

Immanuel United Church  
Sunday, February 26, 2023  
Lent 1

## **PRELUDE**

### **Acknowledgement of the Land and Treaties**

Today, we acknowledge the land that we are gathered on is Treaty 1 territory..... the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, and Dakota Peoples, as well as the homeland and the heart of the Metis Nation, who for thousands of years, walked gently on this land with deeply rooted gifts of spirituality, culture and ways of knowing.

We respect the Treaties that were made on these territories, acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and give thanks for the connection we share with this land – in times past and also in the present day.

Today we are called to seek a new relationship as Indigenous and non-indigenous people, creating one based on friendship, built on respect, and one that produces peace, remembering that we are all treaty people.

***As we enter this time of worship,  
we acknowledge the Christ candle, marking the presence of light in  
our midst, and the Rainbow Candle, symbolizing that we are an  
inclusive and affirming community, and all belong here.***

### **Welcome and Announcements**

## **Lighting of the Christ Candle**

Let us begin our Lenten journey with Christ by our side.

**We prepare our hearts for the road ahead.**

The candle is our symbol of hope that Christ is always with us.

**We acknowledge his presence in very tangible ways.**

The candle is lit to bring us into union with our Saviour.

**We walk with him as we journey through the wilderness.**

This light will steady our resolve and show us the path.

**We will find our way; we will find God's way as we follow the son.**

## **Call to Worship**

The glory of God is in this sanctuary.

**We glorify God with praise and song.**

The love of God reaches out to each one of us.

**We feel God's love with every breath that we take.**

Our spirits are lifted as we begin this journey through lent.

**We begin at the beginning with all that we have to offer.**

The slate is clean and ready for service.

**We come before God with renewed energy and focus.**

Let our worship be the tip of the iceberg.

**As we join together may we find the hidden gems that God has to offer.**

**Hymn VU#574**

**Come, Let Us Sing of a Wonderful Love**

## **Opening Prayer**

As we gather in this service, dear God, we pray that we will hear your voice in all that we say and do. May we be open to your Spirit as it leads

us into the wilderness during this season of Lent. Help us to stand strong during times of testing and temptation. We want to feel your love as it surrounds us and gives us strength to be your children. In God's holy name we pray. Amen.

**Hymn VU#113                      To the Desert Jesus Came**

**Scripture:**

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Matthew 4:1-11

**Choir Anthem                      "Into the Woods My Master Came"**

**Reflection – What Happens in the Wilderness Does Not Stay in the Wilderness**

And so, our Lenten journey begins. The scripture readings for today from Genesis and Matthew find us looking at sin and temptation. Jesus was led to the wilderness, and we will look at the significance of that. However, we find Adam and Eve in what has been described as paradise. Who would sin in paradise? You'd think that once you have everything you need, temptation is gone, right? But as we will see, just because you have it all, that is no guarantee that we won't sin.

Before we begin with the specifics of these scripture readings, I just want to clarify my own take on sin and temptation. Our perception and definition of these words is part of the battle of understanding this struggle in our own wilderness. I'm sure that we each have different

definitions of what sin and temptation is. I find I can't explore this subject without getting personal. I spent many years in my own wilderness questioning my relationship to God because of how sin was presented to me as a child. For example, in my home growing up, it was a sin to go to dances or to dance at all really. It was also considered a sin to watch TV on Sunday or to do anything on Sunday that involved work. In fact, my cousins in the States weren't allowed to watch TV at all. I saw each and everyone of these restrictions as the law imposed by a nasty God. Then, as I got older, I began to wonder if this was really what God had in mind when restrictions were placed on Adam and Eve. Not that they had the opportunity, but I don't think God would have minded if they had gone to a sock hop.

I am certainly no theologian, but for me, sin boils down to separation from God. I believe that when we willfully choose to ignore our spiritual life and in turn, our Divine God, we are then in a position to sin. I think that by listening to and walking with God, we more fully understand our place in the universe. We are not as open to the wily ways that tempt us and in turn, cause hurt to ourselves, those around us and our Creator.

