

Lent 1A  
March 1, 2020  
Matthew 4:1-11

## **INWARD PIETY GOES PUBLIC**

**Here we are at the start of our Lenten journey, barely out of the blocks, and already our readings put us on a collision course with the most basic, thorny issues of human experience.**

Genesis confronts us with the ancient story of God's good creation, Adam and Eve, and the serpent. The task Mr. and Mrs. Human Being are given is clear: to tend and keep the garden. But it isn't long before curiosity has them put focus their energy in another direction.

Chapter 2 ended on a wistful note, with Adam singing the first love song to his life partner, Eve. But in chapter 4 we watch our ancient ancestors come face to face with the limits of their knowledge and the consequences of their choices.

At the end of the day, instead of delivering the knowledge they thought they couldn't live without, the fruit of the tree only deepens the awareness of their naked vulnerability. And what becomes of their tending the garden?

**In the lesson from Romans, Paul's carefully constructed theological argument lays bare fundamental issues of the Eden experience.** Like a skilled surgeon, Paul carefully carves a path through the accumulated layers of interpretation and finds beneath it all, the vibrant, beating heart of the gospel:

IF, BECAUSE OF THE ONE PERSON'S TRESPASS, DEATH EXERCISED DOMINION THROUGH THAT ONE, he writes, MUCH MORE SURELY WILL THOSE WHO RECEIVE THE ABUNDANCE OF GRACE AND THE FREE GIFT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS EXERCISE DOMINION IN LIFE THROUGH THE ONE MAN, JESUS CHRIST.

**The horsepower of Divine grace active in Jesus overtakes and overwhelms the lesser power of human sinfulness, says Paul.** And in a showdown between misdeeds of humans and the steadfast love of God, LOVE wins the race hands down going away!

**The third text before us this morning is the story of Jesus in the wilderness going toe to toe with the Tempter.**

**As chapter 4 of Matthew begins** Jesus enters a liminal zone between the anointing of his baptism and his years of ministry to come. After the words of affirmation: THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED, he is led "by the Spirit" into the desert to prepare himself before taking his ministry public.

The DESERT—it's a place that prophets and holy ones have always gone to hear the voice of God. A place of exposure; a place of testing; a place of extremes.

And what Jesus finds as he comes into this wilderness is that the Tempter is waiting for him. And the first thing out of the Tempter's mouth is "IF"— IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD, WHY NOT...

**When we're vulnerable, you see, Satan goes for the jugular, attacking our very sense of identity.** *"If you are really a child of God, why are you in such a mess?  
If you belong to God, why doesn't God rescue you? Take better care of you?"*

Satan's words seek to undercut the very thing we need most: trust in the God who created us in his image and who claims us as beloved daughters and sons in baptism.

Jesus' responses to the Tempter show us what holding fast to that baptismal covenant looks like: He steadfastly refuses to trade his relationship with God for temporary or convenient satisfaction.

**Lent is an invitation for us to go on a 40-day sojourn with Christ:**

- to enter that wilderness space with him by our side;
- to practice saying YES to God and NO to Satan;
- to take a long look at ourselves in the mirror;
- to recommit ourselves to the identity that became ours in baptism: BELOVED DAUGHTER, BELOVED SON.

**This journey with Jesus is no casual trip. There's too much at stake for that!**

There was a time when the mirror we held up during Lent had us looking primarily at individual habits, vices, and sins. This may have served the Christian community well for a time, but it had a weakness. By inviting me to focus my primary energy on getting my personal house in order, it allowed me to sidestep obligations to the larger, systemic challenges bedeviling the world.

**But the world cannot abide, cannot afford that kind of compartmentalizing any more.**

The global community in which we live requires us to trace the impacts of our decisions and choices globally as well as locally; to connect the dots from personal to communal to global all the way through to the end.

**The invitation our Creation Care Team is making this year is an example of that. We are being called into awareness of the ways plastic wraps itself around our everyday lives, and how plastic waste—from single-use bags to chemical-laden beverage containers to microbead cosmetic products—is impacting human, animal, and environmental health and posing increasing threats to the marine food chain around the globe.**

Can we all agree that there's something wrong with the scenario whereby 16 billion pounds of plastic waste ends up in our oceans each year?

In the world in which we now live the fruit that tempted Eve would be laced with polyethylene byproducts, begging the question of when our eyes will open to the negative impact our addiction to convenience is making in very real ways right now.

The conversation about plastics is directly related to our individual and collective carbon footprints as well, for the manufacturing processes behind the conventional forms of plastic we use originate with fossil fuels.

Add to these manufacturing processes the need to transport plastic products within and across borders, and the connection between plastic addiction and carbon-riven climate breakdown becomes even clearer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the link between fossil fuels and plastics, follow this link: <https://www.surfrider.org/coastal-blog/entry/the-link-between-fossil-fuels-single-use-plastics-and-climate-change>

Yet, despite a growing awareness that plastic waste poses real threats to the natural world, and with no real solution in sight, the U.S. plastics industry expects to invest \$50 billion in the next 10 years to expand plastic production facilities, tripling the amount of plastic exports by 2030!<sup>2</sup>

There was a time when the mirror we held up to ourselves during Lent had us focus on personal changes, but the growing threat that plastic and carbon pose to planetary health demonstrates the need to connect our inner souls with the outer world of our daily choices.

The emergence and spread of COVID-19—the new Corona virus—in recent weeks is hammering home the reality that we are more deeply connected with the world community than we have consciously acknowledged; and more deeply vulnerable to impacts that ripple their way through planetary-wide systems— environmental, medical, financial—which affect us all.

Jesus came to liberate us from all that stands between us and full participation in the kingdom values God calls us to live by. When we are baptized into Christ, his NO becomes our NO, and his YES becomes our YES. When we are baptized into Christ, the first vocation we received is renewed: tending the garden.

As we come to the Table of the Lord, let us come prepared to empty ourselves, turning over to him anything and everything that stands in the way of our saying YES to him, and to living faithfully and full of care in this world God so loves.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the link between fossil fuels and plastics, follow this link: <https://www.surfrider.org/coastal-blog/entry/the-link-between-fossil-fuels-single-use-plastics-and-climate-change>, where you can also read more about expansion plans laid out in the plastics industry's own publications: <https://plastics.americanchemistry.com/Education-Resources/Publications/The-Rising-Competitive-Advantage-of-US-Plastics.pdf>