

## First Sunday of Lent

### First Sunday of Lent – 21 February 2021

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Marjory McPherson, Edinburgh Presbytery Clerk, for her thoughts on the first Sunday of Lent.

“We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.”

*National Worship Team*

As the restrictions on our ability to meet in groups continue, worship leaders continue to deliver their services both online and offline.

We can help to facilitate participation from the whole congregation by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technology in the service in ways that suit both physical gatherings and video-conference style settings, such as:

- Opening and closing moments of worship that help people mark out a time set apart with God
- Introducing various parts of the worship service to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each one (framing)
- Enabling conversations or prayers in breakout groups
- Holding spaces that allow people to go deeper in worship
- Using the chat function and microphone settings to allow people to actively participate in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship

#### Useful links:

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

Useful tips for creating and leading worship online can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

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## Introduction

Are we really all in this together? If the past year has taught us anything it might be that context is everything. The Lenten journey is one that takes us through different types of landscape; different backdrops and scenes in which are set critical, decisive moments in the life of the Son of God, and by extension the world of faith. Barren wildernesses give way to the dirt roads, the towns and villages along the way, mountains and valleys, and ultimately a city, a hill, and a garden. Lent has become, in the life of the Church, an intentionally rough terrain; a place of self-sacrifice or denial in which the sweet and fat things we enjoy become scarce. Arguably, our Lenten journey began a year ago, in March 2020, and we have not managed to find the way out of it yet.

However, the particulars of the experience have depended on the nature of our work or lack of it, our living in remote or crowded territory, our lockdown in a high rise or surrounded by a welcome garden, the ability to have or to hoard more than the essentials of life, and of course our health and experience of loss. Are we really all in this together? What is the landscape of life, of soul, in which we find ourselves today? How does the landscape of the Lenten journey speak to our own lives?

In terms of landscape, the readings for this first Sunday in Lent demand that we look both up and down: at the sky above and at the earth beneath. Rainbows of promise above, and rivers, floods or drought below, remind us of the power of water in daily life and religious symbolism, while the solid earth might be scrubland, hill or road where the story of salvation is played out.

Year on year I find myself returning each Lent to the novel *Quarantine* by Jim Crace. It's a more poignant read this year, reminding us of times apart from loved ones and from daily life in order to protect others from harm. Crace sets the whole salvation narrative in the desert where many find their way to spend 40 days in quarantine, longing to do a penance that will release them from whatever ails them. In this shadow land we encounter the devil in the shape of a trader exploiting those who will give in to temptation, and we also find an elusive Galilean putting his trust in God. The landscape is a powerful backdrop to the actions of and the outcomes for the characters.

In navigating these texts then a focus is not just on the words and events but the wider context of earth, water – and sky, and the ways in which creation narratives weave their way into the other passages and Gospel story, colouring and shaping what we see and hear as we look for faith on the journey.

## Genesis 9:8-17

Throughout the land in the past year rainbows have appeared everywhere, from coloured stones, to painted pictures in windows of homes and shops. They have been offered as a sign of hope that all will not be lost and healing will come. They have been associated with gratitude for the work and self-sacrifice of NHS staff and other key workers during the pandemic. The rainbow was already being seen as a sign of inclusion and welcome, forming an arc over people regardless of sexuality or race as well as finding a place as a symbol of change or of peace across different religions and peoples.

In Genesis it is a sign of the covenant between God and all the earth, every living creature of all flesh; that the waters shall not again destroy. The rainbow is set in the sky after the flood, not as a sign for humanity but as a reminder for God, in order that when God sees it God will remember not to let the flood water destroy life again. So it is not primarily a reminder for us, but rather a sign that reassures us that God remembers us, remembers that even though we will go wrong, that the waters will not again overwhelm the earth for God can see the rainbow. Perhaps then it is all the more poignant that in times of suffering and disease we paint rainbows on windows, stones and pavements as a prayer, or as a reminder to God that all living creatures are not to be lost to the world but remembered. This is the promise of God on which we rely whenever the heavens open and the waters rise.

Creation narratives explain the existence of the firmament that holds the waters above and keeps them from the waters below in a domelike barrier. Once the firmament is punctured chaos ensues, but now God has promised to maintain the structure and keep life safe.

