

First Sunday in Lent – Year A

First Sunday in Lent – 26 February 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Phill Mellstrom, Worship Development Worker, Faith Action Team, for their thoughts on the first Sunday in Lent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website: <https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

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.

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Introduction

The readings for this first Sunday of Lent get us thinking about sin and temptation.

The story of how Adam and Eve turned away from God invites us to consider how, with our eyes opened to the knowledge of sin, we view ourselves and others. The psalm helps us to voice our repentance and appeal to the goodness of God. The New Testament reading reminds us that we are saved through the obedience of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel widens our view on this as we see how Jesus went to the desert to fast and pray for 40 days and resisted temptation.

In writing this material I tried to be as compassionate as possible regarding the story of Genesis, trying to be careful in how we might view our 'goodness' as human beings. As the readings go on, there was ample opportunity (as with the Psalms *Selah* moments), to stop and consider how I was orientated either away from God's love, or towards or in tune with God's love. As Lent begins I am often drawn to consider not only how my rhythm fits within wider rhythms of family, community and creation. I was also challenged to consider how my sin and sinful choices fit within this wider framework without being tempted to focus on structural injustices and so on while at the same time ignoring that my eyes have been opened to sin within my own life. The prayers and exams for Lent are intended to reflect this tension.

[Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#)

There is something important to note about the story in Genesis, from the beginning and not just Chapter 3. The story so far has been that Creation was good and then, with the addition of the two human beings, Creation became very good. This intrinsic value and very goodness is how we should view our humanity. We are very good at our core, valuable, beautiful and loved by God.

It is also important to hear the story of the perfect companion made from the rib. This is not a story about Eve being less than or inferior to Adam, but rather, this speaks of closeness and connectedness. These human beings in relationship are very good.

It is interesting that the stories told to the humans, by God and by the snake, are ambiguous in terms of truth. What does this tension do to our reading of this text, and ultimately to our hearing and deeper understanding of the stories told for us throughout the scriptures?

With the eating of the fruit comes the knowledge of their circumstance. The circumstance remains, that they are naked, but their seeing and knowing of their circumstance has changed. What follows from the resulting conversation and attempt to hide from God is a curse (not of the human beings, but rather of the serpent and the ground), but this is not part of our reading. So, we are left to wait in this space of opened eyes, of feeling naked, and of waiting to see what might become of this new knowing, and of the decision to put trust in somewhere else other than God.

Perhaps it is in this waiting that we begin to sense the call to listen fully, to try and understand more deeply our circumstances, the temptations that lie there, and to confess.

While the call is ultimately for us to repent, how often do we make this entirely about ourselves? The drama in this story is set in the midst of relationship, so what might the coming journey through Lent look like as it is lived out in our relationships and our communities?

[Psalm 32](#)

Talking about sin, and acknowledging sin (v5) is difficult. How do we hold in tension that we are 'very good', yet we know that we make choices which are not? How do we understand that our own sin and the sin of the systems in which we live and move both need to be acknowledged/confessed; and in both, there is need for repentance? And how do we do this without condemning humanity with a harmful negative narrative, while recognising that focusing only on the wider injustice or evil, abdicating any responsibility, is not the full picture?

We are reminded in verse 3 of the withering effect of holding back and not speaking out against the wider sin of injustice and oppression and denying the effect of unconfessed sin upon our mind, body and soul. This psalm is not just pointing to the personal side of repentance and forgiveness, but through the course of the psalm the writer points outward to the community of faith – in verse 6 the invitation is made for all to come and live faithfully, showing that the whole community may be part of the rhythm of confession, repentance and forgiveness. Psalm 32 is not particularly long, yet there are moments of *Selah*. What might this pausing, stilling, and waiting say to us about our Lenten rhythm?

Psalm 32 – Responsive reading:

Leader: Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Blessed are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as
by the heat of summer.

