

**Hybrid Worship for February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023**  
**First Sunday of Lent**

**Territorial Acknowledgment and Announcements**

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather is situated upon traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron - Wyandot, the Haudenosaunee and later the Mississauga of the Credit First Nations. The territory is mutually covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibway and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, this remains the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in their community, and to share and respect Mother Earth.

**Centering Music:** “Me Alone” MV 118

Me alone, me alone in-a the wilderness.

Forty days and forty nights in-a the wilderness.

**Call to Worship and Opening Prayer**

One: We are called to journey through Lent.

**All: The Holy Spirit is our tour guide,  
and we wonder what we will be shown.**

One: We are called to journey through Lent –  
moving with Jesus from the wilderness all the way to the cross.

**All: What will inspire us along the way?  
What will we learn?**

One: We are called to a journey that could surprise us,  
enlighten us, transform us.

**All: We open ourselves to God’s call and the Spirit’s  
direction as we follow Jesus and our Lenten path.**

One: We are called to worship here today,

**All: as we begin that Lenten journey together.**

One: Let’s pray with one voice:

**All: God of all our times and seasons,  
throughout the ages you have called your people  
to journey faithfully into new places,  
exploring new attitudes, finding new perspectives.  
We continue as our ancestors in faith have done –  
sometimes fearfully, sometimes joyfully,  
sometimes into the disturbing,  
sometimes into the troublesome.**

**Renew our faith today, God,  
as we gather in this virtual or physical space.**

**Give us the courage to keep moving on our faith journeys,  
whatever we may face.**

**Give us the insight to see your Spirit at work,  
in every challenge and every new idea.**

**Give us hearts open enough to feel the guiding  
and abiding presence of your Tested One, Jesus.**

**We pray in his name today.**

**Amen**

**Opening Hymn:** “God of the Bible” MV 28 verses 1, 2, 5

God of the Bible, God in the Gospel,  
hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come,  
you are our centre, daylight or darkness,  
freedom or prison, you are our home.

Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise,  
God always faithful you do not change.

Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise,  
God always faithful, you do not change.

Those without status, those you are nothing,  
you have made royal, gifted with rights,  
chosen as partners, midwives of justice,  
birthing new systems, lighting new lights.

**Prayer for Reflection and Revelation:** “Lent Prayer” @Dave Hopwood/engageworship.org

One: Lord as we struggle each day to discern the bread from the stones,  
the truth from the fiction, your word from the lies;

**All: Please help us and guide us and give us your strength.**

One: Lord as we struggle each day to discern the difference between trusting you and testing you,  
following your word and manipulating it, your ways and our ways;

**All: Please help us and guide us and give us your strength.**

One: Lord as we wrestle each day to resist the temptation to worship the wrong things,  
to see through the distractions that confound and confuse us,  
to overcome the fears that distract us and depress us;

**All: Please help us and guide us and give us your strength.**

**Sung Response:** “Senzeni Na?” MV 66

Senzeni Na? Senzeni Na?

Senzeni Na? Senzeni Na?

Senzeni Na? Senzeni Na?

Senzeni Na? Senzeni Na?

**Scripture Readings:**

**Psalm 32**      *A paraphrase © Bob Hartman/engageworship.org*

When the thing you've done wrong is forgiven, when your sin is hidden away,  
like it never existed, you're happy.

When God declares that you are innocent and free of guilt, and when  
there's no longer any need to pretend, you're happy.

So why does it take me so long to admit it, when I have done something  
wrong? Why do I put myself through all that pain?

Because it was painful, Lord. It really was. It was like carrying a heavy burden.  
It was like a sweltering summer day followed by an even more sweltering night.  
No relief, none at all, from the heat.

But when I finally confessed, when I owned up to the thing I'd done, then  
everything changed. You forgave me. Simple as that.

And that is why those who trust in you offer their prayers to you. Because when  
the flood wants to wash them away, you are there to lift them up out of the waters.

And when it looks like there is no longer any refuge, you are my hiding place.  
And when trouble is all around, you surround me with the sound of your voice.  
"I am here. Here to help. Have no fear."

So listen to me, and I'll show you the way you should go.  
I'll keep my eye on you, and teach you, step by step.  
As long as you're willing to be taught, that is, and not like a horse or a mule that  
needs a bit in its mouth to force it along the right path.

For the wicked, they suffer for their sins. Tormented. Alone. Don't let anyone kid  
you. But those who trust in the Lord live in God's presence, surrounded by  
God's love - a love that never quits.

So be happy, righteous ones. Rejoice!  
And those of you whose hearts are in tune with God, shout. Shout for joy!

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Then 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 splendour; 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.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

Choir: "Kyrie"

Reflection: Called to the wilderness

Hymn: “Jesus Tempted in the Desert” VU 115

Jesus, tempted in the desert,  
lonely, hungry, filled with dread:  
'Use your power,' the tempter tells him;  
'turn these barren rocks to bread!'  
'Not alone by bread,' he answers,  
'can the human heart be filled.  
Only by the Word that calls us  
is our deepest hunger stilled!'