The landscape here is a land that has been flooded and is beginning to dry out and see the sun. The landscape includes the sky, the firmament that separates the sky from the seas and land and even though this has been breached it is mended now and all flesh will not be destroyed. In the arc of the rainbow is a bold and colourful reminder to God of that relationship to all living things, to all flesh in all its myriad forms and it will not be flooded out of existence. There will be echoes of this in the baptism of Jesus, being enveloped by the water but rising out of it, to signs and symbols of hope and belonging, as the beloved Son is remembered by God.

## Psalms 25:1-10

Though a deeply personal psalm, calling on God to remember and to show mercy, it is a psalm that speaks to all souls who have known trouble, been beset by enemies and felt lost.

This personal outpouring is a common and shared experience such that the psalm becomes part of the cult of the covenant festival. The psalm offers a view, not so much of the outside world, but of the landscape of the soul that experiences pain and difficulty, even at times a sense of abandonment, yet which longs wholeheartedly for God. Waiting for God to draw near, for God to be felt and discovered is in the cry of the faithful who wish only to be remembered by God. If God can remember the people, the worshipper who cries out day and night, then a new path opens up. And this path is one of faithful following. Here are found truth, honesty, humility, steadfast love and faithfulness – and of course salvation. Salvation comes when God remembers us and pieces back together the fragmented aspects of our lives and broken relationships. Dependent on the covenant, relying always on the promises God has made, the soul can find peace and hope can be restored.

### 1 Peter 3:18-22

A letter written to a people suffering persecution is overlaid with allusions to the creation stories, to the time of Noah and the flood, to the role of angels and the central place of baptism as a sign of salvation. A few verses bring the riches of the stories of beginning in which, for example, in Genesis 6 we find that the Sons of God are consorting with the daughters of men who in turn give birth to warriors. God's patience is being tried in these times and it appears that more and more people act in destructive and sinful ways until God decides to destroy all flesh. Yet not all, for a few humans will be saved, Noah and his family, and the potential for each living creature to reproduce after the flood is also held out to all who enter the Ark. Those who did not respond to God in the time of Noah, whether angels or humans, have their spirits visited in prison by Christ. The writer links the flood and being saved in the Ark to the baptism they have received. Despite all the trouble of the time, though they feel overwhelmed under dark clouds and as if the waters are rising to drown them, they will instead be saved. For Christ has come through the waters into new life and they too will experience this new life.

The persecution of the time could have caused many to despair and lose faith but Peter writes to reassure them. In effect this is nothing new; many have felt themselves to be lost and at sea but the water of baptism is a water that leads to life – and as Jesus has gone through it, so too will they. Although human agencies are powerful, our trust is that God is over and above the corrupt systems we see on Earth. Christ is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to Him.

In our time we see people persecuted for their faith, whatever that faith may be. Even now concentration camps exist to re-educate those who seek to follow in the steps their faith has taught them. In the depths of such suffering is a message that Christ walks with us.

Whether in prison, surrounded by walls that hold us in or seek to crush our spirit, Christ who was put to death is alive in the Spirit.

In this text heaven and earth come close, with connections made from the stories of beginning until the time of writing to show the interweaving of the ancient and the now, as all that seems separated and apart is drawn together in the eternal saving work of Christ – who dies in the flesh and rises in the Spirit. This interwoven world is the landscape and backdrop of their suffering and in its threads is found hope of new life.

### Mark 1:9-15

From Nazareth in Galilee, to the banks of the Jordan, to the desert and back to Galilee in a few short verses, Mark sets out who Jesus is and the task He has come to fulfil: He grows up in an uncherished town; is baptised in a river alongside many others seeking renewal who were willing to come from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside; His temptation takes place in a barren landscape; and His preaching is back in the familiar territory of Galilee. In a few short verses Mark covers some essential ground and reprises some of the words and images we have already found in our other readings for today.

We acknowledge that the baptism of Jesus can be problematic as John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The closest analogy to this baptism is the baptism of proselytes who adopted Judaism, thus signifying a new life. It could also be seen as a sign of belonging with others, sharing in the life of those around and forging a bond with them, much as in baptism today we welcome people into membership of the Church.

