

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “*Beneath the Cross of Jesus*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus began his ministry to the world, led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

**As we begin our Lenten journey, let us be led by the Spirit, even into the uncomfortable places.**

In those forty days, and in that place, Jesus was faced with hunger, doubt, and temptation.

**As we seek to follow Jesus, we would be led, even into the uncomfortable choices.**

Jesus left the wilderness, faithful and obedient to God, rejoicing in the One in whom he trusted.

**As we continue on our path to faithfulness, we will be led by our Christ, rejoicing in the Lord our God.**

(Thom M. Shuman, [LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com](http://LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com))

HYMN No. 51 “*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*”

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land;

I am weak, but Thou art mighty, Hold me with Thy powerful hand;

Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more,

Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain, Whence the healing stream doth flow;

Let the fire and cloudy pillar Lead me all my journey through;

Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, Be Thou still my strength and shield,

Be Thou still my strength and shield.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

**Divine Sojourner, as we enter the Lenten wilderness, may your light sustain us. Help us walk past the temptations around us, let go of unrealistic expectations, negative judgments, and deep fears. May the questions that fill our minds with doubt drift away into the sands of the journey. May we dig within our souls to remove the prejudices deep within us. During these 40 days, please renew us, restore us, and refocus our attention. In this moment of silent reflection, we release to you what we do not want to carry forward on our Lenten journey.**

MOMENT OF SILENT REFLECTION *This Lent, I wish to let go of...*

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

In the harsh landscapes of our lives, God’s mercy, grace, and forgiveness are poured out for all. May the Holy One water the parched places in our lives, place a seed of hope within us, and help us follow the Son as we grow together this Lenten season. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I

give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

## SERMON

I talked with a friend and retired colleague the other day, and together we reminisced about our experiences of Lent. As good little Protestant girls who grew up in various parts of New England, there weren't any. I don't want to put words in her mouth, but when I was a child, Lent was something the Catholics did. And as far as I knew, that meant giving up good stuff like chocolate – my mother never would have asked me to do that (because she would have felt compelled to set an example). At some point, I also learned they only ate fish on Fridays. That's about the sum total of what I knew. To try and expand the scope of my survey, I asked Ben yesterday about Lent, and he slowly shook his head. Palm Sunday and Easter were the big ones. I didn't hear Palm Sunday stories, but he said Easter sunrise was huge, with a thousand or more people gathering in the high school gymnasium. They gathered in the dark with a backdrop of the Jerusalem skyline and three crosses on a hill; as the light grew, the crosses disappeared. Our sunrise was on the beach, assuming the snow wasn't too deep for such a thing. I remember that Maundy Thursday and Good Friday slipped in there sometime along for me, but as for the rest of Lent, it just didn't enter in until later, probably during seminary and once I started serving churches. My assumption is that your early experiences of Lent depend on what sort of religious upbringing you had, if any; and while I very much doubt I'm the first pastor to come and suggest we observe Lent, I also suspect it isn't your favorite season in the church year; but maybe I'm wrong.

So what is Lent? Don't go looking for it in the Bible, because it's not there. It's a church concoction that came together later, as a way to help Christians reflect on and remember Jesus' journey to the cross. It's also a time for us to reflect on our own faith and prayer life, to repent of our sins and shortcomings and try to grow as disciples. We think of it as a 40 day season, because 40 is one of those important biblical numbers. Noah and his family were in the ark while it rained for 40 days and 40 nights; Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust God; Elijah spent 40 days there before hearing the still, small voice of God, and on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days listening as God handed down the commandments; Jesus even went into the wilderness for 40 days on retreat between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry. It's a 40 day season, but before you pull out your calendar and start counting, let me explain that Sundays don't count. When the early church moved our Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, it was so we could celebrate Jesus' resurrection every week; every Sunday is (supposedly) a little Easter, and you can't be repenting and fasting on Easter, so Lent is 40 days plus Sundays.

There's a long tradition of giving something up during Lent, as a way of encouraging a sense of discipline while reflecting on all that Jesus gave up in his journey to the cross. It may be anything from chocolate or meat, Facebook or television, video games or alcohol. We can use the time or money we usually spend on those things to deepen our prayer life and reach out to others. I've tended to be more

drawn to the idea of taking something on during Lent: letter writing or exercising, piano playing or visiting the nursing home, volunteering at the soup kitchen or reading a thought provoking book. Practices that may connect me to others or help me hear my own inner world. I heard a new approach the other day, when Vince Amlin wrote in the *UCC Lenten Devotional*. Using the analogy of packing a backpack so that he can go hiking, he encouraged us to wonder what we can take out and put away. What are the responsibilities, burdens, biases or baggage that overcrowd our lives and weigh us down unnecessarily? What can we take out, give away, put on a shelf or do away with altogether?

