

Learning the Lenten way of the cross

Bible reference: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Copy text of sermon in place of text below.

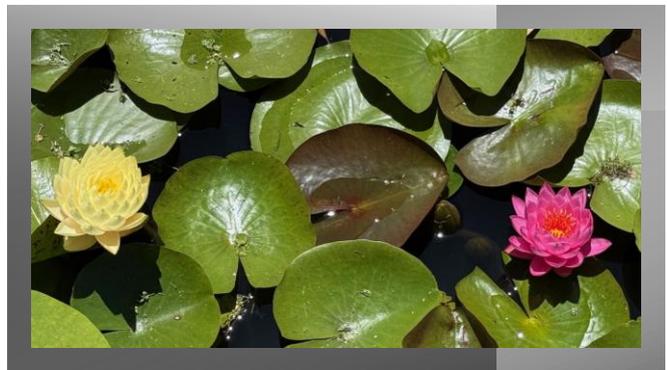
After Christmas we visited the Blue Lotus water gardens near Warburton. It was quite a hot day and people everywhere but worth it as the gardens are most beautiful.

Among the beautiful, tranquil, peaceable water lilies my attention was taken by some carnivorous plants. I don't remember the variety but I was a bit fascinated by these plants that seem to lure their prey.

The carnivorous plant I grew up hearing about was the Venus fly trap.

I learned that with the Venus fly trap, insects are attracted by the plant's sweet, sugary nectar and vibrant colours, which signal a food source. But there is a trap waiting.

Venus fly traps grow in wet, marshy, boggy coastal country. But it seems to me that as I hear God's Word the wilderness is a place where I meet the venus fly trap to show me my sin which I think I can somehow hide from God.



On Ash Wednesday we hear Psalm 51 written by King David. And the Psalm takes us to our venus fly trap for David in 2 Samuel 12 where the King is visited by the prophet Nathan.

Nathan tells a story of a rich man's selfishness, ruthless, disregard and sin against a poor man. King David bristles with self righteous anger at the story told by Nathan.

"As surely as the Lord lives", he says "this man who perpetrated this evil deserves to die". And now, the trap set by the Venus fly trapper Nathan is set "You! You David are the man!

In the book of Exodus we know that in the wilderness Israel fails to be faithful just like King David. And all of this is in stark contrast to Jesus' perfect faithful focus and reliance on God alone in the wilderness of trial and temptation.

Its easy for me and for us to perhaps scoff at unfaithful Israel and say how poor, hopeless and sinful they were. But the questions for us today as we are taken to the wilderness in our gospel reading is "how faithful are we?" " and "how faithful am I?"

Like David, our scoffing at the lack of faithfulness of others leads us into the venus fly trap outcome of our own sin.

"You..you are the one"

we all are the ones"

You are guilty. You have sinned. You are not faithful. Is that where we're stuck in the fly trap of sin?

Israel was led into the wilderness. They were rescued miraculously by God from slavery in Egypt.



God himself promised to go ahead of them to lead them and protect them and he rescued them at the Red Sea where they were promised by their leader Moses, "Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. And my favourite verse in my current life's journey follows "The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to keep still." And of course, God keeps his promise and again rescues his people.

God is faithful. God will fight for you.

Jesus is faithful. Jesus fights for us.



Satan although defeated by Jesus in the wilderness will not give up. The same pattern as we have seen in Mat 4 will reappear again at the pivotal point of Jesus' mission for the world...at the point of Jesus' personal mission for you and for me at the cross. Jesus will be crucified precisely because he is the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

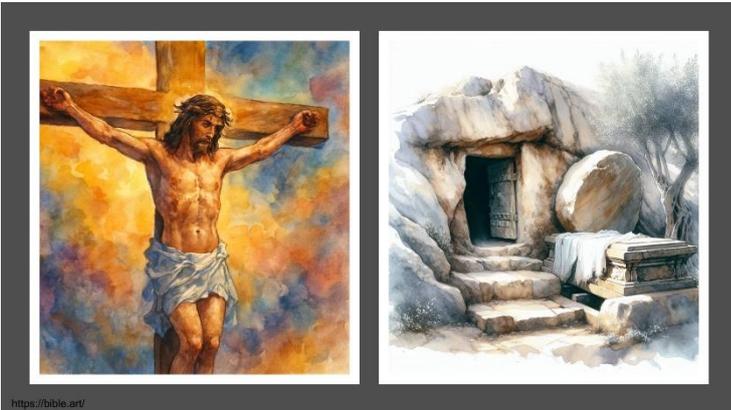
Our rescue.

Our life.

Our hope exists only because Jesus willingly goes to the cross. We, like Israel of old, like David have failed. Paul's words resound in my ears and heart "all have sinned and have fallen short..." And "the wages of sin is death." Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life.



And at the pivotal point, Satan puts Jesus to the test again through the mockers at Jesus' cross: "If you are the Son of God (sound familiar?) come down from the cross." Don't die for that lot of sinners! They don't deserve it! And Satan is right.



But in the wilderness of the valley of the shadow of death with the punishment for sin willingly taken in his suffering and in his death, Jesus is faithful.

For you.

For me.

Why? Because he loves you and me and every person who has sinned

and fallen short and who faces the death penalty of hell in separation from God...Jesus loves us so much he will not fail his mission He fights for you.