Coming out of the water it is Jesus, rather than the crowd, who sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove. Again perhaps it is only Jesus who hears the words that He is the Beloved. Baptism acts as symbol of death and resurrection and here encapsulates a new beginning and the path to come. Though the reading includes the baptism of Jesus and we are referred back to the water and salvation, the focus in Lent is on the move into the wilderness and beyond.

The temptation in the wilderness receives scant treatment in Mark. There is no great sense of Jesus' battle with Satan or a struggle to use His power for good and for God. The role of the wild beasts is not clear, whether forming part of the struggle or a reversal of the creation stories and a restoration of the relationships of peace in paradise. However, angels wait upon Him, so despite the harshness of the landscape He is not alone. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness echoes the 40 years spent by the Israelites in the desert, the 40 days of rain in the time of Noah, and the 40 days Moses spent on Sinai. It is in the end a significant

period of time, after which He went to Galilee and proclaimed good news. Through flood waters, through baptism, through the tribulations of the desert and suffering in its myriad forms, salvation comes through the life and rising of Jesus, as God in Him remembers the promises and rescues the living creatures of earth.

## Prayers

### Approach to God/Call to worship from Psalm 25

Leader: To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

**All: O my God, in You I trust.**

Leader: Make me to know Your ways, O Lord.

**All: Teach me Your paths.**

Leader: Lead me in Your paths and teach me.

**All: For You are the God of my salvation;  
for You I wait all day long.**

## Thanksgiving

God, creator of every landscape  
who shapes on the earth gardens lush and green  
who hollows out of rock the desert scrubland  
who sets the seas in their mighty depths  
who sends the ice to carve out mountains –  
You we worship  
for mystery and wonder have captured the eyes of our souls.

God, creator of life above and below  
who sends rain to water the field  
who placed sun and moon in their heights to lighten the world  
who cast from the earth creatures that breathe the air  
who in the sea birthed myriad forms of life –  
You we worship  
for our senses are stirred to see and touch the works of Your hand.

God, creator of love and relationship  
who lights the cloud with the rainbow's arc  
who promises after the rain a day washed new  
who promised the great of our faith the presence of god

who is near us now to speak in cloud and sunshine –  
You we worship  
for still You reach out in loving friendship.

God, creator of all that is  
who promises seedtime and harvest  
who wishes to shower us with good gifts  
who walks with us the harsh, stony roads  
who rejoices with us in times of gladness –  
You we worship  
for the promise fulfilled that God is love and loves us all.

### **Confession**

As we enter these Lenten days  
and look to fall into step behind Jesus,  
entering with Him the wilderness  
where battles are lost and won  
faith tested and futures found

We confess we are not ready  
we are not strong  
to face and to find  
all that might be revealed

We are not pure in heart and mind  
our feet may stumble and be unsure –  
we carry too many burdens  
of guilt long gathered  
wounds often cherished  
a past mulled over  
wrongs not righted –  
and pray for You to meet us  
at the edge of the desert  
and lighten our load

Take the heavy packs off our backs  
and simply forgive  
what has been  
what has not been achieved



all the good we failed to do

That we may travel lightly with You  
our eyes set on the Galilean going ahead of us  
clearing a path  
promising that for us rain will fall in the desert  
and after the storm a rainbow will light the heavens  
and we will be made new  
through Christ our Lord.

### **Intercession**

Where angels fear to tread  
comes Christ to walk

Feet firmly planted in the earth  
that whatever lies beneath  
there may be found a way through  
and a route onwards to life,  
shaped not just by earth  
but by the heavens above

We pray You walk by the rivers  
those that overflow and those that run dry

Where the course of life  
has taken strange turns  
and the landscape shifted out of recognition

Where ancient routes are turned to silt  
and there is little left to refresh us

We pray You walk in the wilderness  
where makeshift homes are uprooted  
by powers that act without justice

That those who scratch a living  
might discover wells of water

Wherever the stones hurt our feet  
wash the dirt clean from under us

We pray You walk in the city  
amidst all the wealth  
that hides the poverty

Reshaping the history that built us up  
yet breaks us down

Anonymous, untouched, many wander  
longing to connect in human touch

We pray You walk  
tireless and strong  
to all that awaits You

For unless You go  
we cannot follow  
and as You walk, remember us  
that we be bound in love  
to You and all humankind

**Blessing/Closing prayer – CH4 574 spoken or sung**

Leader: Even though the rain hides the stars

**All: Even though the mist swirls the hills**

Leader: Even when the dark clouds veil the sky

**All: God is by my side**

Leader: Even when the sun shall fall in sleep

**All: Even when at dawn the sky shall weep**

Leader: Even in the night when storms shall rise

**All: God is by my side**

**God is by my side**

## Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of **Spill the Beans** and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

We believe in telling story. This material is simply the **retelling of our faith stories**. It always starts with the story each week. Then each activity is simply a way to engage the story and enable children and adults to embed the story, capturing different aspects of it, highlighting different images that help us hold the story in our beings.

