

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in Simi Valley**  
**First Sunday In Lent - February 29, 2004**

**Anne G. Cohen**

**Luke 4:1-13**

**For Our Reflection:**

Lent is a time to take the time

to let the power of our faith story take hold of us,  
a time to let the events

get up and walk around in us,  
a time to intensify

our living unto Christ,  
a time to hover over

the thoughts of our hearts,  
a time to place our feet in the streets of Jerusalem  
or to walk along the sea and listen to his word,

a time to touch his robe  
and feel the healing surge through us,  
a time to ponder and a time to wonder.

Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God!

- Ann Weems, Kneeling in Jerusalem p.22

**28-40-18**

40. Numbers in the Bible usually signify something. They are not to be taken literally. They are symbolic. 40 is a large, unspecified number. 40 days is a long time. 40 years is a very long time. A 40 year old person is old and at 140 that person is very old. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness - a long time - a transitional time - a time in which he gained a sense of clarity and purpose.

So the number 40 brought to mind the number 28. In the modern medical world most recovery programs are 28 days. Alcohol, drugs, disorders of a variety of sorts usually take a 28 day period to restabilize the human body and get the person in recovery to a brain chemistry receptive to talk therapy. And if everyone is lucky, 28 days is a prelude to a whole new life.

Which brought to mind the number 18 - which, in Hebrew, is the letter CHAI - which is a word meaning LIFE. And there you have the whole rationale for the sermon title. As for the text itself, that's a different chain of ideas - relating to what actually happens to us when we go through a period of transition - of healing and gaining clarity - readying ourselves for a whole new life.

So let me begin again. Jesus went on a 40 day retreat into the

wilderness. It was not really a sabbatical, but certainly a nice, long vacation. He took his Torah or scripture with him - and he took his psalter, his hymnal - if not under his arm or in his suitcase, then in his head where he seemed to have stored a great deal of his tradition.

As he traveled out into the wilderness, he cleansed his mind - emptying himself of all the noise and stress and confusion of living with and around people. He fasted, cleansing his body of all the foods he had consumed without much thought to the effect of his intake on his physical and mental well-being. "You are what you eat - but there are ways to undo some of the damage."

He climbed up onto rock formations and bluffs to get a better view of God's creation and the spaces around him, watching the sun set in orange and pink across the landscape. He lay awake under the stars each night, picking out constellations and watching the universe turn over him like a cosmic blanket - until he fell asleep.

At the end of those 40 days Jesus was in a mental state that led him to deal with some of his life issues. His spirit needed as much cleansing as his body - from all of those things which blocked him from being in right relationship with his Creator God.

He began to talk to himself. His internal conversation became externalized - played out on the high and low places of this wild and lonely place to which he had retreated. He began to wrestle with the tempter, his shadow side, the part of his own psyche that led him away from where his conscience was persuading him that he ought to go.

The text tells me that Jesus wrestled with three basic questions.

**Question Number One:** Jesus was tempted, by his physical hunger and emotional emptiness, to take control of his environment and create what he needed in order to fill the emptiness, to satiate his desires. He was tempted to ignore his relationship with God - at least temporarily, until he was finished getting what he wanted, until he was comfortable with his situation. If he could turn the stones into bread - then he might have the time and energy to think about God.

Quite often I become totally absorbed in creating my own life, pursuing medical solutions to problems, collecting resources, improving relationships, fixing things at home, getting my work done, putting food on the table, washing dishes, seeing all the friends and movies I have time for - neglecting utterly the one relationship that would make all of those tasks easier - and some of those tasks unnecessary.

To cast light across the shadow of this temptation, Jesus turned to his psalter and sang to himself from Psalm 91 - verses 11-12:

One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes  
from the mouth of God.

As he sang to himself, over and over, like a lullaby, his hunger was quieted and his desires were subdued - as Jesus sang softly in the early evening - as the last color left the sky and the stars began to show themselves.

This question of "neglect" is a good one to explore during Lent - these 40 ritual days of retreat and rehabilitation in the Christian tradition:

In what ways am I neglecting God in my life  
and how can I find my way back into the fullness of that  
relationship?

