

LENT 1

21/2/21

Caves Beach Uniting Church

CALL TO WORSHIP

We go with Jesus into the wilderness.

We feel the need to get away to reflect and to pray.

We stay with Jesus in the wilderness.

We sense the power of the Tempter calling us to the easy, self-serving ways.

We endure with Jesus in the wilderness,

aware of a Supportive Presence showing us a faithful way, a compassionate path.

We return with Jesus from the wilderness,

renewed in body, mind, and spirit, ready to be about God's work.

Opening Prayer journey: Lenten

Prepare us for our Lenten journey, O God;

give us the courage to venture into the challenging places of heart and spirit.

Come with us on our Lenten journey, O God;

strengthen us that we might learn and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Join us with others on our Lenten journey, O God;

in faithful solidarity, we will search out dark forces of oppression and defeat them with the light of Jesus Christ.

Be with us at the end of our Lenten journey, O God;

**that at the foot of the cross we might look up and understand
your wonderful love. Amen.**

HYMN 560 All my hope on God is founded

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3LCGh02Vew&t=8s>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Loving God,

to you we lift up our hearts and souls.

Your love is so complete

that we are awestruck and speechless.

Yet even without words,

in the presence of such a mystery

we are moved to thanksgiving.

You sustain and uphold the whole creation,

both its creator and redeemer,

the one whose love makes all things new,

whose steadfast presence is everywhere.

Today we rest in the assurance of your faithful love,

ready to be made new,

as we walk in your ways.

Most merciful God,

we do yearn for mercy,

though we often do not know what it is.

We call out to you for mercy

in the wildernesses of our lives –

yet far too often what we really want is escape.

We would rather not face the wilderness

learn from our mistakes and our frailty,

instead we run away

hoping to outmanoeuvre loss

and finding instead that we have not lived.

Help us to seek true mercy:

the compassion and kindness

which is present in the midst of suffering

and not in spite of it.

Help us also to offer this mercy

to those around us.

Those who would seek love

which is unafraid and all encompassing.

We know that true mercy is found when we are honest.

And so we come to you now, trusting in your love

as we declare our own faults, pain, and mistrust.

(time of silence)

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

Hear these words of assurance:

God indeed delights in mercy.

God indeed offers the path of love

for all to follow.

Know yourselves loved and forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **1 Peter 3:18-22**

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

- **Mark 1:9-15**

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

HYMN 591 Forty days and forty nights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5Nq4YXlcX8>

SERMON

In many parts of the world people gathered for a special service last Wednesday. It was Ash Wednesday and those who attended these ceremonies usually left with a daub of ash on their forehead. It marks the start of Lent. Some people traditionally fast for most of Lent, others try to give up a favourite food or a drink like coffee so they are making some symbolic personal sacrifice during this period of reflection.

Lent is traditionally 40 days. This number recalls a number of Biblical stories and symbolically picks up on 40 being recognised in ancient times as a high number or a long period of time. Perhaps the best known Biblical stories are the 40 years that the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt and today's passage telling of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness before he embarked on his public, world shattering, ministry.

The version of the 40 days in the desert that we have had read to us today from Mark's Gospel is like most of this Gospel, short and to the point with very few extra details provided. If we look at the same story from both Matthew and Luke we have far more details provided with the various temptations described in some detail. Here is Mark's version we simply have: "the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert and he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan." End of story.

By looking at this passage in the light of the rest of Mark's Gospel we can gather some clues about the nature of this time of testing for Jesus. If we look for the word which we translate from the Greek as 'testing' or 'tempting' it comes up three more times in this Gospel. In each case it is used in response to the challenges of the highly religious Pharisees when they try to catch him out with trick questions. In these situations Mark says that they are putting Jesus to the test or as Jesus puts it: "Why are you trying to put me to the test?"

It is interesting to reflect here that Jesus challenging of the demonic seems to come about mostly in religious places. Satan with the temptations in the desert and those religious leaders are all trying to throw Jesus off track. We can consequently surmise that the temptations were to try and put Jesus off his intended course in ministry and therefore not fulfil the purpose for which he came. Was he focused and strong enough for the task ahead?

Taking into account the fuller details in both Matthew and Luke along with the connotations of the wording in Mark's Gospel we can see that these temptations are subtle. There is no blatant challenge to do something evil, rather they are trying to divert Jesus to vary his direction by trying to get him to do things another way. Here we see the old problems with the

phrase 'the ends justifying the means' without regards to the consequences.

Jesus constantly asserts that for him this is not the case. The objective is quite clear and when you start to divert from it and embrace suspicious diversions, no matter how subtle, things quickly go off the track.

