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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation Santa Rosa CA

22 February 2026

First Sunday of Lent

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

Psalms 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

I miss Advent. Just a few weeks ago, right. The star-speckled sky, that midnight blue wash over the horizon and the background of many a Christmas card—Giotto's chapel at Assisi. The silence, the uncomplicated mood, the platters of cookies, the elegant wreath with the candles, three purple and one pink, the warm fragrance of evergreen, *O Come, O Come*, the background awareness of that event for which we await. Yes, I miss Advent.

But the truth is, I need Lent. I need these forty days. I need the wilderness, the now opaque gray sky, the morning chill, the absence, the encounter, the unknowing, the grit. And I need the humility required to enter into this season. I need the honesty, the barrenness, the, yes, on occasion the ashamedness necessary to counter the arrogance, the presumption, the failure of vision, the refusal to act, the withholding, the slander, the forgetfulness, the

denial that inhabits our every day. Not because I, or we, are bad people. Quite the contrary. But this season is not about bad and good.

This season is bleak, not the bleak midwinter of Yuletide carol, but the bleakness of the desert, of Sinai, trekking a way—eventually—to the triumphant palm-strewn entrance to Jerusalem, the last supper, Jesus washing the feet of his friends, and then, so quickly, betrayal, Gethsemane, Golgotha, the darkness at noon, the hawthorn crown, the abuse, really, and a certain *cse la vie*—I have washed my hands of this mess.

In today's familiar and yet always newly fresh Gospel, Matthew paints a vivid picture of Jesus being led by the Spirit, ***being led by the Spirit***, into the wilderness, which in the Near East means desert, parched lands and sands, for forty days and forty nights, days and nights of fasting and prayer, in the Sinai, that desolate, unpopulated triangle just south of Judea. No man's land, except in our story, one man's. Oh, yes, along with the tempter, the diabolical presence that assaults the good and the real, then and now.

Jesus was no easy mark, the force of darkness knew. Having been ***led by the Spirit***, he trekked into the desert to be in the divine presence, to be still, to listen, to apprehend his grounding in the intimate source of All. To be his self. His very self.

With this utterly present man, a perfect time and place for the tempter. And how crafty and sly and attractive and compelling that

tempter is. Of this we have some very personal knowledge, don't we? The tempter does not waste its time on what does not appeal, as we know all too well. Nor does the tempter seduce the low-hanging fruit. No need.

The tempter offers the basics: power, riches and glory. But he dresses them up a bit and embellishes them with what he feels will be most appealing.

Want all your bodily needs and cravings met, BIG TIME? Then defy nature, Jesus, and use your miraculous power, stones into bread, and really, so much more, right?

Defy the laws of physics whenever, BIG TIME? Then throw yourself, Jesus, off the west porch of the temple down into the Kidron Valley and trust the angels will save you. They would, wouldn't they, right?

Or perhaps control. How about all the great kingdoms with all their splendors, all yours, Jesus, BIG TIME? It is so simple, just fall on your skin-cracked knees and worship me. Like I said, simple, right?

In the scriptures, Matthew has Jesus retorting with passages from Deuteronomy, emblematic of Torah, the covenant between God and humankind, each time the tempter tempts. All with the goal of breaking that covenant. Scattering the beloved community, an everlasting Babel, annihilating the soul.

Visually, this is the anti-Advent, if you will, the guilelessness of the Child in swaddling, snug in the cowbarn, in contrast to the barren landscape of abject human desire, of our nihilistic tendency to remain unconscious and, like the Israelites in the desert millennia earlier, creating a new god, one we *can* control, lacquered up with

luster of gold, even if the gold is but dross.

Simone Weil wisely knew that attention is the foundation of love, that understanding of human beings' inner workings that was and is deep in the heart of Jesus operating system. Jesus' encounters with human beings—and with diabolical energies—was marked by his attention and the recognition of our very selves in his mirroring eyes. He penetrated through the ego into the soul, an event from which one could run but never fully hide.

Receiving this attention is a transformative event, one we encounter as we move into the edges of our own deserts.

These three temptations of which Matthew writes, and their wasteland milieu, exemplify in what we face each day.

This past Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—we had this mark, this cross of ash, placed on our foreheads, and so we began this forty day fast, this holy trek whose destination, perhaps unwittingly to Jesus' followers, is Jerusalem, with all that Jerusalem means.

If we are in this church today, we have decided to engage this forty day fast, being present to the barrenness we may have created and the emptiness we may feel inside.

Me, you might say.? Yes, you, but you are not alone. Me, too, and your seatmate next to you. A friend reminded me recently that I was a sinner. As quick as I was to feign a slight umbrage, I also knew I had been seen, a Zacchaeus moment, that attention, the foundation of love. It at once chastened me and offered me hope, an escape from my inflated ego.

In an age of self-help, of the pervasive wellness culture, of hyper-individualism, of my clarity about the speck in your eye, of blinding privilege, understanding myself as a sinner is a pre-rec for receiving Jesus' love. Jesus is lavish with his love, but, too, clear-eyed.

I stand here today and you sit here this morning to accept the invitation to embrace the dark side of our beloved selves, that shadow self that prevents us from understanding and embracing just how dearly beloved we are, and how dearly beloved your seatmate is, and how dearly beloved our nemeses are, the one sitting in that other pew, you know, over there, or the one marking their ballot differently in the voting booth.

This is Lent. **We are being led by the Spirit** to a *kenosis*, an *emptying out*, to make room inside for what is to come.

It can be painful, rather, will be painful, to pull that plank out of our eyes.

The penultimate event of this trek is Jesus embracing his fate, his *amor faci*, his poignant and stupefying response to life, to real life, even as it required of him, death.

But to be Jesus' companions, his kin, we must become our full selves, become *real*, so we might be filled up, and be present, at any and all cost, to his presence inside us.

Lent is not self-flagellation nor self-recrimination nor compulsive denial of our true selves. It is not stewing in our guilt, God forbid. Lent is, rather, the fulfillment of Advent. It is the Incarnation near completion, the essential forty days of growing up, of embracing our

fate, our *amor faci*, the fate of being filled and fulfilled in Jesus, who is always focusing his attention on us.

Jesus is who we need, the exact brother, the exact Lord, the exact companion, the exact beloved, the exact witness, the exact and ever Son of Man who we can fully embrace and love, because he first fully embraced us, and fully embraces us yet.