

# “Lent: Time for Spiritual Dusting”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 1, 2009*

First Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 9:8-17

Matthew 4:1-11

We have arrived now in the season of Lent, which  
In our faith is spelled not with an “I” but rather an “E”  
And still, the notion of cleansing and cleaning,  
Befits our blemished souls most appropriately

For though in baptism we have been washed,  
And transformed to be pure and white like snow.  
Our hearts still gather dust and debris,  
Yet by seeking the “Lent” we can grow.

Though like an infant without fault;  
Jesus, in the Jordan, also made clean  
He who the Father sent to save us,  
Chose human sinners to be his kin.

There descended a dove,  
To proclaim the Father’s love.  
Then with no second to spare  
Send, he was, to the wilderness bare,

Forty days we are called to spend in Lenten reflection;  
Just as forty days of rain deluged Noah and his floating ark;  
Just as Moses and Elijah sojourned forty days with God on the mountain;  
Just as forty years the Israelites wandered to become a God’s people.

Forty – it’s a long time indeed;  
For a boat in constant, pounding rain;  
For a prophet to face the Almighty;  
For a people to take steps and make missteps; and  
For a famished man to encounter his toughest trials.

These temptations, as we read in Matthew,  
Recounted as a series which numbers three.  
For as ancient Israelites faced them in their wilderness,  
So – as people in the Church of our dear Lord – do we.

The first test, about turning stones into bread,  
Questions the nature of this call to be God’s Son.  
Rather than seeking to satisfy the hunger of all,

Satan tempts Jesus to think of himself as the only one.

O, how the traveling Hebrews made this lament,  
Wishing they could return to their pots full of food.  
Preferring enslavement in Egypt and to the things of this earth,  
Rather than freedom in God, confessing him Lord as we should.

The church faces the same temptation today,  
It rears when we overhear some members say:  
    I'm bored, can you please make this worship more entertaining?  
    I don't know what to say to my kids – can you give them religion?  
    I don't like the way this church spends its money – it's mine is it not?<sup>1</sup>

The temptation we still face is to grasp for the immediate, and thus win the race,  
But, those who are last – we were taught – shall be given first place;  
Instead of following Christ on the long, difficult way,  
Where satisfaction of self is due for delay.

A second test unto Jesus, now came upon him,  
Again the tempter sought to make Jesus choose self over them.  
Here, scripture was quoted, as it had been before.  
And yet, the tempter, used it first, to try to even the score.

A promise from the Psalms that the angels will protect us,  
Even hurtling to the ground, deep in a precipice.  
In rejecting Satan, Jesus showed us the folly,  
Of pretending that we are the God, by golly.

Putting God to the test is no way to show,  
Thanksgiving and love to our creator, we know.  
Churches do this too, they say, catch us when we fall,  
When the road is laid before us, by Christ, after all.

Finally, in the test final and third:  
    Jesus is offered an easier path to glory;  
    Jesus is shown a quicker way to victory;  
    Jesus is provided an escape from the pain,  
That his rumbling stomach and parched throat help him to imagine.

How the tempter must smile when, as a substitute, we make  
    Faith in the power of positive thinking, above our  
    Faith in the power of sacrificial love.  
    Belief in the importance of material success, in place of  
    Belief in the merits of obedience to God's will.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, "Matthew" from *Westminster Bible Companion*

It's a humble journey, this one we begin this first Sunday in Lent.

It's humble; it's modest; it's unassuming.

It begins unremarkably – unlike the other journeys in our lives.

Other journeys begin with:

Loaded suitcases; or

People waving and cheering; or

With a degree or license in hand; or

In a clear direction; with a predetermined itinerary.

This humble journey takes us,

As it did for the just-released Israelites,

As it did for a newly baptized Jesus,

Into the wilderness.

Sometimes, no matter where we call home,

No matter how far we have already traveled,

No matter how closely connected to family and friends,

No matter how much we pray and deepen our faith,

We find ourselves in the middle of the wilderness:

Blinded?

Disoriented?

Empty not just in our gut?

Thirsty, like we can't remember our last drink?

I know that you've been there:

Cast there without a moment's notice;

Feeling absolutely alone, in mind even if not in reality;

Questioning, doubting, wondering;

Wishing you could hope,

Hoping you have the strength to pray.

But there's something else we know about the wilderness,

Something that Matthew wants us to hear, loud and clear:

Jesus has been there first!<sup>2</sup>

No wilderness on earth is so distant, so remote,

That Jesus has not already walked his way through.

No place of loss or anger, loneliness or doubt,

Has not already been trod upon by our Lord's open shoe.

In these gospels, there is a message of Good News,

That we both take comfort in and proclaim to all;

Jesus faced the very temptations that we do, and

Though not at all easy, God did not let His Son fall.

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Fleming McGurgan, "Lent 1 B"

This Lenten journey we undertake is not about getting,  
Not about “a leg up” or “a step ahead,” not for me and you,  
But instead about following the one who calls us,  
To see the journey through.

So dust off your spiritual walking shoes,  
Get off the people-mover tempting us to be our own Master.  
Watch closely and listen to the words of our Savior,  
Take just one step today, it need be no faster.

But make the step that you take in God’s direction,  
For the sake of the church, as well as yourself, as you need.  
The same faith that can move mountains,  
Begins the size of a tiny mustard seed.

For Lent, don’t just dust off some old restriction, like:  
    No chocolate,  
    Fewer naughty words,  
    Less wine and beer;  
Make this year the year you make and hold a promise,  
To keep God as God, and yourself near.

Maybe you will take some spiritual leap:  
    Not one that puts God to the test,  
    Not one that aims to solve all your problems in a day,

Maybe like a preacher who trades in prose for verse,  
Though he’s never done it before this day.  
Don’t think about how well it’s going to work,  
Only God knows, in His time you’ll be shown the way.

“Suddenly the angels came,” that’s how the story ends,  
Not as Jesus deserved, but as the Lord gives.  
Journey through Lent knowing they await you,  
For at the true end of the story, “He lives!”  
    AMEN.