As we enter the season of Lent we are invited to allow ourselves to be drawn into a time of self-reflection. We are challenged to face our own demons, our weaknesses, and our temptations. To do this successfully we need to follow in Jesus' footsteps and refuse to compromise with lame justifications for our failings.

Lent is a time when we make the effort to take stock of our lives in order to identify those things that constantly de-rail our good intentions. As we reflect we can recognise their power over our lives and therefore remove their impact on our behaviour and attitudes.

Jesus was a charismatic leader with a massive job ahead of him and the main temptation would have been whether to utilise his gifts and power in order to attract attention, eliminate his enemies and impose his will on the world.

For us it is a bit different. Everyone has different tensions in their lives which try to divert us from our goals. The challenge for us is to face up to our temptations boldly.

If we look further at this passage we see that it was the Holy Spirit which took Jesus into the desert for the time of testing. This was necessary for Jesus to prove to himself that he had the fundamental strength and gifts to embark on the journey which was ahead of him. This intentional self-understanding also lies there for us to take up as we seek to enter the journey which is Lent. It is up to us to set out our objectives in accordance with our overall goals as we recognise where we are most likely to be vulnerable and therefore try to deceive ourselves with self-destructive patterns and compromises leading to hostility and fear in the way we deal with the world.

The whole purpose of this reflective endeavour is to confront all those things which hold us back from being all that God created us to be. The aim is not so much to emerge from the wilderness knowing that we have the ability to easily overcome whatever is put in our way but more importantly to recognise that even in our broken state we can still achieve our goals.

In this passage we can see that Jesus emerged from this journey in the desert to begin his public ministry in Galilee sharing the news that God was present and interested in each and every person. People were invited to join with Him and turn their lives around. There was no longer any need to delay their commitment for want of a better time, the time is now!

If we are honest with ourselves then we know that we have spent a lot of our time in the wilderness facing our demons. We have also seen the support of God's people and the potential that comes from God's kingdom giving gracious forgiveness, love and abundant acceptance.

When we refer to this as a kingdom we also recognise that there is a King. In earthly terms this title might be associated with tribal style conflict and repression whereas we know that we are giving our attention to a God who supports all of us. What Jesus was sharing in Galilee was about giving priority to a personal connection with God before all other influences.

This kingdom is not so much a physical place as a culture. I think that it helps to understand this idea when we recognise that some immigrants maintain their own cultural practices even here in Australia. They stand out because they don't do everything the same way as we do. With this concept in mind we are called to live as aliens by maintaining our connection with the culture that Jesus introduced us to.

This calls us to reject those in our society who want us to accept the ways of vengeance and self interest. We are a people of grace and humility. While some people live in fear and become defensive and aggressive when challenged we need to be loving, welcoming and inclusive.

A lot of people around us try to invoke an image of an angry demanding and vengeful God to justify their campaigns against those who are perceived as a threat to their lifestyle. We are called to be a people who bear witness to the unfailing love and mercy and self-giving of God, and to bear that witness by living it out ourselves in lives of freedom and mercy and love.

The Gospel is the good news which comes to us through Jesus' teachings. God is not some two-faced monster, now loving, now vengeful. Even when the floods of destruction threaten to engulf the world, God provides a way of escape and invites all to get aboard. No one is left behind unless they defiantly refuse to get aboard.

This period of 40 days is for us to prepare and to examine ourselves and prepare to celebrate the Easter miracle in new and growing ways. We are, after all, God's ambassadors to the world.

Jesus is here to walk the road with us again, and to give us the courage to face whatever we have to face and to overcome our fears using his strength, so that we might emerge renewed and inspired and with a steely resolve to walk the road with him all the way to the cross and the deep waters of death and on beyond into the promised land of love and mercy and grace.

HYMN 590 What a friend we have in Jesus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SCorW9r_Is

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Loving God,
take what we offer
and the fullness of our lives
that your will and way
is made plain in the world.
Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious God,
trusting in your love and care,
we bring before you the concerns of our hearts and minds this day.
We pray for our world:
for honesty in politics
compassion in communities
healing for those who are suffering
and hope for those who are oppressed.
We pray for our nation:

for Indigenous peoples
for farmers and industry
for those who are homeless
for people who feel lost.

We pray for our community:

for the sick and the dying
for those seeking new work
for children and parents.

In all things, O God, move us to be your hands and feet in the world
that our lives and our prayers dance together and are one.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 411 Filled with the Spirit's power

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyBNuAeqaM4>

BENEDICTION

We are a people always on the way,
always moving along God's paths
of loving kindness and hope.

Go knowing that you are surrounded
by the love of God,
the peace of Christ,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oqiFenpWxY>