



First Sunday in Lent
22 February 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.
Amen.

I did something I never get to do last Wednesday. I sat in the back of the church while Pastor Tony was preaching. Pastor Tony preached this crazy good sermon where he spoke of the ash on our foreheads being an invitation to life. Honestly, all I have ever heard on Ash Wednesday – and I am pretty sure all I have ever preached on Ash Wednesday is death. As in...time is precious...tomorrow is not promised...you get the idea. So, I am sitting in the back of the church, Pastor Tony is preaching one of the best Ash Wednesday sermons I have ever heard and he starts talking about the wilderness. Only he never mentioned the word “wilderness.” Instead, Pastor Tony said this, “What if we let the ashes with which we’ve been marked today be less about our ending and more about a new beginning? Less about where we’ve been and more about where we are going. Less about who we’ve been and more about who we are becoming.”

I had already began preparing my sermon for today. I knew Jesus was heading into the wilderness – the desert. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.” And as I was listening to Pastor Tony and reflecting on where Jesus was going today – I looked over the heads of members sitting in front of me to focus on Pastor Tony at the pulpit. Until I realized I was listening to Pastor Tony talk about the wilderness moments in our lives - where we have been, where we are going, and I found myself reflecting on the wilderness stories of the people sitting in worship – where they had been – and I wondered where they might be going. Two people sat in front of me, literally next to each other, and I was betting that they did not take the time to greet each other before worship. No worries – it was Ash Wednesday after all. But I thought about their wilderness stories – stories of shock and pain and torn edges in their lives. Wilderness moments that were as different as the timelines and events of their stories and still both were living this life in a new way – both sent into the wilderness without their permission. In one wilderness, the loss of a child – I sat with the family in the Emergency Department, where disbelief, shock, and shattered pieces of life covered the floor mixed with our tears. In another wilderness, a family deals with the disappointment, vitriol, and painful actions of other family members who are angry at their decision to worship in this church – far away from the rules and rigid edges of a more conservative Lutheran denomination. In both cases, the entrance into the wilderness might be some time ago – and still, even when the wilderness, seems to have been tamed or a new path has been found – still, there are lingering twinges of memory and frustration – as they navigate the wilderness.

Yes, Jesus knows the pain and struggle of the wilderness. The wrestling, the doubting, the hunger for clarity, and the prayer to be delivered from the confusion, the uncertainty, the pain of what the wilderness would offer to us. And yet, here we are. In the wilderness – with Jesus today. On other days – we will feel completely alone. Even though we are not. Pastor Tony quoted poet Mary Oliver. I changed just a few words. “When it’s over, I want to say: in the wilderness, I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking on the wilderness. When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder if I made of my time in the wilderness, something particular, and real. I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don’t want to end up simply having visited this wilderness.” It seems I borrowed from everyone to enter into the wilderness today.

From our catholic friends, with some Lutheran seasoning. If you are looking at the next forty days and thinking, “I don’t know if I have anything left...” You’re not alone. Some of us aren’t starting



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Lent from strength. We're starting from exhaustion. For some of us, the desert did not start today. It started with the quiet ache you can't name. With a constant anxiety. With trying to hold everything together. And now we're walking into Lent. It can feel like more. Lent is not God adding weight to your shoulders. It is the church making space for what is already true. That you are finite. That you are not in control. That you need mercy. The wilderness is not where God proves your weakness. It is where God reminds you that you were never meant to carry everything alone. Lent teaches us to fast – to make space by laying something down. Maybe your fast is from self-contempt. From taking responsibility for outcomes you cannot control. From believing holiness means pushing past your limits. What if this Lent you refused to speak to yourself in a way Jesus never would. If you are spiritually dry: Maybe it's okay to do less – but do it with more honesty, with more faithfulness, with you whole heart. The goal of Lent is not intensity. It is intimacy. Lent calls us out of ourselves, but you cannot pour from a soul that refuses to be tended. What if this Lent, you began with mercy towards yourself, not as indulgence but as truth. You, too, are poor before God. You, too, depend on God's grace. The world feels urgent. As if everything is on fire. Lent reminds us of something steady. Jesus has already entered the suffering. Jesus has already carried the weight. Jesus has already overcome death. You are invited to share in God's word, God's promise to you – that you are loved; that you are forgiven; that there is hope. If you begin Lent tired, begin anyway. Begin honestly. Begin without punishing yourself. The desert is not where you prove your strength. It is where you learn you are loved even in your weakness.

And from a faithful young woman up north. My friends, I bless you in the complicated space of these days, caught between beginnings and endings, where the dust settles on your forehead, reminding you of your mortality and the promise that you are loved all at once. May you journey through this season with hands capable of holding the grief and the grace that surrounds us. May you allow the ashes at the beginning of your journey to mark you as a reminder of the strength found in vulnerability, the beauty found in surrender, the death that doesn't get the last word, and the truth that all things end except the everlasting One.

May you be given the strength to release what no longer serves you, the lies that weigh you down, the distractions that pull you away from your purpose and calling, the illusions of control. Set it down, cast it off, shake it loose. You're being set free now, even though it may feel like loss before it feels like freedom.

We bless your hunger and your anger, your longings and your hopes, your fasting and your feasting. May you embrace the courage to enter this wilderness with God, to sit in the silence, to hear the voice of Love calling us to more - more honesty, more humility, more resolve, more patience, more long-suffering, more joy, more love. May you remember that you are dust, yes, but that dust is holy, crafted by the hands of the Creator, held in love, formed for good. Let this season invite you into deeper honesty with yourself, to confront what needs healing, to let go of what no longer serves you, and to make room for the new life God is always calling into being. May you be brave enough to let go of illusions and pretense, to make space for the truth of who you are and the truth of who God is. May you never settle for pursuing your own peace alone, but extend that love and goodness outward, always outward, to include all those whom God loves.

May you be blessed with the stubborn hope that keeps believing, even when all evidence points to the contrary. In this space, when our prayers feel small and our hope feels faint, may you be



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reminded that God does not abandon us in our despair and worry, anxieties and angers. May God meet with you in the wilderness, in the valleys, in the places where we feel most alone. When you refuse to turn away from whatever is difficult, when the road is uncertain, when the future feels uncertain, may you know the steadfast love and presence of God as a blessing and equipping all its own.

May you trust in the mystery of these weeks. The truth that God is already at work. So however you are showing up to love the world and love your neighbor, we bless you in that work. May you be given glimpses of that growing light of the dawn on the horizon, the promise of a new day coming after a long night. May you trust that resurrection is true, even when we cannot see it, even when we cannot feel it. God is at work, redeeming, restoring, and renewing all things even now. We pray for a Lent that is full of honesty and grace, a Lent that heals us, a Lent that welcomes our hunger as a sign of our longing, a Lent that connects us to one another and brings healing. May you step into these weeks held within the love of God and in the promise of resurrection, which is always ahead, always around, always within. And may you know, truly know, even if just for a moment, how deeply loved you are, how deeply loved you have always been, and how deeply loved you will always be.

Yes, the wilderness can be a scary place – it can tear us down – it can even cause us to lose ourselves for a time. But the One who goes before us – waits for us – sits with us – even carries us in this wilderness - until we are able to walk again. It turns out, that it is okay to get lost in the wilderness. For the wilderness is just a place we visit on our way to amazement. It turns out, as Pastor Tony told us, that Lent is less about where we've been and more about where we are going. Less about who we've been and more about who we are becoming. And the wilderness, well, it is only a place we visit on our way to all that God promises to us in the life, death, and resurrection of the One we call Savior. Thanks be to God! Amen.