

**"Journeys toward Life"**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – Feb. 26, 2023**

**Please Read:**  
**Romans 5:12-19**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**

The journey is a powerful metaphor for life. The story of God's people begins famously with Abraham who is called to journey away from home based on a promise. It was a later writing, but in the story of our beginnings in Genesis we are sent from the garden because of our sin and rebellion. Part of the result of our brokenness is a journey to find meaning and purpose. Liberation comes after the flood through a 40-day voyage to a new shore, and from slavery in Egypt after a 40-year sojourn through the wilderness.

Today we read about Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil where he fasted 40 days and 40 nights... And this past Ash Wednesday began the season of Lent, the 40 days that afford us an opportunity to engage in fasting, praying, serving and reflecting on what our lives mean and what our purpose is. You see the pattern, right? 40 is the biblical number for *a long time*.

Homo Sapiens have been around for a long time, about 300,000 years, and the Jewish-Christian revelation has only come on the scene 3,000 years ago, (1% of human history) so it's taken a long time for us to begin to tune in on what is ultimate and what has meaning. There is no substitute for time as we work out who we are over the course of our lives, and who we are as a society over the course of history.

We usually think of Jesus' temptations as three, around materialism, security and power. But the first temptation is really one of identity... about *who* and *whose* he is. "If you really are the son of God..." is the taunt by the Enemy, and that is a taunt which continues at different times for all of us, but usually in times of suffering. The word for the Enemy here is διαβόλου in the Greek, which could also be translated, the "diabolical" one. The word means literally "one who throws across..." which is also translated as an accuser, or one who tries to trip you up.

It's an interesting scene where Jesus, just after being affirmed as God's beloved Son, is now let by the Spirit to be cross-examined after an exhausting time of 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. It's in the heat of battle that you find the measure of your being. It's when you are going through hard times that you find out who you really are. We say you have to "dig a little deeper" when suffering. There is will you'll find what you're really made of...

I read recently that “only a few months into the pandemic, 40% of adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Andrew Gerber from Silver Hill Hospital has been a key partner in New Canaan’s attempts to give better access to Mental Health resources for our community. It’s not a secret that we are in the middle of one of the greatest mental health crises in our country. In the first year of the new program for urgent assessment care Dr. Gerber reported there were around 75 intake clients, and half of them were adolescents! Half. But here’s what stunned me. His explanation as to why we are having this epidemic of mental health challenges is that he and his colleagues around the country are realizing that too many people, especially younger generations, are struggling because of *a lack of meaning and purpose in their lives*. There is profound perplexity around who we are and why we’re here.

I think we are struggling with identity on a personal level, but also as a nation. People don’t trust our institutions, and I don’t think it’s overstating it to say that we are seeing new threats to our very way of life. The Ukraine War is not just some regional skirmish, but a war between contending beliefs in the value of individual conscience and the limits of state power. It is an armed conflict about whether a principled defense of human equality or a fear-based system of tribal nationalism will shape the future of our world order. You are seeing a frightening alignment of nation states like China and Russia, along with North Korea and Iran and Syria rallying around the tyranny of the state. And you have western European nations and the United States aligning around the belief that democracy is the way forward. Make no mistake about it, these are belief systems, and whether or not we yield to tyranny will deeply impact our identity.

I’m deeply troubled by the racism that has emerged again in various incidents of violence on front page news. I’m deeply troubled by the opioid crisis. I’m deeply troubled by the gun violence in our country. I’m deeply troubled by election deniers’ cynical rants about the deep state and conspiracy theories.<sup>2</sup> I think we are wrestling with who we really are as a nation, and I’m praying we will come back to the foundational vision that we are “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

As a congregation, today we will be looking back on the past year and looking forward to where we are headed. We are on a journey too, and part

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<sup>1</sup> Silver Hill Hospital 2022 Annual Report, pp.14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Referenced online Feb. 24, 2023: [https://robertreich.substack.com/p/a-second-attempted-coup?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://robertreich.substack.com/p/a-second-attempted-coup?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

of that journey has been to wrestle with who we really are, from where we come, and where is God calling us to go?

We are so blessed in so many ways, and we have resources that would make many pastors around the world green with envy, whether personal, physically, or financially. We are truly blessed... But I also become weary of the competitive spirit that seeps into our conversations, looking down the road to compare how we measure up or down with our sister churches...

