

Slowly, Slowly

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

First Sunday of Lent - February 26, 2023

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

GOSPEL READING Matthew 4:1-11

Immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Welcome to Lent. Welcome questions. Welcome quiet. Slow down, look around, breathe.
Welcome to sadness, welcome to gladness. Welcome to Lent.

I know as well as you do that the word Lent comes from a northern European word for spring meaning “length,” meaning days are getting longer (this does not work in the southern hemisphere, of course). In my heart, though, I hark back to the musical term, *lento*. Slow. Very slow. From the Latin word *lentus* meaning “flexible, pliant, slow.” I love that idea of Lent.

When I was a young American tourist in Italy, eager to see everything, my hotel concierge cautioned me with another musical term: *piano, piano*. Meaning, “softly, slowly, take it easy. Rome wasn’t built in a day, you can’t see it in one either.” When I settled in a village in Crete they said the same thing only in Greek, “*Siga, siga*. You Americans hurry and worry too much. *Siga, siga*. Take it easy, take your time.” Or as they say in Thailand, “Life is short. Walk slowly.”



Lent is forty long days (Sundays don’t count). That doesn’t seem like a long time, when you have a big project due, or a business to build up, or hard changes to prepare for. But what if you’re all alone in the wilderness with nothing to eat or drink, like Jesus? In the Bible forty *anything* isn’t *literally* 40, it just means a really, really long time. So long you feel like it will never end, like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Time flies when you’re busy. It slows down when you’re traveling on foot. Time slows down when you’re learning to trust, to see, to dig deeper for answers.¹ Time slows down when you get off the hamster wheel.

God has a reason for that. When we move too fast, we miss a lot. Like our speed-of-sound aircraft overlooking those slow-moving balloons, whatever they were.² Native American writer Vine Deloria, says, “Opportunities for grasping the substance of life have faded as the pace of activity has increased.”³ He wrote that in 1979. Yes. More activity, less substance. How much faster are we moving today than in 1979? My teacher Steve Charleston, a Choctaw Indian and an Episcopal bishop, understands this story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness as a vision quest, when the Spirit led Jesus away from the crowds to search out his holy assignment, to discern the true path from the false ones. Don’t seekers of wisdom in every culture do the same? Vision quests, in the true sense, mean seeking understanding in a world that whirls too fast to be seen until you step out of it and slow down..



Remember how the covid lockdown seemed to last forever? But when we slowed down, if we were paying attention, all sorts of distressing truths surfaced. Inequities: racial, geographic, economic, political. Who had the luxury of working safely from home, and who had to deliver necessities to the privileged ones? Who complained about the scarcity of meat, and who got sick and died from working in the plants that processed it? Whose

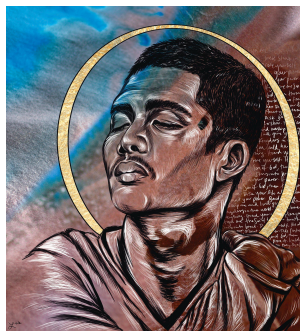
¹ Image: Wesley, Frank, 1923-2002. *The Mind of Christ* (temptation story).

² Image: A US Air Force U-2 pilot looks down at the suspected Chinese surveillance balloon as it hovers over the central continental United States on February 3. Photo: US Air Force/Department of Defence via Reuters.

³ From Vine Deloria’s forward to *Black Elk Speaks*, 1979; quoted in Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*, 2015.

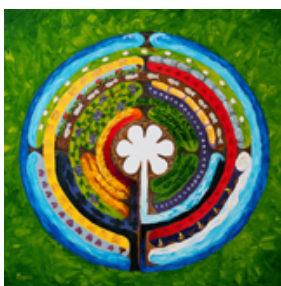
children had internet access and people to help them with online learning? Whose children fell even farther behind because they had neither of those things? Which countries quickly gobbled up the available vaccines and which countries never got them? The pace of life has picked up again, and we are happy to leave those ugly reminders behind, mostly forgotten. To be honest, though, I kind of miss lockdown. I had more time then.