Jesus, tempted at the temple,  
high above its ancient wall:  
'Throw yourself from lofty turret;  
angels wait to break your fall!'  
Jesus shuns such empty marvels,  
feats that fickle crowds request:  
'God, whose grace protects, preserves us,  
we must never vainly test.'

Jesus, tempted on the mountain  
by the lure of vast domain:  
'Fall before me! Be my servant!  
Glory, fame, you're sure to gain!  
Jesus sees the dazzling vision,  
turns his eyes another way:  
'God alone deserves our homage!  
God alone will I obey!'

When we face temptation's power,  
lonely, struggling, filled with dread,  
Christ, who knew the tempter's hour,  
come and be our living bread.  
By your grace, protect, preserve us  
lest we fall, your trust betray.  
Yours, above all other voices,  
be the Word we hear, obey.

### **Introduction to the Offering**

#### **Gift of Music**

**Hymn of Dedication:** "Grant us, God, the Grace" VU 540  
Grant us, God, the grace of giving,  
with a spirit large and free,  
that ourselves and all our living  
we may offer faithfully.

#### **Offering Prayer:**

**All: Loving and Giving God,  
bless and transform everything that we bring:  
our faltering steps,  
our brokenness,  
our hope, our risking, our hearts,  
so that we and the world may find  
your transformative love and justice.  
Amen**

#### **Prayers of the People**

*Adapted from the resource 'Celebrate God's Presence,' the United Church of Canada*  
Jesus the Christ,  
you refused to turn stones into bread.

Save us from using our power,  
however little,  
to satisfy the demands of selfishness  
in the face of the greater needs of others.  
We offer our prayers for all those whose lives have  
been dominated by the power of others,  
thinking of Indigenous peoples in our own land,  
the people of Ukraine,  
refugees from Afghanistan and Syria and Myanmar.

Jesus the Christ,  
you refused to leap from the temple top.  
Save us from displaying our skills,  
however modest,  
to win instant popularity  
in the face of nobler calls on our abilities.  
We pray today for those denied the opportunity  
to develop their own skills and knowledge,  
and we pray for those who work to bring  
education to all people everywhere.

Jesus the Christ,  
you refused to bend the knee to a false god.  
Save us from offering our devotion,  
however weak,  
to cheap or easy religion  
in the face of the harder path  
on which you bid us to follow you.  
We pray for those who are kept from expressing their own faith,  
and those who are refused a place in places of worship  
because of their God-given sexual orientation or gender identity.

Jesus the Christ,  
give us wisdom  
to discern evil;  
and in the face of all that is deceptively attractive,  
help us to choose the will of God.  
Amen.

### **The Lord's Prayer (sung) VU 959**

#### **Closing Hymn: "To the Desert Jesus Came" VU 113**

To the desert Jesus came,  
to wrestle and to seek God's way.  
Sun and moon rose high above  
to watch him as he'd fast and pray.  
Together through the valley,

the tempter led him around.  
Together through the valley,  
so Jesus answers found.

Like the Hebrews long ago  
who ventured through the desert sand,  
did he find a rock of faith,  
where streams of living waters ran?  
Together through the valley,  
so shall we make our way.  
Together through the valley,  
we'll walk for forty days.

In the desert we may find  
the mystery of who we are,  
following a faithful God,  
so very close and yet so far.  
Together through the valley,  
we'll gather our dreams in prayer,  
together through the valley,  
and find God's presence there.

From the ashes to the hill,  
we'll travel on our Lenten road.  
Hand in hand we'll cross this sand,  
and share each other's heavy load.  
Together through the valley,  
we'll watch the changing sky.  
Together through the valley,  
as Easter's dawn draws nigh.

### **Commissioning /Blessing**

#### **Sung Amen VU971**

#### **Rev. Joanne's Reflection**

I wanted to call this reflection "You want me to go WHERE?" I don't think I have ever visited what might be described as true wilderness, and perhaps there are few of us would willingly enter a wilderness of any kind - although I am sure there are some adventurers out there!

We aren't given any clue to how Jesus felt about being led into that wilderness time and place. He had just experienced his baptism with John in the Jordan, just heard the voice of God affirming him, just felt

the presence of the Spirit. But like last week's story on the mountain, Jesus couldn't stay in that moment of God's revelation. Immediately he is led away by the Spirit, and into the wilderness he goes.

The Biblical wilderness is often portrayed as a 'thin' space, or liminal place where ordinary life might be suspended, identity can shift, and new possibilities emerge. Through the stories of the Hebrew Testament, especially those of the Israelites in exile, we learn that while the Biblical wilderness is a place of danger, temptation and chaos, it can also be a place for solitude, nourishment, and revelation from God. Certainly those themes run through our scripture reading today.