Let me say this plainly: We will never find our true identity nor fulfill God's calling upon our congregation if we compare ourselves with other congregations. We have a unique calling here as a progressive and reformed congregation and we need to live into *our* identity and *our* mission. I love the story of the great Hassidic Tzaddik named Zusha of Hanipol: When Rabbi Zusha was on his deathbed, his students found him in uncontrollable tears. They tried to comfort him by telling him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham, so he was sure to be judged well in Heaven. He replied, "When I get to Heaven, I will not be asked *Why weren't you like Moses*, or *Why weren't you like Abraham*. They will ask, *Why weren't you like Zusha?*"

We must struggle, even suffer, to remember who and whose we are... The Biblical narrative unabashedly traces the roots of our discontent back to the very beginning of our journey. You know the story. From the dust of the ground, God forms earthlings, places them in a rich garden with one restriction - stay off that tree over there. But they saw the tree was good to eat, a delight to the eyes, and that it could make one wise. They took, they ate. That primal act of disobedience is the genesis of our condition.

"Death reigned from Adam to Moses," says Paul in our first lesson. Kind of harsh! But read it in today's newspapers if you don't want to read Romans. Ukraine, The West Bank, the shooting of Bishop David O'Connell, the trial of Alex Murdaugh, weird AI love chats, the Proud Boys, toxic waste, fentanyl, domestic violence, political lies, deception, and on and on... it all spells death of one kind or another. How did we get into this mess? It all started with Adam, says Paul. He said yes. "Sin came into the world through one man, and so death spread to all." "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!" Not just once in Adam, but all of us, always. And we're not just talking about what English writer Francis Spufford called, "enjoyable naughtiness."<sup>3</sup> We're talking real brokenness that we have to own.

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<sup>3</sup> Tish Warren, "Worthy Goals can harm others if we hold them above all else," (*New York Times* Opinion, February 26, 2023).

The story doesn't tell us why, it just states what we know to be true, if we are honest. As John Calvin put it, "the human heart is a perpetual idol factory." We'll bow down to just about anything given the right circumstances. We often do ourselves and others the most damage when we think we are saying yes to what *we* think is good for us. "I want you because I love you." What's the harm in love? "Our army is on full alert in the interest of national security." Is security a sin? "I drink this to make me feel a bit better." Is it a crime to avoid pain? "It's not an issue of ambition, it's a matter of living up to my potential." Doesn't God want us to use our gifts? "It's economic development, wise use of natural resources, not environmental exploitation..." Didn't God give us dominion over the earth?

The great paradoxical tragedy of our sin is that fearing we might say *no* to that which could give our lives substance and meaning, we say *yes* to everything! Our voracious, limitless self-affirmation is but pitiful testimonial to our superficiality. We have no means to resist.

In the church we make the bold assertion that we are *in* Christ: living in this world, but not of this world. This is an important dimension of the idea of fasting in Lent. We need to practice saying no more often, because if we could learn to say no to *anything*, in a society that teaches us to say yes to *everything*, why, there's no telling what God might be able to make of us! Consider a fast, and when you find yourself becoming angry, irritable, hurt, fast from your old normal responses. And in your hunger and emptiness, ask God to speak to you; to fill, heal, and satisfy you with new life.

It's really important to remember that Lent is not another reboot of your now long forgotten New Year's resolutions. This is not about self-improvement. This is about creating new space in our lives for God. It's about turning back to God. Our hope is not in vain, because there was one, one who was completely obedient. Even as one was disobedient, saying yes, there was one who said no. And paradoxically, Paul writes, "As in Adam all die, so *in Christ* will *all be made alive*." That's a wonderful promise to hold onto!

One final note. The labyrinth at the back of the sanctuary is not a maze, but a guided walk for prayer. Labyrinths have been around for a long time too, and one of the most beautiful labyrinths I've seen is in the Cathedral of Chartres just outside Paris. It's an 850-year-old labyrinth set in the stones of the cathedral floor. Labyrinths are for those who couldn't go on a longer pilgrimage, a journey of faith to some faraway destination. The point is, after all of the turning and twisting around this way and that, after all the praying and struggling to find our meaning and purpose, the labyrinth, like the journey of faith, always leads you to the center, where God meets you.

May our journeying lead us back to the heart of God, to remember who we are and whose we are, that we are called beloved, that the Spirit continues to lead us by grace into new life, and that our identity, our purpose is not defined by materialism, security or power, but that our deepest meaning, even through suffering, is realized in the self-giving love of Jesus, who leads us on our journey, even through the cross to Easter New Life.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*