So how does it all start? What does sin entail and what makes it so easy? As I've often wondered myself, critics of this story and of God wonder why in the world God would place a choice so momentous before Adam and Eve. The answer that makes most sense is that, without a choice, there could be no genuine obedience, no real love, no meaningful trust. If you can't choose, you are a robot, a computer, a machine programmed to obey, love, trust. God didn't want that. God wanted a creature in the Divine image capable of a real relationship. That required a mind and a will, and a command that could be obeyed or disobeyed. And that was what God gave to Adam and Eve; the freedom to choose.

Let's look at the scripture from Genesis. I'd like to read what God says in verses 16 and 17. " 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Forbidden fruit always has a wondrous luster. Isn't it often the way that when we are restricted from something, we want it even more. Think about when we were teenagers who are given rules. Think about books that have been banned. The more something is banned, the more we seem to want to check it out.

The strategy of Satan in the Bible as well as the many temptations we face are very clever. We underestimate the power of words and how they can be used as weapons. This is how Satan begins, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" Until now, the text has referred to the deity as "the Lord God," but the serpent shortens that to "God." The effect is to de-emphasize the importance of God. But that's just the start.

The serpent sets the stage for deception by deliberate misrepresentation. God did not say, "You SHALL NOT EAT from any tree in the garden," but rather, "of the garden you MAY FREELY EAT of every tree". God then placed one limit on this freedom—"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it". The permission far exceeded the restriction—but the serpent represents God as having permitted nothing and restricted everything. The purpose of this misrepresentation is to confuse Eve—to throw her off balance—to plant a seed of doubt in her mind.

"The woman said to the serpent, "Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat, but of the fruit of the tree, which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it,

lest you die.” At first glance, it appears that Eve has restated the Godly permission and restriction correctly. However, as we are prone to do when not sufficiently on guard, her restatement fails to capture the permission and restriction exactly, and exactness counts when engaged in courtroom battle with temptation. Inexactness weakens the woman’s case and strengthens Satan’s hand.

- First, she says, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden,” rather than “We may FREELY eat of EVERY tree of the garden”. While her words capture something of God’s liberality, they fail to capture the full measure of that liberality.
- Second, she quotes God as saying, “You shall not eat of it; the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die”—rather than “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” She fails to name the tree and the name has significance, but instead designates it by its location. She adds “nor shall you touch it”—thus embellishing God’s prohibition.

But the woman’s greatest mistake is to talk to the serpent at all. The serpent has clearly misrepresented God’s instructions, and the woman is tempted to correct the misrepresentation. “Tempted” is the right word. The serpent tempted the woman to correct him. Once she engages in dialogue with the serpent, she finds herself on a slippery slope where the serpent is in control.

Temptation does not shock us into alertness by suggesting whopping crimes. It starts off with little, almost inoffensive things to which even the heart of a saint would make only mild protests.

The serpent ends by saying to Eve, “You won’t surely die”. Earlier, the serpent told the first Big Lie—that God prohibited eating from any tree

in the garden. Now the serpent tells another Big Lie—“You will not die.” In both cases, the serpent expresses the exact opposite of what God said. Sometimes we are susceptible to subtle lies, but at other times will allow ourselves to believe a whopper. Satan is capable of tailoring the lie to fit the listener—whatever works.

The phrase, “The Big Lie,” was popularized by Hitler and Goebbels (Gerbels). Hitler first used the phrase in his book, *Mein Kampf*, where he accused Jews of using big lies to undermine the German military effort during World War I, thus insuring Germany’s defeat. Goebbels accused England of using the Big Lie technique in their propaganda, but cynically adopted the method himself. One example was the sign, “Work makes one free” posted at the entrance to concentration camps where the only freedom was death.

The serpent recognizes Eve’s vulnerability, so he contradicts God’s word directly. “You will not surely die....” God is lying to you. But they did die— to themselves, to each other, to God, and to their environment. Before sin they were not self-conscious. They were naked and they didn’t know it. They were not embarrassed about their God given identity. But sin killed that innocent sense of self. So began the great cover up that makes us mysteries to ourselves.