**All: We acknowledged our sin to You,
and do not hide our iniquity;
we confess our transgressions to You, O LORD,
forgive our sin.**

Leader: We faithfully offer prayer to You;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
You preserve me from trouble;
You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must
be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.
Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

**All: We are glad in the LORD and rejoice,
O righteous, we shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

Romans 5:12-19

It feels too simplistic to land on the idea that sin and death came into existence through the turning of Adam from God. That one man is responsible and that we are cast forever in that mould, does not explore the depth of separation from our source that happens when we 'sin' and make decisions that serve only ourselves. It is important to understand that our actions have consequences and that death – of dreams, ideas, initiatives and so on – is a reality, and will impact not just upon ourselves, but our neighbour, our communities and the rest of Creation. It is important to see and recognise fully the interconnectedness of sin and death and its ramifications. It is in this context that we acknowledge the healing work of Christ upon all Creation – of which we are part – and begin to sense the fullness of the new creation, a new reality, begun in Christ, and the repairing of relationship between God and Creation. The relationship though is not just repaired; what we see here is God's abundance. Christ did so much more in bringing life than Adam did in apparently bringing death. And there is yet more, not only are we to experience the grace of God and

forgiveness from sin, but we are to live freely and fully and to strive to make decisions that orientate us towards loving God and our neighbour and working towards righteousness.

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Led by the Spirit, Jesus goes into the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of testing, of preparing, of equipping, of waiting and of trusting. For Jesus, being the Son of God means accepting His humanity and depending on God for daily bread. When Jesus is tempted – to turn stones to bread and amass more than is needed, or to abuse a position of power in commanding the Angels to wait upon Him, or to bow to a corrupt power for personal gain – this highlights ways in which we can recognise that our way living and gaining of life/satisfaction etc., should not be to the detriment of others.

These tests in the wilderness are preparation for the choices Jesus makes later, as He lives out a ministry of service to others, and of healing. What happens in the wild does not stay there. We can see how it shapes the journey of Jesus' ministry, but how might it manifest itself in the reality of our own context and throughout the coming journey of Lent?

Sermon ideas

How do we respond when we are faced with temptation? It isn't always an obvious choice between good and bad, it is the grey areas that we can often find difficult. In the experience we read in the gospel, Jesus is able to discern what is happening and where the right path, or right response is to each of the temptations. Richard Rohr reflects, "Most people's daily ethical choices are not between total good and total evil, but between various shades of good, a partial good that is wrongly perceived as an absolute good (because of the self as the central reference point), or even evil that disguises itself as good. These are what get us into trouble."

There are different ways that we see temptation laid out in the gospel story, with something of this grey area of choice being the reality of our lives. Perhaps we can choose to reflect on how the journey through this period of Lent will involve choices every day, that can lead us into temptation, or if not deliver us from an obvious evil – at best allow us to choose a better way of living and being – that will ultimately help in the work of establishing God's community of love here on earth as in heaven.

What happens when we are tempted to limit God's word? In what ways do we reduce the impact and implications of scripture by reading it to our advantage? In what ways do our

habits or practices limit how we might hear and respond to the 'Word'? How might our understanding of what God's word is, be opened up and expanded?

What happens when our identity is challenged? Perhaps we are tempted to deny our real identity because of our surroundings or who we are with? Perhaps we are faced with choices that can either dignify or diminish another's identity? Maybe we face the temptation to see our identity as more important than another's, either personally or in view of culture or ethnicity?

What happens when we are tempted to use power for our own gain? What might the choices be for us that reflect Jesus being asked to bow down – how might we choose to side with the powerful to the detriment of others, whether close to home, or through the support of a system or practice that is not in tune with God's way of love?

How are we, in our day to day living, tempted to find life and meaning in destructive places and practices? What might this mean for our rhythm throughout Lent? We need to shape our habits of prayer and action to reflect a journey of self-examination in light of the hope or redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. We need to do this in the knowledge that our personal sin is bound up in relationships and systems, in which our choices promote or hinder the love of God being made real to our neighbour and all of Creation.

Prayers

Call to worship

Leader: We come to worship God,
We come, bringing our stories, our lives,
and our whole selves

All: All are welcome

Leader: We come with our faith and our doubts,
With our hopes and our fears.