But we believe these faith stories ought to be able to **mingle with our own life stories**, our day-to-day experiences. So as activities are engaged, it is important to ask people to retell the faith story along with their own story of that week. It's the tangle of life stories with faith stories that perhaps make both real.

## Through the Season of Lent

### Sacred Space

You can offer a simple image each week that people take from the worship space and use more reflectively at home or in house-groups, building up a small collage of Lenten images that help them journey through the season during their own devotions. The objects are simple pointers that enable people to pause and think about the journey they are taking during the season and can be used in various ways:

- as a reflective object that links them back to the words from the previous week
- as an object to touch and hold as they pray
- as a focal point for house-groups or devotions for church meetings that continually bring the whole community back to the Lenten journey
- put in a special place or windowsill or mantelpiece where the collection will grow during Lent
- placed on a coffee table at home or other appropriate space throughout the season, growing as the season goes on: objects then can be played with or left in a particular shape such as a circle or cross or line that provoke questions from visitors

- carried in the pocket each week so they are constant reminders of the journey between Sundays of Lent

The objects are given to the congregation in various ways depending on the size and culture of your own congregation. Think carefully about this in your own setting.

**Theme:** *Prayer and Practice*

**Object:** A pebble or stone to represent the wilderness.

### **Bible Notes – [Mark 1:9-15](#)**

#### **Tested to breaking point**

“I want to get away from it all!!” It is a cry that many know well. Even if the sentiment is not verbally expressed, no doubt most have had the feeling of needing a break from the pressures of daily living in order to find some peace, clarity and a renewed sense of purpose for life.

While a monastic life is certainly not for all, there seems over the last few decades to have been a re-awakening of the importance of retreat and taking time out to pray, to be quiet and to rest within some parts of the Christian community, and even from those outwith a particular faith community.

The focus here is the time Jesus spent in the wilderness after the identification he was given with the descent of the dove-like Spirit as God’s beloved Son. There is a strong contrast between the lush life-giving water of the Jordan river and the parched scrubland of the wilderness area into which Jesus travelled following his baptism.

The time that Jesus spends in the wilderness is usually referred to as the ‘temptation’ of Jesus, and we can all relate to feelings of temptation. But it is probably better to think about this more as a time of ‘testing’ than temptation. In other words, whereas temptations can sneak up on us when we are not expecting it, when we are being tested we know exactly what we are getting into. This would certainly be the case for Jesus. He knew what he was doing when he walked away from the crowds along the banks of the Jordan into the wilderness. He was going to test himself.

How many of us deliberately place ourselves into positions where we know we will be tested? Some of us relish that challenge, but many of us would rather find the path of least resistance, the easy way.

Mark's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness is characteristically short and to the point, much more spare than the corresponding accounts in Matthew and Luke. We read that Jesus was in the desert for 40 days, a number with long Scriptural relevance: Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai with the Lord, for instance. We also read that Jesus was tested by Satan. It is such a short phrase in the passage, but behind these few words of Mark lies an understanding that Jesus fought a colossal battle against the power that brings evil and darkness into the world. Jesus comes through this testing, but it sets the scene for the continual struggle that Jesus will face against the powerful during his ministry.

We also hear that angels attended Jesus. Whether that was during the time of testing or after it, we don't know, but that Jesus was not alone is notable.

Leith Fisher in *'Will you follow me?'* (Scottish Christian Press, 2003) writes that it is notable that Jesus goes into the empty place for this testing. No distractions, smartphones, Facebook, newspapers, TV or radio. Do we cling to these because they help us to block out and avoid times of quiet and stillness when we might be tested? Jesus actively seeks out that space in which he knows he will be tested.

