March 6th, 2022 • Holy Communion • First Sunday in Lent • In-Person and Online Worship

“Carry Something Beautiful in Your Heart”
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Then the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I want to begin this morning by thanking you all for a time apart following the death of my mother. I am grateful for the support of our bishop and district superintendent, our Staff-Parish Relations Committee, our guest preachers, and especially to our Lay Leadership Team, worship team and staff. Each of our guest preachers commented on how smoothly everything went and how meaningful our worship here is. That I could worship each week with you, online, was for me an added bonus. Thank you, too, for your many cards and kind wishes. I felt as if I were wrapped in a giant prayer quilt of love and support. And today I also want to thank our youth for leading worship last Sunday, bringing us all new insights, new hope and joy for the journey. Truly we are bound together in God’s love through all the seasons of life.

All the seasons of life…the good times, the sorrowful times, the fun times, the challenging times, the difficult times. And now we begin together the season of Lent, this forty-day season which is, traditionally, a time of preparation for the great joy of Easter. Forty days set aside for prayer, fasting, increased service and generosity.

Our theme for Lent this year comes from the 17th century French philosopher, writer and physicist, Blaise Pascal, who wrote: “In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart.” The spiritual work of Lent might itself be described as “a difficult time,” as we are invited into deeper honesty in our relationship with God, with our brothers and sisters, with the creation itself. We are drawn into confession and repentance as we make the forty-day walk into the workings of our soul and the living of our faith.

If Lent is a difficult season, spiritually speaking, perhaps it mirrors the difficult times in which we live in these days. Surely these last two years of the COVID pandemic have been difficult in so many ways and continue to be so around the world. Now an ugly war brings needless suffering, death and fear. Polarization in our own nation keeps us wary and weary of one another. These are indeed difficult times.

And, of course, we all experience difficult times in our own lives in the death or serious illness of a loved one, loss of a job, a troubled relationship, or economic challenges. In difficult times, life can feel like walking through a dark forest, hoping to find our way home, the path overgrown with brush and weeds.

In the Gospel story Bill read for us earlier, the story that opens the Lenten season each year, we see that Jesus himself faced into that very difficult 40-day time of temptation in the wilderness with something beautiful in his heart. He carried the Word of God, that beautiful, life-giving foundation of righteousness and truth and kingdom-values that empowered him to quell the taunts of the Devil and move forward on the path of his baptism and call.

The abiding truth of this beauty is incredibly powerful. Though it may flicker, its flame never goes out. It opens our hearts to deeper realities that are more true than what we might see in the moment. Pain, worry, serious problems, tragic happenings, personal or global, are not all there is. The losses and sadnesses of the past, the problems and tensions of the present do not tell the whole story. Beauty dreams a different future beyond difficult times. It opens our eyes to new possibilities. It draws us into a life of love and hope and courage.

And so, as Pascal wrote, “In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart.”
May our Lenten spiritual work this year be a time to identify that “something beautiful” and keep it in our heart. What might that “beautiful something” be? The care of good neighbor. A kind word offered. A prayer shared. A memory. The rosy glow of dawn. A bird’s song to welcome Spring. The grace of God healing our hearts. The exuberance of a daffodil. An insistence on hope. The melody of peace.

It is my hope that there will be many things in our life together as the church in this season that offer us beautiful things to carry in our hearts—our worship which will be led for several Sundays by members of our Lay Leadership Team, the return of our choir, our Wednesday Noon recital, the devotions in our Lenten Devotional, prayer quilts, our second annual “Hop-By” on Palm Sunday, the joy of our Easter Sunrise service on the palisades, the laughter of children, the impact of our mission outreach in Haiti, our love and prayer for one another.

And foremost today, the sacrament of Holy Communion, this gift of life and love and beauty offered us by Christ Jesus, feasting with his friends at the table and now present to each and all of us as our Risen Lord. The gift of life in bread and cup, God’s mercy, love and tender grace fed to us at table. As our choir will sing as we commune together here and at home or wherever we worship this day: “The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing! All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?”

“Everything belongs to the God of beauty,” said one of the early church fathers, Clement of Alexandria. As we walk the path of Lent through the difficult times of this year, let’s each remember every day to carry something beautiful in our heart, step-by-step preparing our hearts for Easter, the day we celebrate life beyond destruction, the triumph of hope over despair, and joy that abounds forever.

For truly, the stone will be rolled away and the tomb will be empty. In beauty may we walk.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

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