All: All are welcome

Leader: We come as we are,
Invited by God who will never turn us away.

All: All are welcome

Prayer of confession

God of Mercy,
we confess that we have sinned against You
in our thinking
in our speaking
in our action an inaction word, and deed.
We have not loved ourselves, our neighbours or You
with our whole heart and mind and strength.
In Your mercy forgive what we have been,
and redirect what we shall be,
so that we may live fully in Your will
and walk humbly in Your ways,
to the glory of Your holy name.
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of absolution

From the Book of Common Order, p459

Almighty and merciful God,
you are more ready to hear than we to pray,
and you give more
than either we desire or deserve.
Pour down upon us
the abundance of your mercy.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God,
You love all that You have made
and forgive the sins of all those who look to You.
Create in us a pure heart,
that we may receive mercy from You,
as we lament all that we have done
that has diminished Your love in the world.

Forgive us through Jesus Christ the perfect one,
who is alive and reigns with You,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one Perfect Community of Love,
now and always. Amen

Prayer for Lent

From the Book of Common Order, p434. This may be said by two voices, a. and b.

a. Lord Jesus Christ,
you refused to turn stones into bread.

b. Save us from using our power,
however little,
to satisfy the demands of selfishness
in the face of the greater needs of others.

a. Lord Jesus Christ,
you refused to leap from the temple top.

b. Save us from displaying our skills,
however modest,
to win instant popularity
in the face of nobler calls on our abilities.

a. Lord Jesus Christ,
you refused to bend the knee to a false god.

b. Save us from offering our devotion,
however weak,
to cheap or easy religion
in the face of the harder path
on which you bid us follow you.

a. Saviour of the World,
you saw Satan masquerading as an angel of light
and shunned him.

b. Give us wisdom
to discern behind each subtle temptation
the ploy of the prince of darkness;
and in the face of all that is hellishly attractive,
help us to choose the will of God.

Amen

Prayers of intercession

A spoken response may be said, or a period of stillness might be kept, or a short song sung in response.

Tender God,
Your love is unconditional.
Wider, deeper and truer than we can ever fully know.
For those of us who find it hard to accept ourselves,
hear our prayer.

Response

[Hold a moment of stillness, or sing a Kyrie, or invite a spoken response such as

Leader: Lord in Your mercy,

*All: **Hear our prayer**]*

Compassionate God,
for those of us who feel stretched and tired
and whose lives are strained and stressed,
hear our prayer.

[Response]

Merciful God,
for those of us holding onto life by our fingertips,
or whose grip upon life is fragile,
hear our prayer.

[Response]

Healing God,
for those of us whose illness makes us vulnerable,
or leaves us isolated,
hear our prayer.

[Response]

Loving God,
For those of us whose journey is chaotic or find ourselves in turmoil,
hear our prayer.

[Response]

Caring God,
For those of us whose calling is to journey with and care for others,
hear our prayer.

[Response]

Eternal God,
in Your infinite mercy
hear our prayers.
Amen

Prayer of sending

God, send us out into Your world
to be a people who choose Your way of love.
Whether we go into a garden or wilderness
we go with You.

May we discern what will help and what will harm,
empowered to nurture and not neglect.
Help us to live as Your people
choosing to turn toward love each and every day.
Amen

Prayer for Ukraine

A year on from the start of the war in Ukraine, Christian Aid is inviting us all to join in an act of witness to pray for Ukraine on Sunday 26 February, for an end to the conflict and for all those affected by the terrible impact of war. The prayer below has been written by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church for use with your church community. This and further downloadable prayer resources can be found on the Christian Aid website <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/pray/prayer-ukraine>

Almighty and Great God,
Accept our gratitude for your boundless mercy towards us. Hear the supplication of our afflicted hearts for the land and people of Ukraine, as they confront foreign aggression and invasion. Open the eyes of those who have been overtaken by a spirit of deception and violence, that they be horrified by their works. Grant victory over the powers of evil that

have arisen and bless Ukraine with your gifts of liberty, peace, tranquility, and good fortune.