We like to know that goods we purchase are tested to breaking point, it reassures us to see the car we drive has been crash-tested to ensure it survives, and perhaps we too are reassured that Jesus has been tested to breaking point.

From that testing, Jesus wastes no time and gets straight to work preaching the gospel. And yet, as the gospel progresses, we see that time away in prayer is always an important part of Jesus ministry.

### **Retelling for young people**

*The 'wondering' questions are inspired by the Godly Play method of exploring stories. They are so phrased to invite and encourage interaction, but not to demand an 'answer', especially not a single 'right answer'. There is much to be gained from simply wondering together, adults and children sharing thoughts on an equal footing, using our imaginations to delve into Jesus' experiences and our own.*

Here's a story about something Jesus really wanted to do. It was when he grew up, but before he was famous. It was before he made any sick people better, before he told any amazing stories, before he did any miracles, before lots of people got to know him.

Jesus wanted to go away by himself for a while. He wanted to be alone. I wonder why he wanted to be alone? I wonder where he could go to be alone? He decided to go for a long

walk out into the desert. I wonder what it was like to be in the desert? I wonder what Jesus did while he was alone there?

When lots of people got to know Jesus and he became quite famous for his stories and his miracles, I wonder if he still liked to get away by himself and be alone sometimes? I wonder what's good about us being by ourselves sometimes too?

## **Activities**

### **Gathering**

Talk to folks around you. How easy do you find it to be alone? Share a time when you have found it easy to be alone and a time when you have found it difficult.

### **De-Alleluia**

As a symbolic expression of the beginning of the season of the Lent, you could have ribbons of differently coloured paper or florists ribbon ready with pens (different colours if possible) to share out with the congregation so that each person a separate ribbon or paper strip.

Ask everyone to write 'Alleluia' on the ribbon and to decorate it joyfully and brightly. Then gather all the 'alleluias' in and store them away in a box at the front of the worship space, or ask people worshipping from home to put them in a safe place, where they will remain until Easter Sunday.

### **Reflection**

We put the alleluias away  
and clear out the fridge  
as symbols of the de-cluttering  
that we desire  
in our lives.

For the call to repentance  
comes to us today  
to be embraced not as a once for all,  
but as a discipline to be repeated  
time and again.

In high seasons and in low,  
in busyness and in quiet,  
finding wilderness spaces  
allows us to turn again  
to the God whom we lost  
in all the distractions that life presents:  
the God who looks into our eyes,  
tells us we are beloved children  
and then reveals a work  
that only we can do.

God calls us to trek through the wilderness  
in preparation  
for striding through life  
focused on God's mission.

## **Prayers**

### **Call to Prayer** – *Based on Psalm 25*

In you, Lord God,  
we put our trust.

When we are tested,  
it is to you we turn.

When we are tempted,  
it is in you we find strength to resist.

When we are lonely,  
it is to you we come for consolation.

Show us your ways, Lord God,  
and teach us your paths.

Guide us in your truth,  
for in you we find hope, mercy and love.

## **Sending**

Go, beloved children,  
to find your wilderness place  
amidst the chaos of life.  
Find God present there  
revealing the purpose of your life  
and, in loving service,  
know the blessing of God  
today and always.

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## **Musical suggestions**

Our online music resource is on the Church of Scotland website [here](#): you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for liturgical seasons and themes on the *Inspire Me* tab.

- Come with me for the journey is long – African traditional arr. Wild Goose Publications – A song to begin the Lenten journey  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCB6uGFYYzk>

### **Baptism and salvation**

- CH4 21 – “Lord, teach me all your ways” (Psalm 25) – Calling on God to remember God’s love and in that love to remember the Psalmist.
- CH4 43 – “O God, you are my God alone” – A psalm of longing and waiting for God
- CH4 148 – “The spacious firmament on high” – A hymn of creation emphasising God’s care in shaping all that is.
- CH4 172 – “Sing for God’s glory that colours the dawn of creation” – With many references to the creation narratives in the readings this hymn fits that theme



- CH4 191 – “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you”
- CH4 228 – “God, who made the earth, declared it good in the beginning” – References the rainbow, the promise of seedtime and harvest and Christ our salvation.
- CH4 334 – “On Jordan’s bank the Baptist cry”
- CH4 335 – “Out of the flowing river”

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