Each year, on the first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary tells us the story of Jesus' temptation. As Luke tells it, Jesus has just come up out of the River Jordan with the waters of baptism dripping off his arms, legs and the end of his nose; the heavens open above him and the voice of God echoes in his ears, saying: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Luke pauses for just a moment to let that sink in, and then tells us who Jesus' people are, his ancestral cloud of witnesses, starting with Joseph and reaching back from there, through Joshua and Levi, David and Jesse, Abraham and Noah, and finally back to Adam and God. Flanked by all of them, and full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus leaves the banks of the Jordan and heads into the emptiness of the wilderness. There, he spends 40 days being tempted by the devil, while he also ponders exactly what that voice meant when it claimed him as the beloved child of God.

The text may tell us that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, but it also says that by the time 40 days had come and gone, he was empty of food. Not the rumble and uneasiness that comes from lunch being an hour late, or even having missed lunch altogether so we're starving when dinner finally arrives. But famished, something you can feel in the cave behind your ribs, the midriff's empty drum. Given that Jesus hadn't chewed on anything more than sand for forty days, how or why would he balk at conjuring up a loaf of bread when given the chance? What good was he going to do God or God's world if he didn't live long enough to get out of the wilderness? Right behind that offer came one for power and authority, the attention and respect of world leaders. Lining up collaborators and coalitions is a brilliant strategy for achieving goals and realizing success; why would he even consider resisting the offer? Jesus, you've got to pay attention and know how to seize an opening in order to maximize your opportunities. And finally, you need to develop an exit strategy so that you can be confident that when times get tough, you don't go down because of an equipment failure. You don't want to stake your life on the workings of a parachute, if you're not confident the chute is going to open when you've been pushed off the cliff. Saying thank you in the face of any of those offerings makes sense to me; wrap all three of them up as a packaged set, and what wise, dedicated, energetic new recruit wouldn't sign up and join the ranks?

Jesus said no. One by one, as fast as each of the offers landed, Jesus turned them down. Not because, on their own merits, they didn't offer him gifts and resources he could put to exceptional use; but because saying yes would have cost him too much. Would have disconnected him from the love that created him, the voice that claimed him, the Spirit that accompanied him. Saying yes to the temptations offered in the wilderness would have separated him from the only thing that truly mattered in his life. Whether he had to wrestle the questions before he achieved clarity or dismissed them with the flick of his wrist, by the time he was done, he was absolutely clear that they offered him nothing he truly needed, and much that he didn't need, so he said no.

For Jesus, I think it all boiled down to the phrase that shows up in two places in this story; and that's in the offering of both the first and the last temptations, when the seducer says, If you are the Son of God... Does Jesus really believe what he thinks he heard? Will God deliver on what sounded like a commitment? Let's find out before you go charging off into dangerous places. Had Jesus said yes to any of those openings, there would have begun to be a wedge driven between him and the God who so thoroughly embraced him at his baptism.

None of the offerings the tempter dangled before Jesus were bad things, in and of themselves. In fact their power was that they were very good things. Things that Jesus incorporated into his ministry when he multiplied loaves and fishes, claimed authority over demons as well as the powers that oppressed God's people, and handed his safety over to a protective power. And while it's easy to see them as lures dangled to attract him toward something, their real threat to him was the way in which they sought to pull him away from what really mattered. Away from God and the identity he received in and through their relationship.

The same could be said of us. Yes, there are all manner of temptations and bad behaviors we should avoid, that's not the danger the text is posing. The real threat, more often than not, are good things offered in ways that, to embrace them, will separate and distract us from the gift and grace of our identity as children of God. Think about the barrage of advertising just waiting to assault us the moment we turn on the television or internet, or look at a newspaper or magazine. Nine times out of ten the goal of those ads is to create a sense of lack and inadequacy in us, followed by the implicit promise that purchasing the advertised product will relieve our insecurity. Or consider how many of the messages from political parties and candidates for office seek to create insecurity and fear in us. Terrorism, immigrants, corporations, joblessness, low wages, high taxes, health care, the wealthy, the poor – depending on which party you listen to the target shifts, but the message is the same: you should be afraid because you do not and are not enough; elect me and I'll keep you safe.

It's hard to resist the logic of those words, to keep them away from our insecurities and uncertainties, and to not give them the power to drive a wedge between us and the love of God who claimed us in our baptisms. Their power is precisely in knowing our vulnerabilities and trying to hook us into giving them our allegiance over and above the God who created and redeemed us. God loves us more than anything, loves all of us enough to come into the world to take on our lot and life, to suffer the same temptations and wants, to be rejected as we often feel rejected and to die as we will die, all so that we may know God is with us and for us forever. Moreover, God raised Jesus from the dead in order to demonstrate that God's love is more powerful than all the hate in the world and that the life God offers is more powerful even than death.

