

WORSHIP SERVICE 2/26/23

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl! Today is the first Sunday of Lent. It rolls around every year.

Lent is a 40-day period leading up to Easter, that traditionally is a period of penitence and fasting. The 40 days come from the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert before he began his ministry.

Lent is a time to acknowledge grief, and confess and repent of sin as we take the path of Jesus through the cross to resurrection and transformation.

Check out the table in the back, which contains some devotional resources you can consider using during this season.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Caleb: JESUS, You have the words of life **(Congregation echo)**

The serpent said, "You will not die"

Lois: And yet, we see, the serpent lied

Leader: Death has had the last word from Adam to Moses

Lois: And yet, the free gift of Life comes grace-filled through One

Leader: This One was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted

Lois: And yet, in his time of need, he declared the truth

Leader: Let us who seek to be faithful offer prayer to You in our distress

Lois: And the rush of mighty waters shall not reach us

Leader: You are a hiding place

Lois: You surround us with songs of deliverance

Leader: As it is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,

Lois: But by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Leader: JESUS, You have the words of life **(echo)**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION – PASTOR CALEB

O God, you forgive and cover our sins. You protect us from trouble. You are our hiding place. You have the words of life.

Let us draw near to you this morning: both the weak in Spirit and the strong, those who are content and those who are in distress.

We will follow You. Amen

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – PASTOR LOIS

Lord, our desire for control has separated us from you. In our stubborn independence, we have turned from your love. We try to hide our failure and guilt, yet we feel their weight both day and night. Here and now, we acknowledge our sins before you and reveal our transgressions. We confess to you, Lord...

(time of silence – light the peace lamp)

Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven. Our slate is wiped clean. We are free to follow Jesus in obedience and experience God's love in every test. Amen.

Song of Confession (choir)

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Gracious God, as we enter this season of testing, of humble confession, and the possibility of transformation, we come to you with gratitude for your unfailing love and mercy. We are grateful that you never give up on us and you keep returning to the covenant that you've offered to your people over and over again. Forgive our sin of not passing the test. We try; we have good intentions. But we fall short. And we break the covenant – individually and corporately. We pray, "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy." And you do show mercy.

We offer our prayers to you, God. For those who are sick – with covid or flu or other viruses, for those who have pain that disrupts their lives. We pray for healing and relief from pain and we thank you for healing that has happened. We pray for those who are anticipating medical procedures or tests or appointments to try to figure out where pain is coming from or how it can be treated. Lord, we know that a time of waiting and not knowing can feel like a time of testing and so we pray for those who are in that position. We ask for patience and trust for them and for wisdom and focus for their doctors and care providers.

God we pray for those who are traveling. We think especially of Kris and Kara Schmucker as they travel in Europe and get Kara settled in a new location. We ask for their safety and we pray for their family members here at home. We pray for the Bethel College Choir (including Eddie, Lizzie, Julianna, Timothy and Jacob) as they prepare to go on their spring tour. And we pray for the Goshen College Choir as their tour brings them to our area to sing. Be with these young people as they minister through their music and build meaningful relationships. Grant them safety and good health as they travel.

We thank you, God for our children – for the college and high school students as they move closer to adulthood. Guide them in their decisions and plans. We thank you

for our junior high students as they learn more about who they are where they fit. Bless them and those who teach and guide them. God, be with Laura and Michelle as we anticipate the Camp 412 weekend. Bless the fundraiser next Sunday for that event. Thank you God, for those who prepare and serve that meal as they support our jr hi age children. We pray also for your blessing on whoever it is who will give new leadership to this group. And we're grateful for our youngest children as they learn and develop into the people you imagine them to be. Thank you also for their teachers and parents, those who are guiding them. Thank you for the generosity they showed in their collection for MCC; bless them in their giving and bless those who receive their gifts. God we thank you for those who serve on the Bd of Christian Education and the Children's Ministry Team as they plan and guide our children and all of us in the life-long process of learning about you and how to follow Jesus.

We pray not only for our children, but for your children all around the world, God. As the one-year mark passes of the war in Ukraine, we pray for all who are suffering because of that. We pray for children in Yemen and Somalia who don't have enough. We pray for children in Israel and Palestine, especially in Nablus and Gaza. Lord help us to see and remember others who share this planet. May we have awareness and compassion that motivates us to care more deeply for the well-being of the planet and all the creatures who live on it. We pray in your holy, creative name. Amen.

"PASSING THE TEST" – PASTOR CALEB
Matthew 4:1-11

Some weeks ago, we looked at the account of Jesus' baptism.

