

## Walk by Faith

Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Luke 4:1–12

Reading the chapter in Deuteronomy alongside the story of Jesus in the wilderness raises the nature of temptation. In both the Old and New Testaments, the word Satan means “the tempter.” He is the source of temptation.

However, the Epistle of James explicitly reads, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil nor tempt anyone” (James 1:13–14). Rather than external temptation, say from Satan, James adds that it is “our own evil desires” that tempt us. Now there’s a message appropriate for the time of repentance known as Lent!

I wrote much of this sermon with ash under my fingernails. Once again, we began Lent by marking Ash Wednesday with our friends from The Local Church. We heard the truth of our mortality—we are made of dust, and to dust we shall return. It is a lesson in humility and also a call to pay attention. In the church tradition, this lesson is known as *memento mori*—remember that you must die.

Our mortality is the truth. There is also freedom in it. So many people are feeling overwhelmed, but remembering our death can free us from things that are beyond our control. I cannot save the world or my country. I cannot even save myself.

But someone else can. That is the message of grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lent, then, can be a time to lighten up. I’m thinking of the clocks moving forward with Daylight Savings and how spring is all around us in the flowers, buds, birds, and frogs. It is a reminder that life is returning, utterly apart and distinct from anything that we have to do with it. If you feel overwhelmed, perhaps this reminder will help you lighten up—not that you will make light of serious things, but that you will not take yourself too seriously. Finding freedom from doing too much, we can then do the next right thing.

As far as the next right thing, that is a matter of discernment. Jesus often made quiet time in the wilderness to discern what God wished for him to do.

Discernment is also a matter of self-care. Taking care of yourself is necessary when taking care of others.

I have a friend at the elementary school whose bumper sticker reads, “Honk if you are letting the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” That’s a line from Mary Oliver’s poem, “Wild Geese.” It makes me smile every time because geese

honk! Wild geese are also a type of *memento mori*—everything is passing, whether it's the birds overhead or the flowers from the earth. What we can do is notice. Mary Oliver also said that paying attention is the beginning of prayer.

The poet James Crews wrote, “I don’t think we do enough bowing to the simple things, the humble acts.” Crews continued, “I bow to the box of my mother’s ashes.” The dust and the ash point to the truth that everything dies, including everyone we love. But we bow and pay attention. In grief, we still live in gratitude to the grace of the moment. Perhaps the grief even sharpens our awareness of the simple, humble gifts.

Since another congregation had joined us for Ash Wednesday, there were several worshippers who were unfamiliar to me. One of them was a young mother with her baby—the child was maybe three months old and strapped to her chest. The two of them happened to come to my station to receive ashes. Once I finished marking the young mother’s forehead, she held her baby up for me to do the same. What faith! This mother was acknowledging that even what she held most dear was also mortal.

So, I wanted this to go well! I bent down, which was like a bow, and I carefully dabbed a little ash on this baby’s tiny forehead with my pinky finger, not wishing to risk getting ash in his eye. As I did this, the child regarded me in that solemn, studious way of the very young. For a moment, I thought this was not going to end well!

Suddenly, the baby broke into a smile—a drooling, all-gums expression of glee! The mother held him higher as he giggled, and I hold this image up for all of us this morning. For if our faith in the God of all creation means anything, then that child is our child, just as all children are our children. And what’s more, we are all children of God.

The life of faith is staring at our experience and wondering, like that baby, “Can I trust this?” In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can trust. Trust that there is more than death. Trust that there is beauty in what is before us because we are loved.

Jesus wandered through the wilderness for 40 days, an echo of the Israelites wandering for 40 years. In the wilderness, there is temptation. But there is also freedom—we let go of what we cannot control and trust God for the journey.

I'm reminded of the saying, "All who wander are not lost." Indeed, the scripture reads that our ancestor was "a wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26), a reference to Abraham, who left his home not knowing the way, but only trusting God's promise of the future.

We are the same way. So, practice self-care. Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Know that you can trust the one who walks to the cross and beyond the grave with your mortal life and in the life to come. For we walk by faith. Amen.

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