We implore you, O Merciful God, look with grace upon those who courageously defend their land. Remember the mothers and fathers, the innocent children, widows and orphans, the disabled and helpless, those seeking shelter and refuge, who reach out to you and to their fellow human beings looking for mercy and compassion. Bless the hearts of those who have already shown great generosity and solidarity, and those who prepare to receive their Ukrainian brothers and sisters in Ukraine's greatest time of need. Bring us together as your children, your creation, and instil in us your strength, wisdom and understanding. May you be praised and glorified, now and forever, and to the ages of ages.

Amen

Alternative Material

Examen – finding a rhythm through Lent for you, your community and the world

As we journey through Lent you are invited to consider what rhythm of prayer and reflective living may be helpful to you. Will you choose to fast from something, or choose to begin some form of practice? How will your journey through Lent allow you to consider the bigger picture of faith, and how will it play out in your relationships, within the context of community and how will your Lenten journey imprint upon Creation?

At the beginning of the day you may find it helpful to pray to God to raise your awareness of God's presence with you throughout the day.

This prayer by St. Anselm of Canterbury may be helpful:

O my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You,
where and how to find You.
You are my God and You are my all and I have never seen You.
You have made me and remade me,
You have bestowed on me all the good things I possess,
still I do not know You.
I have not yet done that for which I was made.
Teach me to seek You.
I cannot seek You unless You teach me
or find You unless You show Yourself to me.
Let me seek You in my desire,
let me desire You in my seeking.

Let me find You by loving You,
let me love You when I find You.
Amen

At the end of your day, you might use the practice of the daily examen to consider where you were aware of God's presence, and how you lived.

Take a moment to settle into the space that you have chosen, or find yourself in.
As you sit, take time to notice your breathing.

As you breathe, notice the noises and movement around you, how you are feeling within and without.

Let these things fade so they are not at the front of your mind.

Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you as you open up your heart and mind to hear God and to be attentive (use whatever words feel right for you).

Look back

Think back over the most recent part of your Lenten journey – perhaps the past day, or the past week.

Notice moments of presence and absence. Give thanks to God for these moments, and try to see how God was present in that time with you.

Now take a few moments to reflect on these questions.

- How did I meet God today?
- How did someone else meet God through me today?
- How did I experience God's love today?
- How did I express God's love today?
- What might God be saying to me now?

It may be helpful to finish your time by saying the Lord's prayer.

Further material can be found on the Sanctuary First website for the journey through Lent and for worship gatherings: https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/themes/article_new/the-third-day-lent-march-23

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; 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 this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- A suggested playlist of [songs for the Season of Lent](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

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

- CH4 171 – “Take up the song, and sing the praise of God”
- CH4 226 – “God, whose form is all creation”
- CH4 228 – “God, who made the earth, declared it good in the beginning”
- CH4 239 – “When your Father made the world, before that world was old”
- CH4 243 – “Touch the earth lightly”
- CH4 378 – “Praise to the Holiest in the height”

Psalms 32

- CH4 461 – “How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds”
- CH4 490 – “Jesus, lover of my soul”
- CH4 554 – “Rock of Ages, cleft for me”
- Psalm 32 (Steven Faux, The Psalms Project Volume 1)
<https://soundcloud.com/steven-faux/the-psalms-project-psalm-32>
<https://youtu.be/ufRUJehh6fU>

Romans 5:12-19

- CH4 177 – “O God of blessings, all praise to you!”
- CH4 228 – “God, who made the earth”
- CH4 348 – “Praise the one who breaks the darkness”
- CH4 378 – “Praise to the Holiest in the height”
- CH4 461 – “How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds”

Matthew 4:1-11

- CH4 338 – “Jesus, tempted in the desert”
- CH4 354 – “O Love, how deep, how broad, how high!”
- CH4 629 – “Mark how the Lamb of God, self-offering”
- CH4 641 – “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 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](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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