It seems surprising that Jesus, who was without sin, would even need to seek baptism. Yet he chose baptism as the way to mark the beginning of his ministry, dedicate himself to God's call, and anticipate his own burial and resurrection.

In the very next breath, the story continues with Jesus being led into the desert. Matthew's Gospel says that he was "led up" into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Whether that means that Jesus literally trekked upward out of the Jordan valley to the wilderness highlands, or was taken in some sort of rapture, the result was the same.

Jesus experienced forty challenging days that would test what he was made of. These forty days remind Bible readers of the forty days Moses fasted on Mt. Sinai before receiving the tablets of the law, or the forty days Elijah journey to reach the same mountain.

When I was in high school, I went on an interterm backpacking trip with other classmates in the Ozarks. I had never before and never since walked miles in wilderness with all my provisions on my back. It wasn't exactly the desert, nor was it fasting.

Yet there were beautiful natural vistas to take in. The stars at night were brilliant, and one night we had the rare privilege of seeing the northern lights – the only time I have seen them.

I clearly remember one evening after walking all day eating a bowl of instant oatmeal from my pack. I had never been much for oatmeal, but that afternoon, there couldn't have been anything better to satisfy my hunger.

How delicious a loaf of fresh-baked bread must have seemed to Jesus after forty days of fasting.

We often think of this story as the temptations of Jesus. The moral of the story as I've sometimes heard it as that Jesus was perfect, so he couldn't be tempted to sin.

And the best way to resist temptation like Jesus is to do enough Bible memory that you can quote verses back to the devil just like Jesus.

The Greek word translated "temptation" also means a test or difficult trial. These are not so much about the devil trying to lure Jesus into some kind of understandable moral failures to disqualify Jesus.

This is a test of what Jesus is really made of, and what kind of Messiah Jesus will really be.

There are many kinds of testing that can reveal what we are made of. Sometimes, we seek out these tests for ourselves in order to gain self-confidence. Many sports, competitions, or physical training are a certain kind of test of endurance. You have to have the discipline and consistency to train yourself to tolerate discomfort and stress.

Plenty of other kinds of testing we don't choose, but they reveal the strength of our character. We experience psychological and social testing when we stick our neck out to live out our convictions and get criticized for it.

An illness, grief, or unexpected loss can be a major test. Those times when we are exhausted, stressed, and emotionally vulnerable, we are more prone to temptations.

We are most tempted to lose it or some something we will regret at these times.

Few people who are at a healthy and fairly contented place in their marriages will experience temptation to be unfaithful. The temptation of an affair usually happens when people have been struggling in their marriages for quite some time.

Likewise, most forms of addiction are resorting to unhealthy ways of coping with difficult emotions when life feels very trying.

Jesus was similarly at a vulnerable place after forty days of fasting in the desert.

The devil, acting like a prosecuting attorney, first asked Jesus:

“So you are the Son of God, huh? God’s special agent? Well, then you can create bread in the desert. You are going to be ministering to all kinds of hungry people. If you just give people food, to satisfy their physical hunger, you’ll have no shortage of followers.”

No hungry person will resist the offer of bread. In fact, Jesus *did* initiate the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Jesus met people’s physical needs as an expression of God’s deep love and compassion. But Jesus refused to meet physical needs as a cheap way to get followers and influence for himself.

Each time that Jesus quoted scripture, he quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. And each of those quotations are taken from the Israelite’s forty-year trial of wandering in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 says:

2 Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. 3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

God gave the Israelites manna in the desert to supply their physical need, but it didn’t satisfy their palates.

The liberation of the Israelites required them to trust that God was with them in an ultimate sense, even though they faced suffering, discomfort, and uncertainty.

They had what they needed, but not what they wanted. Jesus’ own ministry demanded the same from those who would follow.

The second temptation of Jesus was to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple.

What was the meaning of this?

Perhaps the devil was aiming to destroy Jesus. For Jesus personally, this might represent the temptation to avoid the cross, to save his skin.

During the crucifixion, people mocked Jesus. They said, "If he's the son of God, why doesn't he just save himself? Then we will believe in him."

According to the Gospels, Jesus healed people, but he never did any miraculous sign simply to wow people or convince them to believe in him.

With a miracle like leaping from the high point of the temple during a festival with lots of pilgrims to witness it, Jesus would have gained a very large following instantly.

In the story of Israel, the phrase, "do not put the Lord your God to the test" is connected to an episode where people are ready to revolt against Moses because they are so thirsty.