I admire the Ukrainians. We've heard a lot about them, a full year into this war. It must feel like forever since normal life was overturned. And yet they seem more committed to their common cause now than a year ago. More ready to take whatever comes with courage, and even humor. Like the Ukrainian comedian I heard on the radio who joked that she lives in fear of a bomb falling and knocking off the outside wall of her apartment so everyone will see how she lives and then her mother will say, "I told you you should clean your place!" When you laugh, she says, you're laughing in the face of the enemy. If she can laugh at that, I should be able to laugh at my minor inconveniences.⁴



But to do that, I need to step outside of my routine, slow down. What is the substance of life? Jesus shows us. It's not about satisfying my own private needs or desires, or assuring my own physical security, not about gaining personal recognition. The temptors, which Matthew refers to as the devil, are the voices in my head that tell me it's all about me and my needs. This story crops up on the first Sunday of Lent every year to tell us to step back and listen. Listen for the voice of God. Tune out the distractions. Grasp the meaning, the truth. Plumb the depths.

Steve Charleston says, "The purpose of the vision quest in Native tradition is to reveal how a person is to live in a spiritual way to help his or her people, to show us what our holy assignment is to be, what gifts we have to share, what work we can accomplish. . . . Jesus stands against those temptations that are truly devilish in every human heart, the lure of ego and profit." The quest is undertaken by an individual but for the benefit of the whole community. Never for the self alone. God gives your holy assignment, if you ask in *lento* time: Flexible. Pliant. Slow.



Walking a labyrinth is its own sort of vision quest. It's like a localized wilderness, a place to walk slowly, slowly, to bring your questions, your doubts, to traverse the same ground over and over, around and back again until you see the world in a new way.⁵ This Lenten labyrinth begins and ends in darkness [the opening at the bottom], the darkness of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In between, feel the multi-colored, textured substance of life in

⁴ Image: a kitchen inside an apartment block heavily damaged by a Russian missile strike in Dnipro, on January 15, 2023. # Reuters; *The Atlantic Photo*.

⁵ There is a beautiful labyrinth at Assisi Heights, if you are looking for one. Maybe when the snow melts

community.⁶ Feel free to walk it in your mind as we close with a meditation called the “welcoming prayer.”⁷

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today
because I know it’s for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God’s action within. Amen.

Prayers

Loving God, during this Lenten season, “cure us with quietness, bless us with peace.” Slow us down long enough to see the world with new, true eyes.

May we see the suffering inflicted by our haste to get ahead; make us aware of those who have been trampled in the rat race, thrown off the hamster wheel. Help us redefine success.

We pray for precious lives impacted by war, not just in Ukraine, but in so many places where conflict simmers. We pray that we will never forget the lives impacted by genocide so that such horrors may never be repeated.

We know it’s not enough to implore you to bring peace, healing, and dignity. Rather, kindle in us the desire and the means to do the healing. You have given us a holy assignment. Let us take it up with grace and courage, following the example of our Savior.

May we, too, be inspired to reach out with love and compassion to those nearest us that you have given as our special gift and task. Keep us on the right path, as we pray in Jesus’ name:

Our Mother and Father in heaven, holy be your name. Impose your reign that we may do your will, on earth as in heaven. Give us today this one day’s bread. Forgive our wrongs as we forgive those who do wrong against us. Save us from our temptations and keep us from doing evil, For the Realm, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen⁸

⁶ Image: Mike Moyers, 2012. "This painting is a visual labyrinth containing many Lenten concepts. The labyrinth begins and ends with the dark path at the bottom —representing Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some other themes depicted are: covenant relationship, scripture, The Law, discipleship, betrayal, servant hood, readiness, patience, Christ’s passion, deliverance, abundance, provision, sacrifice, new life, and love."

⁷ In her book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 2004*, Cynthia Bourgeault credits a woman named Mary Mrozowski with this prayer.

⁸ This paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, <https://unfoldinglight.net/worship-resources/>