

Worship for February 26, 2023  
Lent 1

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lenten Reading Mark 1:9-15 Hala Mosrie

\*Hymn 12 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

Prayer of Confession

**O God, our strength and fortress, forgive us when we fail to trust in you.**

**We fall easily to temptation,**

**swayed by false words,**

**and false statements of our own making.**

**We choose ease and comfort over the claims made upon us**

**as Christians devoted in faith and service.**

**In turning from you, we settle for less than the abundant life you intend.**

**We keep the Good News to ourselves and neglect to demonstrate your generosity to those  
desperate to find relief.**

**Forgive us, Lord, and do not put us to shame.**

**Show us your salvation when we call upon you.**

**In the name of Jesus Christ, who died that we might live. Amen.**

\*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

The Lord is generous to all who call on him.

God does not turn us away, but, desires to bring us into the glorious freedom offered in our Lord  
Jesus Christ.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Friends, know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Old Testament Reading Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Luke 4:1-13

Morning Message

It wasn't until I walked into my bedroom Wednesday night and caught sight of myself in the mirror that it dawned on me why I'd received some funny looks when I stopped at a store on my way home from the Ash Wednesday service.

I had a black smudge right in the middle of my forehead. It was pretty unattractive. And that's as it should be, isn't it?

Ashes, dark and grimy, traced on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. Two symbols in one: ashes to remind us of death and the sobering words, "From dust you came and to dust you shall return." But in sort of a secret language, that truth is overlaid with the sign of resurrection...the empty cross.

Christians do not receive the sign of the cross to attract attention. They receive the sign of the cross to focus on who they are as human beings, bound in death and life to Christ.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent provide time to explore the mystery at the heart of the Gospel... that being a Christian means a new life through Christ.

And so Lent begins...forty days, except Sundays, between last Wednesday and Easter. The forty days remind us of other big events in the story of God and God's people: the flood of Genesis, Moses' sojourn at Mt. Sinai, Elijah's journey to Mt. Horeb, Jonah's call to Ninevah, and Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness, as we read just now.

In the early church, Lent was a time of preparation for baptism, which was done at the Easter vigil.

Imagine for a moment what that may have looked and felt like. New believers, many of whom were converts from some other faith, or no faith at all, were given months of instruction before the final act of commitment, baptism.

We light candles each Sunday, and special candles for baptism. In the early church, because baptisms were done in living, or running, water, they were conducted outside, and held just after midnight.

I can close my eyes and visualize the scene. Believers lining the riverbank or the lakeshore with torches, maybe singing songs of the faith, praising God in prayer, witnessing the uninitiated wade into the water, plunged beneath the surface, washed clean, raised as new-born brothers and sisters in this great communion of saints we call the Church.

Men and women were baptized in separate ceremonies, and they were baptized without a stitch of clothing on. When they came up from the water, they were wrapped in new robes, to symbolize the new life they put on in Christ.

Today, we still observe Lent. Catholics and Orthodox Christians have observed it for centuries. Presbyterians are late in coming to the practice. As you remember from church history, the Reformers, like Calvin and Zwingli, tossed out rituals that could not be found in Scripture and anything that they deemed “too Catholic.” That was pretty short-sighted.

I am most appreciative that we have re-claimed Lent as a time set apart in the church year. Unlike the four weeks of quiet expectation we observe in Advent, the outcome of which is Christ’s birth, Lent plunges us into six weeks of somber reflection on our humanness, our penchant for sin, and our mortality. Remember those ashes.

In the lectionary texts, we will walk through the final days of Jesus’ life, and feel the pressure building between spiritual power and civil power.

And we will pray, as Jesus prayed, and sought God’s purpose and will for his life those forty days in the wilderness, as he prayed that night in the garden when all his friends fell asleep, and as he cried out to God in agony, in those excruciating final hours on the cross at Calvary. All of it adding shape and texture to the purpose of Jesus’ life.

What is your spiritual purpose? How did you come to faith? Did God call you in a dramatic way to love and serve him? Or was it a more gradual process? I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know God. As you’ve grown and matured, has your faith been strained or has it grown stronger? I’ve experienced both. How is your faith different from your earlier years?

We received word last Sunday that Ernest Thompson, former Senior Minister at First Presbyterian Church, had died. He was 89. I worked with Ernest as the Christian Education Director there for several years. Time with Ernest shaped my faith in specific ways. I learned so much about being a pastor from him. On his last Sunday at the church, we had Communion. It was a solemn occasion. You could hear sniffles and muted crying all around the sanctuary. ET himself looked at the floor while the trays were being passed through the congregation. We had already begun to mourn our loss.

But, Ernest would be the first to say as important as the moment was, we would always be connected through our faith, and we must remember that we do not live by bread, even holy bread, alone, but by finding our purpose in the true bread of heaven, Jesus Christ.

In a staff meeting one day, we were all called on to share something of our faith story. Ernest had grown up in faculty housing at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, where his father was an esteemed professor. He was also heavily involved in the civil rights movement and was instrumental in launching the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, which is still published today.