The serpent attacks God himself, God’s character, God’s trustworthiness by challenging God’s motive in giving the one prohibition in Eve’s life. “For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

I’m going to paraphrase a statement made by Old Testament scholar Gerhard Van Rad. He said that Adam and Eve stepped outside “the circle of obedience and judged God and his command from a neutral position. And humanity’s ancient folly is in thinking we can understand God better from our freely assumed standpoint and from our notion of

God than we can if we would subject ourselves to [God's] word." And I would add to God's voice.

"The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked. Earlier, they were naked and unashamed, but now their eyes are opened to see their nakedness in a different light. While they thought that eating the fruit would make them crafty, it only made them naked.

Adam and Eve covered up in the presence of God. God still walked in their world, but they hid because they were now afraid. Unbroken, unmediated communion with God was dead, though God would give his life to restore it one day.

And they did not become like God. They were already like God because God created them in the Divine image. But they couldn't accept the limits of being mere image bearers. They wanted to know everything, as God did. But that wasn't possible. Oh, they already knew good, because they knew God, but they didn't know evil.

Where is the hope in this text? Because the reading ends at verse 7, we don't get to see God in redemptive action, beginning with the plaintive question, "where are you?" The only way to preach Gospel from this brief reading is to connect it with Jesus' temptation in Matthew, where we see Jesus undo what Adam and Eve did. Confronted with not one, but three temptations, Jesus resists and obeys because he trusts the Word of God. The temptation of Jesus summarizes all that sin offers to the world—the cravings of the flesh, the lust of his eyes and the pride of life. Jesus responds to each and stays in the circle of obedience, centered on God.

It is no accident that Jesus winds up in the wilderness after his baptism. He is not lost, and he is not being punished for something he has done wrong. This is an assumption that people today sometimes make about



their own “wilderness experiences”. He has been led by the Holy Spirit for a purpose: to be tempted or tested by the devil.

Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God’s next move, a place of learning to trust in God’s mercy. For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next.

The author of Hebrews says, “For we don’t have a high priest who can’t be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin”. The Christ who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men” is subject to every human experience, from birth to death. He experiences hunger, pain, grief, and anger. Otherwise, the Incarnation is incomplete, and his ministry is defective. If Jesus cannot fail, his temptation is less than our everyday experience. A savior who cannot endure our everyday temptation cannot save us.

Satan begins by saying “If you are the Son of God”. Following the baptism, a voice from heaven announced, “This is my Son.” Now the devil says, “If you are the Son of God” —introducing doubt—challenging Jesus to prove the authenticity of his identity.

Then Satan says, “command that these stones become bread”. The devil attacks Jesus at his weakest point—his compelling physical hunger. Such hunger drains us, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. A starving person hardly has the strength to take nourishment—much less strength to turn it down. A starving person will do nearly anything to get food—the drive to survive is built into us. The temptation for Jesus is to relieve his own hunger—to use mighty power for a small purpose. But perhaps the purpose is not small. Jesus must eat—otherwise he will die and his mission will die with him. The tempter uses persuasive logic!

Under different circumstances, Jesus will use his power to feed the hungry. Jesus does not claim that we do not need bread, but that we do not live by bread alone. We must have bread, but our deeper need is satisfied only by God. Jesus will provide bread, but he will not do so by turning his back on God. The real issue here is that he cannot begin his ministry by following temptation's lead.

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 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."

One of the lessons I take from this passage is that not everyone who quotes scripture is from God. The world is full of people who seem to have our best interests at heart, who might even appear to have God in their pocket; they know scripture, they say all the right words. But as we see from this reading, quoting scripture is merely a ploy.

The final temptation happens when "the devil took him to an exceedingly high mountain". On this high mountain, Jesus confronts the devil. Jesus has come to save the world, and the devil offers him the world. "The devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory".

Given Israel's plight under Roman domination, an offer of the whole world is a powerful enticement. The Jews remember with longing the days of David and Solomon. In those days, Israel was a nation to be reckoned with—small but great. Israeli armies defeated great nations. Now Israel is a shadow of its former self. Roman publicans collect taxes and Roman soldiers enforce the taxation. The emperor's face is on their

coins. Jewish greatness is a distant memory. Nothing would draw people to Jesus faster than a credible promise of political and military power—even if gaining power required a pact with the devil.