And three days later God's holy angel, like the angels who minister to Christ in the wilderness after the temptations, will announce his victory in life, new and everlasting in the resurrection of Christ.

We receive the gifts of cross and the resurrection in our baptisms. They are God's faithful promise for us for life. We are God's holy people. And yet when I look honestly at my life, I sin!

Why do I do what I don't want to do?" Paul laments in Romans 7.

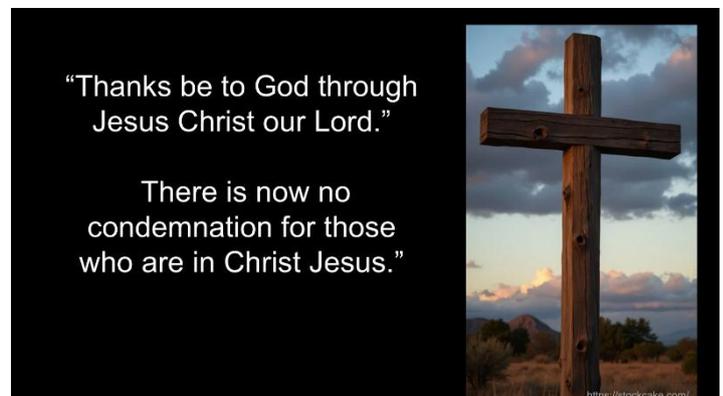
"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

His answer is found on that wilderness cross: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We look to the cross.

In the wilderness we are confronted by our sin, our failure to be faithful. And yet also in the Lenten wilderness that we are met by the One who comes to save us, this same Jesus Christ. The glorified Christ of the Transfiguration mountain top comes down to minister to people on the plain and in the wilderness...to you and to me. And it is from here that he picks me and you up and calls us anew this Lent to look to him, to follow him, to worship him, and to hear God say this is my Son, my beloved, listen to Him.

The wilderness is also the place where Christ comes to me and you. It is where God refines, strips away all falsehood and where God provides (manna in the desert, the water of life from a stone, teaching and equipping. It is the place where I learn anew to depend on my Saviour.

One of the values/themes we identified together 18 months ago as a community of faith was **'Trust & Hope'** Characterised by a strong sense of needing to trust God through uncertainty.



Lent calls asks you and me to answer the questions

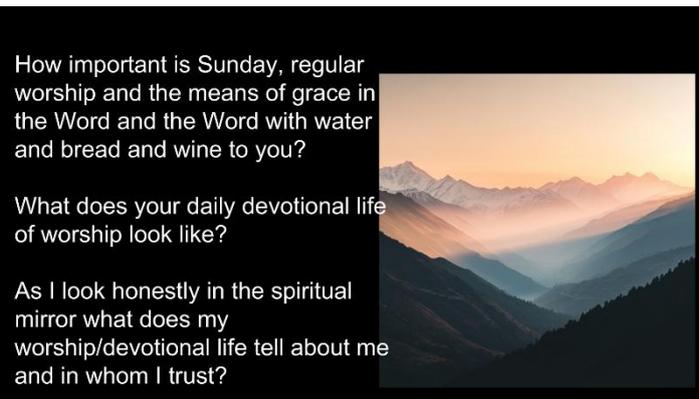
In whom do you put your trust and in whom do you hope?

And secondly, How can you grow this Lent in your relationship with Christ?

Today, let me suggest two simple ways based on two of the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness.

First of all, Satan tempted Jesus and tempts us to worship him. Satan tempts in subtle venus fly trap ways by seeking to take us away from Christ and our worship of him.

One way you can consider growing in your relationship with Jesus and to grow in your trust and hope in him is by examining your worship life.



And secondly Satan tempts Jesus and tempts you and me to listen to his voice and take us from the Word of God.

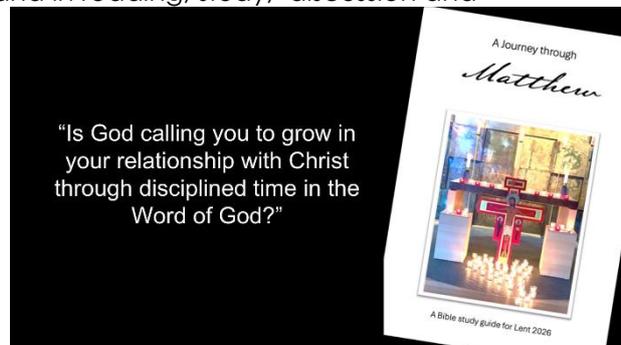
Is this Lent a call from God and opportunity for you to grow in your relationship with God is through disciplined time with God in his Word?

If the answer to this question for you is

“yes, I commend the resource “Journey through Matthew to all of you”?

What can you do this Lent to grow in your trust and hope in Christ?

It is in receiving the grace of God in worship and in reading, study, discussion and discernment and prayer of the Scriptures that we grow and emerge from the dry spiritual wilderness and from the venus fly trap of despair over our sins. It is in the practice of private devotion and regular public worship together that we are met by the One who saves and who forms us as his holy people prepared for holy mission. May this season of Lent then be a time for you of growing in trust and in hope in Jesus, your Saviour who has won the victory over sin, death and the devil for you and calls you to follow him. Amen.



Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>