

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

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ST. JOHN

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: God of the Sahara and the Amazon, Maker of dry places and wetlands.

Many: We come before you with parched hearts for living in this world has made them so.

Holy One, your ability to renew us is unmatched.

You renew us from within and without.

Ancient of Days, you held us in the beginning, and you are

holding us now.

We reach out to you and draw as close as we can.

***INVOCATION:**

Divine One, we are thankful for the restoration that can be found in you. Your presence is welcomed here. We delight in knowing that you want to be wherever we are. Because you are love, you show up for us. In this space, may we delight in your assurance that all you made is good. Amen

***OPENING HYMN: NCH 205 “Forty Days and Forty Nights”**

***UNISON PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Source of Grace, we confess that sometimes when we’re tempted, we don’t resist. Sometimes when we could do good, we don’t because it seems too hard. These are the times that we need your grace the most. Instead of giving up on us, you transform us as we open ourselves to you. For grace that abounds as needed, when needed, we give you thanks. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

All that God made is good. God made us and we are empowered to be good and to do good. Grace and mercy make goodness possible always and in all ways. Amen.

***GLORIA:**

Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near.

As it was from the start so it shall be forever,

One God always here. (repeat two more times.)

(end) One God always here. One God always here.

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

¹⁵ The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it. ¹⁶ The LORD God commanded the human, “Eat your fill from all of the garden’s trees; ¹⁷ but don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die!”

Knowledge, not eternal life

³ The snake was the most intelligent^[a] of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn’t eat from any tree in the garden?”

² The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees ³ but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴ The snake said to the woman, “You won’t die! ⁵ God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 5:12-19

Grace now rules

¹² Just as through one human being sin came into the world, and death came through sin, so death has come to

everyone, since everyone has sinned. ¹³ Although sin was in the world, since there was no Law, it wasn’t taken into account until the Law came. ¹⁴ But death ruled from Adam until Moses, even over those who didn’t sin in the same way Adam did—Adam was a type of the one who was coming.

¹⁵ But the free gift of Christ isn’t like Adam’s failure. If many people died through what one person did wrong, God’s grace is multiplied even more for many people with the gift—of the one person Jesus Christ—that comes through grace. ¹⁶ The gift isn’t like the consequences of one person’s sin. The judgment that came from one person’s sin led to punishment, but the free gift that came out of many failures led to the verdict of acquittal. ¹⁷ If death ruled because of one person’s failure, those who receive the multiplied grace and the gift of righteousness will even more certainly rule in life through the one person Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ So now the righteous requirements necessary for life are met for everyone through the righteous act of one person, just as judgment fell on everyone through the failure of one person. ¹⁹ Many people were made righteous through the obedience of one person, just as many people were made sinners through the disobedience of one person.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 4:1-11**

Temptation of Jesus

⁴ Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. ² After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³ The tempter came

to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*"^[a]

⁵ After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶ "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*"^[b]

⁷ Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*"^[c]

⁸ Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*"^[d] ¹¹ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

These are the Ancient Words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: The testing of Jesus and of us

There is one thing which we must carefully note right at the beginning of our discussion. It's the meaning of the word *tempt*. The Greek word is *peirazein*. In English, the word *tempt* has a uniformly and consistently bad meaning. It always means to entice people to do wrong, to seek to seduce them into sin, to try to persuade them to take the wrong way; But *peirazein* has a quite different element in

its meaning. It means *to test* far more than it means *to tempt* in our sense of the word.

It seems that the author of the Gospel of Matthew is unfolding the story of Jesus step by step. He begins by showing us how Jesus was born into the world. He goes on to show us, at least by implication, that Jesus had to perform faithfully his duties to his home before he began on his duty to the world. The author had to show how Jesus was faithful in the smaller tasks before God gave him the greatest task in all the world.

The author goes on to show us how, with the emergence of John the Baptist, Jesus knew that the hour had struck and that the time had come to enter upon his work. The author shows us Jesus identifying himself with a people's unprecedented search for God. In that moment, he shows us Jesus' realization that he was indeed the chosen one of God, but that his way to victory lay through the cross.

If anyone has a vision, the immediate problem is how to turn that vision into fact; some way has to be found to turn the dream into reality. That is precisely the problem which face Jesus. He had come to lead men and women home to God. How was he to do it? What method was he to adopt? Was he to adopt the method of a mighty conqueror, or was he to adopt the method of patient, sacrificial love? That was the problem which face Jesus in his tests we read about today. The task had been committed into the hands of Jesus. What method was he to chose to work out the task which God had given to do?

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness to be alone. His task had come to him; God had spoken to him; he must think how he was to attempt the task which God

had given him to do; he had to get things straightened out before he started; and he had to be alone.

Have you ever had that experience?; to voluntarily go somewhere to be alone to help you “clear your head”, or to work out some challenge that lies ahead?

There are times when no one else’s advice is any good. There are times when it becomes necessary to stop acting and start thinking. It may be that we often make mistakes because we do not give ourselves a chance to be alone with God.

Once we have Jesus on our side, we have the strength and fortitude to answer the call of God to do God’s will. It is true that at our weakest moments, we are tempted to give up. When that time comes, we can talk it over with a trusted friend; we can spend time with our Bibles, and most of all, we can ask God for assistance and guidance.

The psalm we read, Psalm 32:5-11, tells us,

⁵ So I admitted my sin to you;

I didn’t conceal my guilt.

“I’ll confess my sins to the LORD,” is what I said.

Then you removed the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

⁶ That’s why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times,^[a]

so that a great flood of water won’t reach them.

⁷ You are my secret hideout!

You protect me from trouble.

You surround me with songs of rescue! *Selah*

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you

about the direction you should go.

I’ll advise you and keep my eye on you.

⁹ Don’t be like some senseless horse or mule,
whose movement must be controlled
with a bit and a bridle.^[b]

Don’t be anything like that!^[c]

¹⁰ The pain of the wicked is severe,

but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the LORD.

¹¹ You who are righteous, rejoice in the LORD and be glad!

All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!

Rejoice for God is with you in the wilderness and in God’s residence within you!

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with time for silent personal prayer.

Hear, O God, the intercessions we offer on behalf of others, Gracious God, you have called us to be the church of Jesus Christ. Keeping us one in faith and service, breaking bread together and telling the good news to the world, that all may believe you are love, turn to your ways, and live to give you glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We pray for all government leaders throughout all countries. May they serve with clarity and charity. Send peacemakers among us to settle our disputes locally, nationally, and internationally. Bless all who are feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, finding homes for the homeless. Grant us peace in our lives of shared abundance and reverence for you, dear Lord, and all creation.

We pray for all those who were affected by the recent storms and snow blizzards. May all those who are working hard to return the power to so many who are dealing with freezing temperatures, may they be safe. We remember all

the victims and their families who were involved in recent shootings across our nation.

Compassionate God, you console the downcast and send visitors to the lonely. Give healing and help to those who are sick and recovering from accident, surgery, or addiction. We especially remember all those on our prayer list. Grant rest to the weary, relief to the suffering, and pause for the overworked.

We pray all these things in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

God gives good things to us, so let us give good things to God. Let us bring gifts that can be like water in dry places. May these resources be used to testify to the goodness of God. Amen.

***UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

Divine One, receive our gifts from the open hearts from which we give them. Thank you for blessing us with gifts to share, so that good works can abound. We offer our gifts gladly. May what we give be used to meet the needs of all. Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

As you depart this space and enter the wilderness of the world, know that God is with you. Whatever may come, let God be your safe place to go and your soft place to land. Amen.