In the ancient Middle East near where Jesus would have encountered the wilderness, it would have been dry and rocky, barren and full of danger and dangerous animals. But those physical dangers aren't what Jesus has to contend with. Instead it is Satan he meets, God's tester, the wily Devil that in this story seems to represent our basest natures as humanity. We are told that this tester comes at the end of forty days and night of fasting. We don't know what else besides fasting Jesus did in that wilderness wandering time. Likely he prayed, perhaps contemplating what had occurred at his baptism. Certainly he would have thought of scripture, perhaps even reciting passages to himself. Whatever he did seemed to be able to prepare him for his encounter with the Devil, and the temptations offered.

None of those temptations were evil in themselves, and while they seemed personal – assuage your hunger, feel the power of God, and take power unto yourself, they actually had implications for doing great good in the world. In the first, turn stones to bread, and feed all those who are hungry in the world. The second, display to the world in a spectacular way who you really are by having God save you from certain death – many people would come to believe if they saw such a thing. The third - take over from the corrupt powerful, and bring God's peace and justice to the world yourself.

Essentially, Jesus is tempted to leave behind his humanity - to become God-like but in service to the quick fix and the easy answer, and to leave God out of the decision-making. He is tempted to perform a miracle not to point to God, but to simply answer a physical need. He is tempted to prove who he is by some trick, rather than through his words and genuine acts of care and compassion. He is tempted to take the agency away from God's people and rule over kingdoms rather than hearts. Jesus is at his most human when he resists the Devil, when he calls upon the scriptures that have taught and sustained him in his life.

That is good news for us, this very human Jesus and very divine Christ who chooses to answer temptation and testing through his human side. It means that when we encounter our own wilderness times, our own testing times as God's beloved but very human people, we have what we need to get through. Sometimes grief can feel like a wilderness, or illness like a journey through a wild place. Worry about our families or friends can lead us into rough country, as well as anxiety about aging, or finances, or the state of our communities or our country. We have God's word to lean on as we travel, we have Jesus' example to follow, and we have the assurance that when our lives are God-centered – even when we feel tested, even when we are hungering for relief – God is with us, and sends angels in the form of supportive community to our aid.

As I pondered this scripture, and the kinds of wildernesses that we can encounter, three examples came to mind. These are perhaps not what we would easily name or identify as testing times or situations, but they exist perhaps on the edges of our lives and our journey together in this faith community. These I named the wilderness of caring, the wilderness of witness, and the wilderness of power.

How, you might ask, could caring for and about others be a wilderness experience? The wilderness, the danger of caring, comes when we act at a surface level only. It is a dry and barren place when we offer food, but do not work to change the systems and societal ills that cause poverty. We can and should offer food and advocacy, action and reflection, good deeds and strong words of support. The temptation we can face is to hang a pride flag, and look supportive, but not to pray for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, or march in solidarity, or lobby for more rights, or change our own policies and practices to become a more inclusive community. In our caring, we are called to go deeper, to challenge and speak out, and to act on more than one level.

How, then, is witnessing to our faith a wilderness, a time or space that might frighten us, where we might be reluctant to travel? I think that witnessing to our faith *is* frightening and challenging today. We no longer share a common language of faith in our neighborhoods and communities, and may feel we do not have the 'right' language to use. Many people do not engage in any faith practices at all, and many may be part of other faith traditions like Islam or Hinduism which we really don't understand. The church has been maligned in media – sometimes with good reason but often through stereotypes of what being a Christian means, with beliefs and practices that do not match our own. The real temptation here is to simply ignore our faith lives outside of our own church environment, and not to share what our faith means to us. The temptation is to talk about *what* we do - like hosting a pancake dinner, or celebrate Easter, but not *why* we do it.

Perhaps it is easier to see that power in many forms can be a kind of wilderness, a place that can be barren and full of potential traps and pitfalls. What might not be so easy to see is that every one of us sitting here has power and privilege – even if most of us don't know it. Our individual power comes from aspects of our lives that we probably did not choose - most of us are white, most of us have English as our first language, and we are as educated as we want to be or have at least had opportunities to be educated. All these bring a form of power in our world. It is probably easier to point to individuals who, for whatever reason, want power over others, crave control, and would do anything to get it. They can seem to be dangerous, and often are, but we can be dangerous as well. Dangerous because our power and privilege can lead us to think that we can 'do it better' - raise children better than Indigenous parents, create community better than our BIPOC siblings, understand God and the divine better than our neighbours from other faith traditions. Like the Devil who tempts Jesus to take control, we have often been tempted to do the same throughout history. Canada's Indian Act is a prime example of the 'we can do it better' way of thinking, which has adversely affected thousands over generations. The temptation is to deny our power, when we actually need to recognize what it is and how it affects us and others.

We will all encounter wilderness times, journeys that will challenge us, but the potential in each is that we may also encounter God. In our caring we may learn, as Micah proclaims, to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. In our thinking of witnessing to our faith, we may find courage to declare, as the psalmist did in the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." In our recognition of our own power we also live into Jesus' ultimate commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and "love your neighbour as yourself."

May our own wilderness wanderings be places where we can face the temptations to live without God, and choose a different path. May we choose a path that follows Jesus, from the wilderness of desert sands that begin our Lenten journey to mountaintops where Jesus prayed and taught, from teachings and healings to palm parades and celebrations, from the cross to beyond. Amen.