

Prayer of Preparation: *We’ve come this far by faith. Leaning on the Lord. Trusting in his holy word. He’s never failed me yet. Oh....can’t turn around, we’ve come this far by faith.* Gracious God, your grace and mercy have brought us to this season of repentance. As we enter a time of wilderness fasting and prayer, may we hear your voice calling to us. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen.**

We’ve come to the first week of Lent, and as such, we’ve come to Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew’s gospel says Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. Matthew doesn’t tell us what happened in the wilderness, but throughout scripture, the wilderness has been a symbol of preparation, waiting, and trusting.

I believe, and this is just me, that we meet our messiness in the wilderness. I believe that the wilderness journey provides a mirror for our souls. I believe that when we begin our journey, we long for the things that are unhealthy for us...things that we’ve been doing all along. I believe that the forty days and forty nights are times during which we will be *relentlessly* tested to see if and when our resolve will break. I believe that the wilderness is good for our souls.

There’s something about taking the time each year to intentionally consider who we are and who God wants us to be. But it’s an ugly time. During Lent, we find out things about ourselves we may not want to know because there’s an honesty in Lent...if we let ourselves hear it.

And, there’s God in Lent. I think that in the back of our minds we know that God is with us but in truth, Lent is a dark time and it’s hard to believe that God is in the darkness of Lent. No matter how many times the preacher preaches it, yes...I’m that preacher, it’s hard to know that God is with us...no matter where we are. Listen, once again, to the psalmist with a fresh ear: *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.* The psalmist acknowledges that God is with us, God’s hand is heavy upon us, leading and guiding us to look deeply in ourselves.

The psalmist goes on to say: *Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress...* Those forty days of wilderness, they are for a faithful people seeking a faithful God who has and will show mercy and forgive us.

Into this messiness, God speaks. Hear the good news with a fresh ear: *I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.* God was with the psalmist, God was with Jesus, and God is with us. There is no wilderness journey which can deter God from our side. There is no problem, no situation, no circumstance which can send God away. God is with us, offering us showers of mercy in a barren land.

Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

Dear siblings in Christ:

the early Christians observed with great devotion

the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,

and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season, converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.

It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins

and had separated themselves from the community of faith

were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,

and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way, the whole congregation was reminded

of the grace and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our

faith, to continually receive God's mercies anew.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,

to observe a holy Lent:

by self-examination and repentance;

by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;

and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

Thanksgiving Over the Ashes

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.

Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence,

so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift

are we given everlasting life;

only by your mercy are we made new;

only by your steadfast love can we live in the joy of your salvation now and forever; through Jesus Christ our Savior. *Amen.*

Response to the Word: *We've come this far by faith. Leaning on the Lord. Trusting in his holy word. He's never failed me yet. Oh....can't turn around, we've come this far by faith. God of mercy, as we walk through the wilderness of Lent, remind us that you are calling to us saying **Beloved, here I am.***