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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
First Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2022
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Ps. 91:1-2, 9-16;
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

I heard three stories this week that keep rolling around in my head and in my prayers. The first story was from one of my favorite podcasts that I listen to while I walk, “Everything Happens” with Kate Bowler. Kate is a professor of Christian History at Duke Divinity School who has a young child, but at age 35, she was inexplicably diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer and knows her years are limited.

This week she interviewed Liz Tichenor (tich-ner), an Episcopal priest in California. In one year, Liz’s mother died by suicide, she became a deacon and then a priest, and her infant son died. Liz and Kate both talked about what it was like to live in what feels like an extended Lent, to feel some days like you are at the end of your rope with few knots to hold on to.

The second story was from my Ukrainian neighbor. It’s a story similar to others’ you have probably heard or seen or read this past week: some of her family members back in Ukraine are splitting up—women and children fleeing for safety, men staying back to fight. The apartment building my neighbor used to live in was bombed this week, and people died. Throughout Ukraine right now, there’s a tragic sense of people feeling at the end of *their* rope.

The third story I heard this week was our gospel story. Of course, I have heard this story many times, from both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, but for some reason I heard it anew

this time, perhaps due to what’s happening in Ukraine. In this gospel, Jesus is at the end of his rope—famished, vulnerable, and alone. He is at his lowest point when the devil comes to tempt him: If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread; worship me, and all the kingdoms of the world will be yours; throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple if you are the Son of God so angels will bear you up.

In all three of these stories—of Kate and Liz, of my Ukrainian neighbor, of Jesus—there are feelings of emptiness, grief, vulnerability, and pain. You can almost see, and hear, and touch the wilderness of Lent in their stories.

Perhaps those feelings are familiar to you. Perhaps you also know what the wilderness of Lent looks, and feels, and sounds like.

If you have lost a parent or a child or a partner, you know what the wilderness of Lent is like. If you have lost a job or been in a financial mess, you know what the wilderness of Lent is like. If your reputation, or your marriage, or your dreams have been ruined, you know what the wilderness of Lent is like.

In the podcast I listened to this week I was surprised to hear how much Kate and Liz said they loved Lent; how much they loved Ash Wednesday, a day, they said, “when the church tells us that we are dust, that we are all on the losing team.” The reason they love Lent is because in Lent the whole church marches together through the valley of the shadow of death, and for Kate and Liz it’s a comfort that everyone else is doing it to, so that they don’t feel so alone.

When Jesus was walking through the valley of the shadow of death, he didn’t have a community walking with him, but what he did have was scripture. And he had it memorized. Every time the devil tempted him, Jesus replied, “it is written, it is written, it is written” and then quoted a verse from the Hebrew scriptures. It’s

what got him through every temptation, and it's what finally drove the devil away "until a more opportune time."

I hope we can learn from what Kate and Liz said about the liturgical season of Lent and what Jesus knew about scripture. For when we find ourselves in an extended Lent—when we too are walking through the valley of the shadow of death—our community, the liturgical calendar, and the words of scripture can hold us, and comfort us, and bring us hope.

I experienced that myself this week. Each Sunday night my family has a family meeting, mostly to figure out schedules and who's cooking and who's doing dishes each day, but we usually open with an activity and a devotion. Last Sunday night Ukraine was on my mind and heart, and I turned to Psalm 27 for the devotion because I had remembered the first two lines of the psalm:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

Now I only remembered the first two lines, but it was when I turned to and read the whole Psalm that it was so clear the connection with Ukraine—here are the next two verses:

² When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

I didn't need to know the whole psalm to find comfort in it, I just needed to know where to look. If you have ever asked me to come pray with you before surgery or when you were hospitalized, I'm certain I've read to you the psalm that we heard today—Psalm 91.

Because I have memorized some parts of Psalm 91, I know it's a psalm that brings peace.

I want to challenge and encourage you to do two things this Lent: go deep into this liturgical season and memorize scripture. Journey with your faith community through Lent where it is ok to be sad, it's ok to grieve, it's ok to talk about death. And then learn passages of scripture that will remind you when you are in despair that God has been and will always be faithful to you. Memorize verses from Psalm 91 that's printed in your bulletin or read through the Gospel of Luke and highlight the verses that give you hope. Just like the writer of Deuteronomy did in our first reading today, remember what God has done in the past, trusting that God will do the same for you in the future.

As we pray for Ukraine, as we journey with Jesus this Lent, know that God is with you and with our siblings on the other side of the world. For when we walk through the wilderness, just like she did with Jesus, the Spirit will lead us. Amen.