**Question Number Two:** Jesus was tempted, perhaps by his desire to be acknowledged and admired - perhaps by some deeper power and control issues - he was tempted to compete with God.

I know that I am often tempted to believe that I can accomplish what God seems unwilling to do. Sometimes I try to control other people and manipulate relationships and situations to fit my desires or to gain respect, affection - even adoration. Sometimes I try to fix people and things that are beyond healing or repair - forgetting that sometimes all that is necessary is a humble, comforting ministry of presence. I sometimes find it hard to forgive myself for things that I have done that I deeply regret - punishing myself for years for things God has forgiven long ago- essentially making myself bigger than God in my own mind.

Jesus, too, it seems, was tempted to do the same thing - competing with God for power over his life and his world. He turned to scripture, still humming Psalm 91 to himself. His Torah fell open to Deuteronomy 6 and his eye fell on verse 13:

Worship the Lord your God and serve only God.  
Worship the Lord your God and serve only God.

Here was a mantra, something Jesus could sing to himself in the mornings as the sun rose over the horizon, as he got ready for the day ahead. As he sang to himself, he felt himself to be adequate to, in proportion to the tasks of the day. He felt more balanced, truly in right

relationship with almighty God.

This question of "competition" is an excellent vehicle for self discovery during Lent:

In what ways am I competing with God  
and how can I stop, let go, and allow God to be God...  
and allow myself to be human?

**Question Number Three:** Jesus was tempted, perhaps by his special relationship with God as a member of the "chosen people" or as "God's child with whom God is well pleased" - or maybe just tempted by feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty or dissatisfaction with his life so far - but Jesus was tempted to test God.

He was tempted to take some serious - and unnecessary risks - leaping from high places, for instance - to see if God would really protect him - as the scriptures said. I know this temptation too. It's like praying for angels to surround one's children - but allowing those children to break the basic rules of safety - and expecting God to keep them from all harm anyway. It's like praying for God to make one immortal - just this once - as one speeds recklessly down the highway, late for a meeting. It's like expecting God to answer my prayers the way I want them answered - Let me win the lottery (even if I don't play it) - Let me find a job, the perfect job, today - Let me have children, even if I am forty-nine years old (which is a heck of a lot younger than Sarah, I remind you) - Let me be totally at peace with myself NOW - this instant!

How often have I prayed for such things - and waited for God to come through on God's half of the bargain. When we are children, we all test our parents and teachers and authority figures - wondering who we can trust, wondering where the boundaries are, wondering how much we will be given and how much we have to do for ourselves.

Testing God is not a foreign idea. And as Jesus wrestled with this familiar part of himself out in the desert, his Torah was still open to Deuteronomy 6 and he saw verse 16 and read it aloud to his inner child:

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.  
Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Here was another mantra he could repeat to himself each night as he fell asleep, calming his insecurities, teaching himself not to bargain with the details when it's the whole relationship that matters; teaching himself to rely on the strength of his Maker, the presence of God in

every moment, in every breath of life.

The question of "testing" is yet another path to explore during Lent:

In what ways am I testing God in my life

and how can I learn, instead, to rely on God - to trust in God?

Jesus met his three shadow tempters head on... his neglect of God, his competition with God, his testing of God. And by the end of his retreat, he had come to some kind of resolve about each of them. He felt empowered and filled with spiritual wholeness; his inner darkness was touched and healed by the light of holy presence.

And on the last evening of his retreat to the wilderness, Jesus walked across the desert, back toward his home in Nazareth. He walked, singing under his breath, a new sense of mission and purpose in his heart and in his gait.

May this season of Lent be one of meaning and renewed purpose for each of us. May it be a time of healing and increasing clarity, a time to renew and repair our relationship with the One Who Made Us. And as we draw near to Easter morning, may God find us singing in the wilderness as we find our way home under a pale moon and the slowly turning stars.

