



First Sunday in Lent
18 February 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

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 upon him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^[a] 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, tested 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^[b] of^[c] God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[d] repent, and believe in the good news.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. When the community of Ascension moved into this sanctuary in 1993, the dream was built and shared of a space that could be rearranged for multiple purposes. Everything in this space except for the organ and the ten pews bolted into the floor, was meant to move, and shape to the needs of the ministry. The congregation grew and shaped itself around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For all the worship appointments crafted and dedicated to the glory of God, there was one thing that did not move from the original sanctuary. Anybody remember what it was?

I did not even notice myself until I had started my call at Ascension. After just six months, my predecessor announced he was going on sabbatical. Though I wanted to be both confident and unafraid, looking out at faces that still had no names and struggling to figure out how to be pastor in a place I was still navigating each day, was a challenge. In those days, we created sermon series that tied together several weeks at a time. And I realized that the best place for me to lead from was the place that grounded me. Worship, meaning, hospitality. It is where I am anchored. So, the first week I was by myself, I reintroduced the eternal light into the sanctuary. After all, at some point, my predecessor would retire, and I would be wholly responsible for the worship life and faith nurturing of this community of faith. I may not have noticed the absence of the eternal light when I began my call at Ascension, but I quickly came to appreciate the constancy of the eternal light every morning I entered this building and every night when I left. It turns out that when my predecessor returned from sabbatical, he was surprised about the re-introduction of the eternal light, and to his credit, he allowed it to stay in the sanctuary through his last two years of ministry. When I originally brought the eternal light into the sanctuary, it sat on the credence table in front of the pulpit. Not unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, the eternal light moved from place to place for a time. Later, the eternal light would find a permanent home under the cross. So that you would still be able to see the eternal light regardless of where you sat in the sanctuary. At least that is the hope.

Today, as is always the case for our brother Mark, we get a lot of information and activity, in a few short verses. Last week, we stood on the mountaintop talking about rice pudding unapologetically. I received a text from a member who told me that their child was asked to brainstorm a topic for school: the brainstorming included: my mom sings there, a place where they tell stories about rice pudding, communion, stories about God and Jesus, and a place we say prayers. I could not be happier that this young person remembered the arroz con leche of last Sunday on the mountaintop. But today, we are at the river Jordan for a baptism, God speaks, and then Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days to be tested by Satan, and then angels waited on Jesus, and then John the Baptist was arrested, and Jesus begins his public ministry with the words, “The Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Take a deep breath, that is a lot in only seven verses. We rearranged the sanctuary for the season of Lent. I usually let the Holy Spirit lead in the reshaping of the space, but I also ask Pastor Tony about his opinions. Sometimes Pastor Tony has an opinion, most of the time Pastor Tony does not...or at least not an opinion he wants to share. My guess is that most of the time, Pastor Tony would prefer I leave the sanctuary the way it is. But where is the fun in leaving things the way they are? But, it was Pastor Tony who helped me to understand what the Holy Spirit was doing in these first days of Lent. When everything was relocated, I asked Pastor Tony to come in and take a look and make sure I had covered all our concerns: number of seats, spacing between rows, visibility of the altar and pulpit, etc. He walked in and



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looked around and said, “I like that that kneelers are shaped in front of the altar in a way that looks like God’s hands are holding all of us.” Honestly, I had not even thought of the kneelers in that way, but I responded with, “yeah, that’s what I was going for.” I think Pastor Tony knew better. But he was right – the kneelers did begin to offer that feeling. I then asked him to let me know about banners. In or out? The starkness of Lent or the wild colors of the wilderness. I usually lean to stark, empty, sanctuary stripped of all extras so that we focus on the cross. Pastor Tony reminded me that, even in Lent, there is joy – or at least we should be looking for joy and not simply the suffering of the cross. So, the banners stayed this year. We can either climb down into the pit of despair and self-loathing for the season of Lent or we can appreciate the wildness of the wilderness we might find ourselves exploring. “Tell me, what is your plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” The words of poet Mary Oliver. Words I had not remembered until Pastor Tony quoted her on Ash Wednesday.

Last year, a member of the church in early nineties showed up at noon on Ash Wednesday in the beginning of the ice storm. I asked her what she had possessed her to drive to church. She said, “Pastor Chris, this will be my last Ash Wednesday worship service.” A bold statement and I wondered if she had a direct line with God unknown to her pastor. I was struck by her boldness of belief, and I wondered if she might be right as I placed a cross of ash on her forehead. A year later, this past Wednesday, my 94-year-old friend showed up again for Ash Wednesday. After worship, I walked up to her and said, “do you remember what you told me last year?” She said, “yes, and if you talk about in a sermon, I will blacken both of your eyes.” Well, she must catch me first, so if you see me running get out of the way. But what I love is that God, apparently, is not finished with her yet. Truth be told, if you are sitting here this morning, God is not finished with any of us and our one wild and precious life. Pastor Tony, in his Ash Wednesday sermon, told us he had had enough ashes in his life and was not really interested in adding more in the season of Lent. I get it. Ashes are dangerous things. They can remind us of what we have lost. Ashes can also remind us of what remains after the fire.

Jesus leaves the waters of baptism and the comfort of his father’s voice for the contest and argument in the wilderness with Satan. Forty days of hunger, the temptation of privilege, and the divine power begging to be drawn upon to scatter Satan to the four winds are all powerful voices swirling around Jesus. When Satan has failed and left Jesus for another opportune time, Jesus sits among the ashes of his existence: hungry, thirsty, exhausted, weak. From the ashes, God sends angels to wait on Jesus. Why should we expect anything less from our God after trials and troubles and trust in the God who calls us by name? What will Jesus do with his one wild and precious life after the ashes have been swept away? Jesus begins again.

The good news begins. The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. The longer I serve as pastor at Ascension, the deeper the relationships grow with you, the more hesitant I am to place ashes on your foreheads each year. The first time I placed a cross in ash on the forehead of each of my children, it tore me up. God would never allow this miracle to return to dust. Yet, the ash on their forehead – the ash on my thumb told me different. To everything a season. Yes, but! It is no different to wash the ash off my thumb after reminding each of you that you are dust and to dust you shall return. The good news, my friends, is that your one wild and precious life is yours until it is not. Every breath is yours to breathe. Every word is yours to speak. Every kindness is yours to offer. What will you do with your one wild and precious life? Before the ashes speak to us of loss. While we wrestle with ourselves in the ash-stained moments of our lives. After the ashes have blown away. There is a reminder, that stands always, the light of God that never goes out.

What will you do with your one wild and precious life? Jesus begins again. And so can you. Each day is yours until God calls you home. Dear friends, what will you do today? What do the waters of baptism call you to do today? What do your days in the wilderness inspire you to do today? People of God, what does God’s gift, of this new day, offer to your one wild and precious life? The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of heaven



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has come near. Today, let your one wild and precious life, be the good news for someone else. By your presence, let them know the kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.