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The First Sunday in Lent

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Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness by that same Spirit to spend forty days and nights alone – with only his thoughts, his hunger, with God and the Devil.

I wonder, can we imagine this wilderness? This is no comfortable place of refreshment and rest — rather it is a desolate and barren place of cliffs and wild beasts. There, Jesus will face hardship and temptation as the devil attempts to co-ops Jesus' power for his own use.

As the Devil casts his net of temptation upon Jesus, Jesus turns to God's Word. He is secure in his knowledge of Torah and sustained by the presence of the Spirit of God. Jesus takes to heart God's words of promise in Psalm 91, as translated by Nan Merrill: "because you cleave to Me in love, I will deliver you; I will protect you who call upon my name. When you call to me, I will answer you. I will be with you in times of trouble, I will rescue you and reverence your life."

As Jesus clings to the Divine, he is assured of protection, and his strength is renewed. For some, a God-and-me relationship like the one Jesus' shares with God is enough, and yet, we humans are created for community. In times of temptation and testing, we need God, and we need one another.

Most of us are familiar with the notion of temptation. While we tell ourselves that we are strong enough to resist it, the invitation to veer off course is ever present. There always seems to be someone, or something, eager to lead us astray, tempting us to relinquish that which is known & trusted for the possibility of something new, or better. For Jesus, this is the Devil. While our contemporary notion of the Devil is a red creature with horns and a tail seen on Halloween, we can't help but be aware of the presence of evil at work, even today, in our own world. There are powers and principalities that seem vested not in God's way of peace, but in wielding aggression and in the attainment of earthly power. It can feel like hope is lost.

In the movie, *The Lord of the Rings*, hobbits Frodo and Sam have set out on a perilous journey to Mordor where, in an attempt to save the world, they will cast the Ring into the fires. This gold ring that Frodo carries, while seemingly small and insignificant carries in it a threat to all the land. The temptation of the ring is great, turning man and creature alike, and many have succumbed to it.

Exhausted and weary, without hope, Frodo says to Sam, "I can't do this, Sam".

Sam responds saying:

I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?

But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. Because they were holding on to something.

What were they holding onto, Sam? Mr. Frodo asked.

That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.

There is good in this world, and it is worth fighting for. We witness this in Jesus' encounter with the Devil. Anchored in God, filled with the Spirit, Jesus resists the lure of the Devil and takes a stand for humanity. When it comes to protecting our souls, we need to follow Jesus' example. Although the temptations we face are not the same as those faced by Jesus, when we compare them, we may find that we have things in common. New Testament Bible Scholar, Amy-Jill Levine has reshaped them in a way we can better understand:

The first is the temptation of self-interest and expedience — when we put what we desire above others, and we seek the quick-fix or immediate gain, the temptation of power and glory, gained by false worship — when we put our alliance in or worship something other than God, out of a desire for control and power, or position; the temptation of invulnerability, self-importance and entitlement. — when we come to believe that we are invincible, that we can do anything; that we matter more than others or the most; or that we deserve what we have or want to have.

Small or large, we are plagued by temptation, by the people or things, or opportunities that draw us away from God. Fortunately, Jesus models what it is to trust in God's care and protection.

We come to worship each week with the expectation of being strengthened for our faith journey. Sometimes we may leave inspired by the Spirit, filled with food for the journey that will sustain us through the week. Sometimes though, we may struggle to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit abiding with us, as it did with Jesus in the wilderness. The pressures of the world and our in our lives can leave us feeling weighed down and alone, lost in the wild. And although we may not sense it, or feel it, the Holy Spirit is with us, in every moment and in every place. Jesus assures us that if we but trust in God and God's Word, God will protect us.

Certainly, learning to put our full trust in God takes practice, and can be challenging work. We may be bombarded by many temptations designed to offer us immediate relief and perceived freedom— invitations to self-soothe our pain away. In times of isolation, or loneliness; profound struggle, or even fear, we may grasp at anything that seems tangible and promising, anything that makes us feel better. What at first seems to help, sometimes becomes a slippery slope: A chance encounter may become an affair; an occasional habit may become an addiction, a decision we believed wise turns out to have been foolish. Our egos can get in the way, and we may go off course. Our connection with community may dwindle, and we may come to believe there is no way back.

My friends, don't believe the press, it's not true. With God's love for us, and with the support of community, there is always hope. None of us is beyond God's forgiveness or redemption.

Let us lean into the words of the Psalmist, which assure us of God's love, presence and protection. As we practice putting our trust in God, may we feel the Spirit guiding us. As we practice letting go of the things that pull us away from God and community, may we find in that space, restoration and renewal. Let us, together, commit to being a community that looks out for each other, that encourages one another when hope seems lost; that accompanies one another through the wilderness moments of our lives, that stands with one another in times of temptation.

Let us remember the stories of God's people, stories of people who stood strong in the face of temptation, who persevered and put their trust in God's abundant goodness and love. May we always trust in the one God who calls us into new life.