God ends up commanding Moses to strike a rock in order to provide water.

It's a miraculous sign, but one that simply provided for a need rather than wowing the people into cooperating.

Finally, the third time the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world from a high mountain top and promises to give it all to Jesus if he will simply worship the devil.

Why does the devil think that he owns the kingdom of the world? Because all tyrants in history with complete control of nations and vast sums of wealth have gotten there through violence, conquering, and deception. They made their deals with the devil.

In the *Lion King*, King Mufasa took his son Simba to a high point where he could see the whole area that Mufasa was king over. The shadowlands where the hyenas lived were outside the realm. Simba was not to go there – and naturally, that is exactly where he was tempted to go.

This last temptation was the temptation to resort to violence in order to be the Messiah everyone thought Jesus should be.

Jesus' way was to instead embrace the way of poverty, the way of identifying with the poor and downtrodden, the way of the cross.

God vindicated Jesus' way by raising him, and by continuing to bring resurrection out of every faithful weakness and defeat.

To the Israelites wandering in the desert, God promised land with flourishing cities. But they had to be clear that they would worship God alone, not other gods, or the god of violence or pride of trusting in their own strength.

In *The Brothers Karamosov*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the characters tells a fictional story of Jesus returning to earth during the time of the Spanish Inquisition.

The Grand Inquisitor is troubled to see Jesus doing good, so he locks Jesus up, threatening to burn him at the stake as an arch-heretic. In a long speech, the Inquisitor accuses Jesus of expecting too much of humanity. The Church, on the contrary, recognized that humans are weak, stupid, and vile.

So the Church gladly accepted all of the temptations that the devil offered to Jesus. The Church chose the way of power, violence, and wealth. The Church chose to manipulate people by appealing their fears and insecurities.

"I returned to join the legion of those who corrected Thy mistakes," the Inquisitor said to the silent, imprisoned Jesus.

The story is a harsh indictment of the church, and it has quite a bit of truth, when you look at much of church history.

The church still has the temptation of choosing institutional solvency over faithfulness, the temptation to fill pews by telling people what they want to hear, or the temptation to compromise its values and radical discipleship.

We still experience these corporate temptations, and we also experience personal temptations. When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught, we are asking God to not bring us into temptation or testing. But the fact is, we do experience wilderness seasons in our lives. Seasons of testing.

Testing brings temptations for us parallel to those of Jesus: prioritizing success over faithfulness, prioritizing security over generosity, and prioritizing reputation over honesty and vulnerability.

How do we strengthen ourselves to respond faithfully when we are tested?

Lent is a good time to acknowledge to ourselves the testing and wilderness journeys we may be experiencing. Even important is to not go at it alone. Being tested is not something we are called to do alone or in silence.

It may very be that no one can do your spiritual and emotional work for you. But we need the strength of encouragement. We need to be able to talk with trusted people about the things that are trying and testing us. We need to share each other's burdens and be a witness to God's love in doing so. This is what the church should really be there for.

Jesus journeyed in the power of the Holy Spirit. So too we claim the promise of the Spirit. This morning we will take the bread and the cup from the table of Christ together.

As we join together in this symbolic ritual, may a small piece of bread and gulp of juice become more than that.

Together we receive the living bread and living water that sustains us in whatever we may be going through.

Before we share together in Christ's table, let's sing our song of response – a beautiful, somber hymn of trust.

COMMUNION SERVICE

This is the table of love! Along with the simple and beautiful symbols that LaNae has prepared, the elements of bread and juice have been added, symbolizing the body and blood of Christ – the deepest and broadest, most significant and sacrificial love ever shown.

This table of love symbolizes God's sustenance for every time of testing.

And this table of love is open to all who know and love Jesus, who strive to follow after him in life.

Words for the Bread –

We remember that as Jesus was sitting at the table with his friends, he took bread, broke it, gave thanks for it and said, "This is my body, broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me."

Loving God, we thank you for the bread of life made known to us through your servant Jesus.

Words for the Juice –

And after supper Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant with God made possible by my death. Whenever you drink this cup, remember me." We give you thanks, loving God, for sending Jesus to us – the one who showed us what sacrificial love looks like even in the face of the most severe testing.

Prayer of Thanksgiving –

O God, with deep gratitude, we thank you for this moment, this meal, this congregation and for your children everywhere. Having tasted your goodness, let us share your peace. Give us wisdom and strength for every kind of testing.

*Send us out to live as your people, ordinary people that you have called to follow you, to share your love, to live for you as people of this earth and citizens of your kingdom.
Amen.*