The devil ends by saying, “I will give you all of these things, if you will fall down and worship me”. The devil names an attractive price. Both verbs (“fall down” and “worship”), suggest that the devil is asking that Jesus fall down and worship him only once—no lifelong commitment required. However, Jesus surely understands the devil’s gambit—one step will lead to another—and another—and another. No bargain with the devil will ever turn out to be a one-time affair.

The temptation is not that food, power and leadership are inherently wrong, but rather that they can be used for the wrong ends, or at the wrong time.

What happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness; rather, it plays again in the life and ministry of God’s beloved son. The wilderness tests of the temptation account are not a one-time ordeal to get through, but they are tests of preparation for the choices Jesus makes in his earthly ministry. Indeed, readers of Matthew’s Gospel have an opportunity to see how the wilderness experience is replayed in Jesus’ encounters with persons who are sick, hungry or in need; with persons who use their connections to power (including, perhaps, the lawyers, Pharisees and Sadducees who test him in various ways) to ascertain his loyalty; with persons who too easily worry about the world’s assessment of greatness rather than God’s (including some of his own disciples).

As I’ve pondered my own temptations and ways that I’ve sinned, I realize that one of the reasons why it’s so easy to give in to temptations goes back to the diabolical attack on God’s motive. We can convince ourselves that God doesn’t want us to flourish, God wants to hold us

down, God doesn't want to share blessings with us. God is selfish, a spoil sport, a denier of human happiness. God's commands are all about restricting our potential. I used to think that, and it was very tempting to cut all ties to God or anything having to do with God, leaving me as vulnerable as Adam and Eve.

Once I realized that God really does want the best for us, it was much easier to find my way out of the wilderness, taking with me the light that is Jesus. There are things we can be sure of, but there are things that we need to trust. There are things that God only knows; things that we are not meant to know. Our faith will lead us to the belief that God will guide us to the life that each of us were meant to live. Amen.

#### **Hymn MV#44**

#### **Shadow and Substance**

#### **Offering #540 VU Grant Us, God, the Grace**

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**

We thank you dear God for the many gifts that you provide. Help us to be giving servants as we extend our blessings to those in our community and beyond. We ask that these offerings be used with wisdom to further your mission on earth. With grateful hearts we say, Amen.

## **Prayers of the People**

You know us dear God. You know that we have all sinned and given in to temptation. And yet your forgiving nature has been eternally there to take us from the depths of shame to the heights of your loving embrace. We are content to be your people and listen to your voice. We are content to spend time in our own wilderness with uncertainty and questions that may have no answers. Help us to rest easy in your Divine knowledge of good and evil. Help us to find in our wilderness journey a faith and relationship with you that stands through all the tests that come our way.

We bring prayers of lament for those tragedies that play out on a day-to-day basis. We continue to pray for Turkey and Syria as earthquakes still plague that part of the world. We think of the Ukraine and the assault that has devastated so many lives. Our prayers go out that in all the chaos, that God will touch the lives of those on both sides of the border. We pray that a spirit of love will prevail.

In these cold winter months, we know there are many who are lonely and isolated. Help us to encourage those in our community who need special care. We pray for healing and continued support as people deal with not only physical illness, but mental illness as well.

We lay all our concerns before you, dear God. We know that you are listening, and we know that you hear us even when we don't say the words out loud. We pause for a moment to silently send you our unspoken prayers.

Let us pray as Jesus taught us to pray...

## **Prayer of Jesus**

**Hymn MV#79**

**Spirit, Open My Heart**

### **Commissioning and Benediction**

The wilderness journey is challenging. We don't know what to expect. We feel off kilter, perhaps even vulnerable. Pursue this path knowing that Jesus too was in that very wilderness and yet he triumphed as he was led from temptation to temptation.

Find in this Lenten experience your own unique strengths and ways to serve God. The Spirit will always lead as it led Jesus, it will be there to comfort as it comforted Jesus and you will find that your faith has deepened along the way. Amen.