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### **Pastoral Prayer**

Almighty God of all time and space, You created the universe and all that lives within it's cosmic boundaries. You are larger than any one imagination. You reside within the smallest particle of matter. You are power and spirit, breath and goodness, knowledge and forgiveness, judgment and affirmation.

In the intensity and stress of our daily lives, we are often overwhelmed by our needs and desires. We quickly become absorbed in the tasks of feeding and clothing, tending and protecting ourselves and our loved ones. We pursue comfort and fulfillment - to the exclusion of tending and pursuing our relationship with You.

Help us to cease in our endless activity, set aside those things that cause us to neglect you. Bring us back into the fullness of relationship with You, in ways that will lighten our burdens and remove unnecessary weight from our shoulders.

In our need to be loved and our desire to somehow be in control of our destiny, we often find ourselves competing with You.

As we gaze up into the stars, show us exactly how big and how

small we really are. Give us the courage to acknowledge our humanness in the presence of Your holiness. Give us a sense of proportion, the knowledge that we are adequate to the task of living our own lives - holding only the power of persuasion - releasing control of our world into Your loving hands.

In our arrogance, out of our regret and uncertainty, we are often tempted to put you to the test - neglecting our own responsibilities, pushing the boundaries of endurance and love and natural law. Help us to stop bargaining our lives away. Guide us into full reliance on Your power and presence; help us to trust that, however the details turn out, our lives have meaning and are significant in Your eyes - because of our relationship with You.

With the understanding that the Universe resides in Your loving care, we lift the names of our loved ones for your special and healing attention:

....and all those who care for those who are sick or injured,  
giving of themselves until they are in need of care themselves.  
Keep these and all of us safe in Your arms and comforted by Your presence.

In humble recognition that You and You alone are God, we ask these things in the name of Christ Jesus who wandered this wilderness before us and showed us the way home to You. Amen.

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### **Bulletin**

#### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison)

Going through Lent is a listening.

When we listen to the word, we hear where we are so blatantly unliving

If we listen to the word, and hallow it into our lives,

we hear how we can so abundantly live again.

+ Opening Hymn                      God of this Great Creation    CSB # 52

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

O God, we pray this day:

for all who have a song they cannot sing,

for all who have a burden they cannot bear,

for all who live in chains they cannot break,  
for all who wander homeless and cannot return,  
for those who are sick and for those who tend them.  
for those who wait for loved ones and wait in vain,  
for those who live in hunger  
    and for those who will not share their bread,  
for those who are misunderstood  
    and for those who misunderstand,  
for those who are captives and for those who are captors,  
for those whose words of love are locked within their hearts  
    and for those who yearn to hear those words.  
Have mercy upon these, O God.  
Have mercy upon us all.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)  
Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One:       My soul waits in silence.  
All:  God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.  
Silent Reflection  
The Assurance of Good News (unison)  
    God's mercy is deep and wide. Thanks be to God.  
Sung Response  "Hallelujah. God be praised!"  (CSB #5 Refrain)

### **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Moment

Conversation with Our Children  Grandpa's Hammer  (Habitat for Humanity)

+ Hymn From Our Lenten Tradition  Forty Days and Forty Nights  
Hymnal # 205

Reading from the Christian Gospels  Luke 4:1-13

Sermon  28-40-18

## **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God

Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory Come Sunday Duke Ellington

Bob Erickson, vocal

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

Freely have we received of gifts that minister to our needs of body and spirit. Gladly we bring to God, and to our church and its wide concerns, a portion of this bounty. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn Lord Dismiss Us With Your Blessing Hymnal # 77

+ Commissioning (unison)

God of power,  
may the boldness of your Spirit transform us,  
may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,  
may the gifts of your Spirit  
equip us to serve and worship you  
now and always,  
in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle) Hymnal #433 v.3

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

+ Postlude

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## **WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is by Ann Weems, Kneeling in Jerusalem p.36

Opening Prayer Ibid. p.44

Prayer of Dedication is by Arthur Foote II, Singing the Living Tradition #673 (adapted)

Commissioning is adapted from: In Spirit and In Truth: A Worship Book for the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly 1991 (p.29, #53)