

“Following Together”

Romans 10:8-15; Luke 4:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 9, 2025
First Sunday in Lent

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might follow Jesus with our words and our deeds, offering welcome and resisting evil. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So Lent has begun, and there is a lot going on. I was struggling a bit to tie all the things together today, and then I realized that there are so many different pieces for us to play with precisely because there are so many different things going on in our lives at the moment. So first, let me name the four texts we will be gleaning from today. There are the two scripture readings, of course; the exhortation from Paul in Romans and the story of Jesus in the desert from Luke. But this craft project we're doing in worship today will be another source of wisdom from us. And that lovely poem contained in our anthem will also remind us of the glorious truths we need to hold onto in the present moment.

Let's start with the basics. It's Lent, so we direct our attention to the story of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Luke's version of this story is even starker than Matthew's or Mark's. Matthew sort of gives the impression that Jesus fasted for 40 days and then the tempting began, whereas Luke straight just says the tempting went on for the whole 40 days, even though there clearly isn't enough dialogue to last that long. And even Mark's two-verse version of this story mentions

that angels waited on Jesus while he was out there in the desert, but Luke has no mention of angels at all, beyond the devil mockingly reminding Jesus that God promised they would step up if needed.

So you know, on top of everything else, we get the hardest version of Lent this time. It's very 2025, don't you think? But the thing about that is it means that this passage is also well equipped to help us deal with these challenging times we're living in. What better moment to reflect on the damage and harm that are done when humanity gives into the temptation to worship wealth and power? Even if we feel fairly removed from the chaos that has been unleashed by letting the world's richest man slash his way through our civil services, there are lessons here for all of us, because wealth and power have always been the forces that tempt us away from faithfulness. Even if we're not very wealthy or powerful, those idols have shaped the way we measure worth, our own and everybody else's, despite the truth of the gospel that promises us that we and everyone around us are precious and holy in the eyes of God regardless of the numbers in our bank accounts.

The story of Jesus in the desert shows us the foundational lessons of faith: God is worthy of worship; not money, not power, not violence, not glamour or acclaim. God's power – and thus whatever amount of power each of us as children of God wields – is to be used for liberation and flourishing, not hoarded or employed in self-serving ways. It ought to be relatively simple to hold onto that truth, but somehow, with the world constantly telling us the opposite, it rarely is.

There are so many different places in our lives where we are pressured to use whatever advantage we can for our own gain. There are so many messages pounded into our heads every day about how if we can't afford to buy this or that we aren't worthy of respect. Those who have way more than they can ever use are held up as heroes we should emulate, while those who don't have enough to live are criminalized and made invisible. The systems that control our lives have gone into overdrive trying to convince us that "might makes right." But the gospel teaches us the opposite. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the peacemakers. See here, see this Jesus, this Christ. He went into the desert, weakened and hungry. He was led into temptation, but did not give in to evil. He rejected the false promises of wealth and power, choosing instead the gentle, loving ways of God. Be like Jesus. Follow Jesus. This is the call of this season we call Lent. It is not an easy call, but it is one we are invited into, together.

There is another moment in front of us as well, though. We are nearing the culmination of a discernment process about becoming an officially "Open and Affirming" congregation, that is, a community of faith that explicitly welcomes all people, including those within the LGBTQ+ community. For that part of this moment, let's turn to the passage we heard from Romans, in which Paul assures us that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. I know that for many of us, it is potentially difficult to read this passage without getting tripped up by simplistic evangelical interpretations about what it means to "be saved" and how that

happens. Modern sensibilities, with their literalism and legalism, have done quite a bit of damage to the good news Paul was trying to share here. Let's listen to the words: Everyone – that's all the people, anyone, your neighbor, your enemy, your friends. Who calls upon – people who do this of their own accord, not because they were prodded by peer pressure or scared into it by manipulative theologizing. Heart and mouth – our actions and our speech – are aligned when we are living in faithfulness. This is not a simplistic and superficial ritual, but a comprehensive and contextualized way of structuring our lives.

Those divisions that the world tells you are so important, Paul says, they are nothing. They have no power over God's capacity to bring abundant life to all people. Rather than weaponizing them, using them to determine who is in and who is out, we can ignore them or – even better – recognize how the diversity we share when we bring them all together more fully reflects the glory of God!

And just a further reflection on the significance of focusing on the confession each person makes. This is an argument for the importance of consent. But again, Paul is not interested in superficial assent. He's looking for informed consent, the only true kind of consent. If folks are going to enter into this abundant liberation Jesus is offering, they need to know about it, and they need to know what it means. Somebody's got to tell them! It should be you! So as we venture toward a new stance, where we are more open and explicit about the broadness and grace and comprehensive nature of the welcome we offer here, let us hear these words of Paul,

encouraging us to bring the good news to those who have never heard. It's for everyone, he says! Let's make sure they know!

This is starting to sound like a lot to do: resisting evil, turning wealth and power upside down, proclaiming welcome, loudly and clearly, to all people.

Meanwhile, Lent is also reminding us that we are mere mortals. Jesus, well, he was the Son of God. And he had the Holy Spirit out there in the wilderness to help him. How are we possibly supposed to do all this? We are just dust, right? Sort of. But no. "Dust, remember you are splendor," the song reminded us. "God's own breath breathes in your breathing." "You shall God's own splendor show." And this is the whole thing, again, isn't it? The center of our faith, popping up from another direction. God – the ineffable, mysterious force of Good in the universe – has somehow created us in Their own image. We are dust, but we are dust that glints and shines. We are dust, but dust that is blown about by the winds of the Holy Spirit.

Our dusty nature is quite possibly what makes us vulnerable to the siren call of wealth. We may act like we know that all that glitters isn't gold, but it's not clear if we care; we're just attracted to anything shiny, like the crows. But when we're listening to the call of the Holy Spirit, we can be reminded to look for the glow within, rather than being distracted by the sparkles on the surface of life. "Dust, remember you are splendor." It's a call to follow Jesus, but also a reminder, an encouragement to believe that we can follow Jesus. It is a tall order, living the gospel. But we are not asked to do it alone.

And that brings us to our final text: this craft project we're doing this morning. You have held the Alleluia representing another person within this community – their heart, their faith, their hopes and fears and joy and strength, their soul. And you have stored it for safekeeping in the frame of that blue cocoon. Now we will finish the project. I'm going to give each of us a piece of tissue paper, thin enough to see through. But you're going to take that paper and wrap it around and around the blue tube of paper, like the Holy Spirit's embrace, and then tuck in the ends, so that the faith you are safe-keeping is held not just by you, but indeed by God.

[Pass out strips and demonstrate.]

As we prepare these Alleluias to be safely cocooned, with their hidden promises, for this season, let us dedicate our efforts in prayer: Companion God, who walks alongside us on the journey, pour out your Spirit now, that we might follow Jesus faithfully into the wilderness. As we enter into this season, bless our commitment to hold one another's hearts and souls in safety. Help us to resist the powers of evil. Help us to resist the temptations of wealth and power. Help us to proclaim your welcome to all people, declaring that all are blessed, all are loved, all are worthy. Help us to be the church of Jesus Christ, the Body of your Beloved, faithfully and fruitfully. We pray it all in the name of the One who became dust, bringing your splendor to earth that we might all shine with your holy light, Amen.