are not Jesus.

So I tried to listen for the underlying issues in Jesus' temptations, that might be the underlying issues in the temptations all of us face. I tried to listen for what is common to the dilemmas and temptations we all face.

I think these can be summarized like this:

1. We are tempted to prioritize our own sense of **security**, safety, and having enough over a posture of **generosity**, open-handedness.

In a sense, this lines up with the temptation to turn stones into bread, when this bread is security for oneself or a way to manipulate others.

2. We are tempted to prioritize our own **success** over **faithfulness**.

Success, however you might define it for yourself, allows us to project the image of ourselves that we want others to see rather than the vulnerable, fragile people that we are. We look to some form of external success to determine that we are on the right track, rather than prayerfully looking within our spirits for the still, small voice of God. We are tempted to compromise on what faithfulness requires when we are afraid of not being able to maintain the "successful" or "strong" image of ourselves we want others to see.

3. We are tempted to prioritize **power** – the ability to achieve our goals and plans and get what we want – over the call to **serve** others.

In both of these (2 and 3), we avoid vulnerability, and avoid anything that looks like weakness. On a different scale these two correspond with Jesus' temptation to become a conventional earthly king.

4. We are tempted to prioritize feeling certain or having a sense of **control** when life is unpredictable over **trust**.

Kate Bowler has a podcast anyone can listen to called "Everything happens." Not "everything happens for a reason," but "Everything happens" (full stop).

Her most recent book is *No Cure for Being Human*. Her story is that her plans in life were very much interrupted when she was diagnosed with stage-four cancer and faced the possibility of dying at a young age, leaving young children behind.

Her message is to challenge the idea of our culture that there is a fix, a cure, or an explanation for everything. That idea often serves to compound the pain of people who are suffering.

"Have you prayed about it? Maybe you don't have enough faith? Have you tried this (insert highly specialized diet)? What about a deep cleanse? Maybe there's a pill for that. Maybe it was God's plan for ABC to happen because of XYZ. Maybe God just wanted another angel in heaven."

Uncertainty scares us in our culture. We like knowing the answer so that we can feel more in control. We assume that pain is always a problem to be solved.

Now, I'm not saying it's wrong to change course in some specific way in your life, because you know that will help you have a more fulfilling life. There's no sin in that.

Some have observed that our culture is death-denying, and pain-avoiding. It's kind of that can-do, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, American individualism, combined with the latest technology that's sure to expand our ability to avoid pain.

But sometimes there is pain we can't escape and may not have explanation for. It's part of being human, and there's no cure for being human.

Jesus faced the pain of Gethsemane, even while he agonized over what he would go through, and still prayed for the cup to be taken away.

Though we all hope not to have anything that resembles Jesus' cup, what does it look like to open ourselves to trust when life is unpredictable and scary? What does trust in God look like?

Let's start with what trust does *not* mean. Trusting God doesn't mean believing God handpicked what you are going through. I don't believe that. Everything happens, but everything does not necessarily happen for a reason.

Trusting God is *not* a guarantee I will get what I pray for. That if it's not happening, I must not have enough faith. Trusting God does not mean being certain of a good outcome. It is not a way to avoid pain or grief.

What you fear may not happen. Maybe it will all work out. Maybe you exaggerated it in your mind. Or maybe it already has happened.

Either way, trust means believing that we are not in the wilderness alone. Jesus walks beside you in your journey. Jesus is the guide along the desert path, but not a helicopter to airlift you out. You are led *in the Spirit*, as Jesus was in his own wilderness.

A verse we may keep coming to during this season of Lent is Isaiah 55:8-9:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Sometimes our problem is our thinking. I know this is true for me. I have thoughts that are not helpful for resisting temptation and staying the course.

I have to stop, take a step back. I try not to be angry with myself, show myself compassion for having off-track thoughts, but also give myself a little distance. Where are my thoughts coming from? What feeds them? Are these the thoughts God wants me to have?

Sometimes there is a specific truth that I have to remind myself of. Or sometimes I need a little mental quiet. Let that unhelpful thought whine in the background, while I center my attention on the present moment. Or on something a lot larger than myself, like a sky filled with stars, on a clear night with a new moon.

Your wilderness may be circumstantial, something you are going through or that happened to you or your family. Your wilderness might be ugliness inside you, that you've managed to keep hidden away for so long, even hidden away from yourself.

Either way, we are called to have the courage to make wilderness journeys –whether literal or spiritual. You will need a guide. Know that the Spirit of Jesus is not far to be that guide, alongside mature, trustworthy people.

May we together discover what it is to trust God on that road.

BENEDICTION

From this time and place into whatever awaits, may you follow God's way of trust. May you release whatever you hold in fear, so that you may be free to live generous lives. As you go, know that our God remains with you on the way through the wilderness in your life.