ET, as he was affectionately known, was fully immersed in the life of the church, but yet, he didn't show much interest in cultivating his faith. He described it as superficial. That is, until one summer, while working at Montreat, he heard the gospel message in a way that woke him up to the good news of the gospel, of life and death, and life after death, all wrapped up in the irresistible love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Upon his return home, he sat with his father and shared this newly-ignited faith.

To which, with a tear coursing down his cheek, his father said, "Son, that's what I've been trying to teach you all along."

In the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, we find this description of the Lenten season.

"What we hear during Lent is the power and possibility of the paschal mystery, and that the way of the cross, the way to Easter, is through death.

To appropriate the new life that is beyond the power of death means we must die with Christ who was raised for us.

To live for Christ, we must die with him.

New life requires a daily surrendering of the old life, letting go of the present order, so that we may embrace the new humanity.

"I die every day!" asserts Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:31.

Resurrection necessitates death as a preceding act.

The church's peculiar Lenten claim is that in dying we live, that all who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death. To be raised with Christ means one must also die with Christ.

In order to embrace the resurrection, we must experience the passion of Jesus. The way of the cross, the way to Easter, is through death of the "old self."

In dying, we live.

Therefore, at the beginning of Lent, we are reminded that our possessions, our rulers, our empires, our projects, our families, and even our lives do not last forever.

The difference in age between my daughters, Katy and Sarah Beth, is nearly six years. Like most kids who have enjoyed first or only-child status, Katy had a wee streak of jealousy that sometimes came out in devilish behavior.

When SB became mobile, I put her in a playpen while I took cooked or did something that required both hands to accomplish. She wasn't pleased about that habitat, but she could tolerate it for a little while.

One day, I noticed she seemed to be crying a lot. I let that go for awhile, but, soon walked from kitchen to living room to see what the problem could be. And, what I saw made me laugh and it made me hurt: Sarah Beth had just learned to pull herself up to standing, her little fingers gripping the padded rail around the playpen, quite pleased with herself, her eyes firmly focused on her big sister, whom she adored. And her adored big sister was peeling those baby fingers off the rail, one by one, until SB lost her grip and fell backwards with a thud and let out a stunned cry.

I was concerned for years that she was irreparably scarred, until I caught SB lowering a giant stuffed clown down the wall from her top bunk-bed to the bottom bunk to scare Caroline, who had clown phobia. That's the way it goes in the world of siblings.

I tell you this story because the liturgies throughout Lent try to pry loose our fingers, one by one, from presumed securities, and plunge us into unknown baptismal waters, that turn out to be not only our death tomb, but surprisingly, our womb of life. Rather than falling back into nothingness, we fall back on everlasting arms.

Death? How can we fear what we have already undergone in baptism?

It is the power of the resurrection on the horizon ahead that draws us into repentance toward the cross and tomb. Through the intervention of God's gracious resurrection, lifelong changes in our values and behavior become possible.

By turning from the end of the old self in us, Lenten repentance makes it possible for us to affirm joyfully, "Death is no more!" and to aim toward the landscape of the new age.

Faithfully adhering to the Lenten journey of "prayer, fasting and almsgiving" leads to the destination of Easter.

So, I invite you to observe a Holy Lent. Take up a spiritual practice. Read one of the gospels from beginning to end. Take your time. Pray. Experience God in silence. Wait for a sense of God's presence and listen with your heart. Help someone. Practice fasting if your health allows.

In all things, I urge you to ponder these words,

“Lent is the season of penitence. To be repentant is to be aware of your human nature, your tendency to sin, and the remorse you feel as a result. And, to repent means to turn around...to turn from sin and to turn toward Christ, that your life speaks of your love and devotion.

In our baptism and confirmation rites we are asked, “Do you reject sin and its power in your life, and is it your intention to turn from sin and toward God?”

And the answer is, “I will, with God's help.”

And so, my dear friends, we will, with God's help.

\*Affirmation of Faith      Apostles' Creed p. 35

\*Hymn 580    Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the Faithful and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

\*Hymn 607    Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

**Gracious God, we give you thanks for all your gifts, including these forty days of Lent. May they be to us a time of deep searching, be it during walks into the wilderness or courageous choices.**

**May we dedicate ourselves anew to discipleship, even as we dedicate our gifts to your kingdom. Amen.**

\*Hymn 215    What Wondrous Love Is This?

\*Blessing

These Lenten days will take us to the cross of Christ.

Go forward, knowing that you do not walk this way alone.

Do not fear, for the Word of God empowers us and the Holy Spirit sustains us.

May the God of the exodus lead us into freedom.

May the Holy Spirit bind us to God's will and to fellowship with believers over time and space.

May Christ Jesus, God's own Son, show us the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

### Announcements

Today is ECCHO and Cents-ability Sunday. Your contributions for those in need are appreciated.

A Lenten study is offered today, (you'll have to fill this in per last week's bulletin)The study begins at 10:00AM in the chapel.

A congregational meeting will be held April 2 immediately following worship. This is the Annual Meeting during which committee chairs present a review of mission and ministry.

\*Postlude