There are countless ways to observe Lent, things we can give up, disciplines we can try on. What about if, this year, we watch for temptations that appear to be wonderful gifts yet hold the potential for driving a wedge between us and God, by asking God to take a back seat to a lesser loyalty? What if we listen carefully to ourselves and whether we might be saying yes and thank you to the offer of gifts when perhaps, instead, we should walk away. What if we focus our hearing and doing on the extravagant, unlimited grace of a God who couldn't love us more.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

Ukraine: Zelenskyy, people fighting, 1.2 million refugees so far, 100 plus babies born in bomb shelter, world leaders, Putin

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Maker and Lover of all, in the mystery of your kindness, you have bound us to each other, and called us to serve the earth and its people. So hear us, as in this time of worship, we pray for our church, that it may be a center of faith, hospitality and imagination, modeling the future rather than lamenting the past. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Grateful for the life in our bodies, we pray for those whose lives are diminished by ill health, depression, grief or rejection, asking for the healing, the affirming, the listening which will encourage and restore them. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Conscious of the peace in our lives, we pray for those who have no peace because of war or the fear of war, or the threat of violence, or the grip of hunger, or the loss of hope. May the voice of the victims be heard and the work of the peacemakers be blessed. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Surrounded by the rugged and tender beauty of our community, we pray for the earth, especially where it is damaged by human carelessness and threatened by human greed; and ask that we may learn to care for the earth as you do. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

And because we are here to meet with Jesus, we join our words to those he taught us, saying: Our Father... *(Iona Abbey Worship Book)*

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

Last week we received a thank you letter for the gifts we gave to the Wallace Christmas Fund in December. In part, the letter said, "On behalf of the Wallace Christmas Fund, we would like to express our sincere gratitude for your donation of \$387.50 to our organization. We are so thankful of your generosity and support. It means the world to us so that we may continue to make Christmas a little brighter for the children in need from the Wallace School District. It is very much appreciated." Thank you to all of you who contributed to that gift and to the one we sent to the Food Bank.

I also want to name the email I sent out this past week, sharing the ways in which the United Church of Christ is responding to the disaster now taking place in Ukraine. As the church always does, we're working with established partners on the ground in the region, to provide food, shelter and other assistance to refugees and others displaced by the war. There are countless ways to respond to this crisis, but if you'd like to give through the UCC, feel free to make your gift to this church, and mark it clearly for Ukraine Relief. And know that these and every gift you give is blessed by God, as it becomes a blessing to support and encourage others.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**We offer to you the gifts which you have given us: bread and cup and money. With them we offer ourselves, our lives, and our work, to become through your Holy Spirit a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice. So may we and all your people become channels of your love; through Jesus Christ, our loving, living Lord. Amen.** *(Chalice Worship)*

HYMN "Eat this Bread"

Eat this bread, drink this cup; come to me and never be hungry.

Eat this bread, drink this cup, trust in me and you will not thirst.

SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Invitation

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. You who come to me shall not hunger; you who believe in me shall never thirst.

**In company with all who hunger for spiritual food, we come to this table to know the risen Christ in the sharing of this life-giving bread.**

Communion Prayer

God be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to God.**

Let us give thanks to God Most High.

**It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

We give you thanks, God of majesty and mercy, for calling forth the creation and raising us from dust by the breath of your being.

We bless you for the beauty and bounty of the earth and for the vision of the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.

We remember the covenant you made with your people Israel, and we give you thanks for all our ancestors in faith. We rejoice that you call us to reconciliation with you and all people everywhere and that you remain faithful to your covenant even when we are faithless.

We rejoice that you call the entire human family to this table of sacrifice and victory. We come in remembrance and celebration of the gift of Jesus Christ, whom you sent, in the fullness of time, to be the good news. Born of Mary, our sister in faith, Christ lived among us to reveal the mystery of your Word, to suffer and die on the cross for us, to be raised from death on the third day, and then to live in glory.

We bless you, gracious God, for the presence of your Holy Spirit in the church you have gathered. With your sons and daughters of faith in all places and times, we praise you with joy.

**Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!**

We remember that on the night of betrayal and desertion, Jesus gathered the disciples for the feast of Passover. Jesus took bread, gave you thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples, saying: "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way Jesus also took the cup, after supper, saying: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Consecrate, therefore, by your Holy Spirit, these gifts of bread and cup, and bless us that as we receive them at this table, we may offer you our faith and praise, we may be united with Christ and with one another, and we may continue faithful in all things.

**In the strength Christ gives us, we offer ourselves to you, eternal God, and give thanks that you have called us to serve you. Amen.**

Breaking Bread and Pouring the Cup

Through the broken bread we participate in the body of Christ.

Through the cup of blessing we participate in the new life Christ gives.

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Sharing the Elements

Take and eat this. It is the body of Christ broken for you.

Take and drink. The cup of salvation poured out for you.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

**Almighty God, we give you thanks for the gift of our Savior's presence in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal. Unite us with all who are fed by Christ's body and blood that we may faithfully proclaim the good news of your love and that your universal church may be a rainbow of hope in an uncertain world; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.**

HYMN No. 43 "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not; As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided – Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!  
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided – Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

#### BENEDICTION

God go with you in all that is gentle  
Christ go with you in all that is brave  
And the Spirit go with you in all that is free.  
Go now in peace, to love and serve our God. Amen.