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What type of journey is Lent?  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
March 9, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 4:1-13

[image: alarm clock: smashed]

How many of us needed an alarm clock this morning because not only did our clocks move forward this morning, but because today is also our Annual General Meeting so our service started 30 minutes early?

Needing an alarm clock is very fitting today, because this is the first Sunday in Lent. And the first Sunday in Lent is known - at least in my own mind - as “Alarm Clock Sunday”. Do you know why?

Alarm clocks are very useful. And not only because they wake us up. Alarm clocks are also useful because alarm clocks make us realize that - in our society - there are 4 kinds of people. And you can tell what kind of person you are by the way you react to your alarm clock.

[image: sleeper cat]

First, we have “sleepers”. These are people who sleep regardless of how many alarm clocks they have and how loud they are. These are the people who sleep through anything and everything. These are the people who will buy the loudest alarm clock they can find. But in practice the clock will wake up everyone else in the house, or dormitory, while they themselves sleep on peacefully.

[image: snoozer cat]

Then, we have the “snoozers”. These are the people who just love the snooze button on their alarm clock. Snoozers seem very conflicted. Obviously they want to get up or they would not set an alarm at all. But when the alarm goes off it’s always later, later, later.

[image: faller cat]

Next, we have the people we could perhaps call “fallers”. These are people who wake up when the alarm goes off, perhaps they even sit up in bed. But they are very

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disoriented. They can't quite figure out who they are. They can't quite figure out where they are. They can't quite remember why they set the alarm in the first place. So, after they turn off their alarm clock, they fall back into bed and go back to sleep.

[image: waker cat]

The fourth group we could call "wakers". These are the people who hear their alarm, wake up, get up, and get busy doing that thing called life.

So now do you know why the first Sunday in Lent is called "Alarm Clock Sunday"? Not yet? That's ok! I'll keep talking.

[image: lent]

Lent is a period of 46 days during which we are invited to reflect. Are you surprised to hear that it's 46 days? Jesus was only in the wilderness for 40 days. Did Jesus get time off for good behaviour or something? Don't we always say that Lent lasts for 40 days? Well, the church is full of mystery. And one mystery is why church math is different than normal math. And I'm sorry, but I cannot completely remove the mystery here. The difference of 6 days is explained in 2 different ways. In some churches, the 6 days are because the 6 Sundays during Lent are not considered part of Lent. And in other churches the 6 days are because holy week (those are the days between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday) are not considered part of Lent. In any case, if you are giving up something for Lent, technically you can indulge yourself on those 6 days. I hope that little tidbit has already made this reflection worth your time.

In any case, during Lent we are invited to reflect on our lives, our faith, our understanding of God, our understanding of self, our understanding of community. In other words, Lent is a time of spiritual awakening, and spiritual wisdom. Lent is a wake-up call. The first Sunday in Lent is an alarm clock going off, inviting us into the spiritual adventure called Lent. Which is why I call it "alarm clock Sunday".

So now you know. The alarm clock inviting us into Lent has just gone off. And how will we respond to that alarm? Well, we can use the same 4 categories as before. We just apply them to how we approach Lent.

[image: sleepers, snoozers, fallers, wakers]

Sleepers just continue to sleep. They do not even hear the invitation to a spiritual

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awakening. Sleepers go from pancakes on Shrove Tuesday to chocolate bunnies on Easter Sunday and do not even realize that they missed Lent.

Snoozers say yes, Lent is a great idea. I should pray more. I should meditate more. I'll start that tomorrow, or the next day, or for sure the day after that, or ... look at that, it's Easter already.

Fallers say yes, Lent is important. They come to Ash Weds. They buy the lenten discussion book. They give up chocolate. But it does not last. Fallers do not finish the lenten book. And they only give up chocolate for a few days before they hit the chocolate again using the rationale that giving up something for Lent is just a silly superstition. Fallers begin the journey. But they fall back into old ways before they give themselves a chance to actually transform their lives.

Wakers hear the lenten call, engage in daily or weekly practices - like participating in our lenten groups, or daily prayer, or intentionally connecting with people. They look for spiritual growth in their own lives. They look for increasing maturity. And they find it.

So there is only really 1 message on the first Sunday on Lent, "Wake Up!" Because we are all invited into the journey of Lent. And I want to open Lent with a story about "journey".

[slide: gros morne]

5 people were hiking together in a vast forest when they came to realize that they were lost. They all wanted to get back to the village where they had started from, but they were truly lost. The 1st person decided they were going to go left, because of their intuition. The 2nd person said they were going to go right because it just felt right. The 3rd person said they were going to go back on their original path, because that was the safest option. The 4th person said they were convinced the group was already going in the right direction, so they went straight ahead. The 5th person, well they really didn't know what was the right direction. So they climbed a tall tree to look around and got a better view. And when they did, they saw the village and got a good sense of the simplest path to get there. Well, there is nothing surprising in that. We usually expect that when we rise above a situation we see a bigger picture and we come up with the best answer, right?

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Well sort of and sometimes, but not in this case. Because the story doesn't end there. The 5th person now knew the easiest path back to the village. But they made another decision. They decided that they knew the best path back to the village. But let me tell you what actually happened.

[image: different journeys]

The 1st person went left and found their way back to the village, but it was a long and difficult hike. Mind you, along the way the person saw beautiful scenery. Stunning scenery that you would not even get a glimpse of any other way. And they did make it back to the village. The 2nd person went right and had to fight off a pack of wolves. But in the process they learned how to survive in the forest. And they gained a huge sense of accomplishment. And they did make it back to the village. The 3rd person walked back along the known path. They had a very long walk. They also ran into another group of hikers, and made life-long friends that day. And they did make it back to the village. The 4th person continued straight and ran into a small family farm. They stayed as a guest of the family for 3 days learning all about farming and the joys of rural life. And then they got a ride back to the village. And the 5th person - the one who had climbed the tree - had a relatively simple but very boring walk back to the village.

So who took the "best" path back to the village? Is there even a best path?

Life is sometimes about being right or wrong, but most of the time it really is not. Life is about gaining our own experiences and finding our own path, in the company of others. Every decision we make offers new experiences for us, which is how we grow.

[image: exam]

In school, when we were given a test, we knew that everyone in our class was given the exact same questions. And we knew that the teacher knew the right answers. But what if during a test each of us were given a different question paper? A different test? In life - trust me - we do not all get the same test papers. During life, and even during Lent, each of us are invited to walk our own path while we also learn from the experiences of others. This Lent, engage in your own journey. And know that although it is your path, you are surrounded in this church by caring people who are happy to share our journeys together with you. It is your journey, but you do not have to journey alone.

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Well - now we've all been invited to wake up to a spiritual adventure. And we have been reminded that each of us has our own personal spiritual journey. And while I agree with those statements, they sound a bit .... abstract. I'm sure that some people here cringe at the idea of a "spiritual journey" anyway. I think we need to begin our lenten journey with something a bit more concrete. But what sort of journey might we be on?  
[image: temptation]

I want to propose that - this year - that we view Lent as a season of temptation. I mean, at some point I had to start using religious words, right? Our temptations can be seen as spiritual tools. Because acknowledging what tempts us. And recognizing how we feel about the things that tempt us can lead us to better self-understanding. And knowing ourselves is a meaningful step on any journey.

[image: desert view]

No wait - that's not the right image.

[image: desert with dessert]

Jesus was tempted in the desert. We are tempted by the dessert. Beyond that terrible joke is there much more to say about temptation? I sure hope so! Let us consider the temptations of Jesus that we just read in Luke. Did you notice anything in common between the three temptations? The temptations are all different, but I see a thread that connects them all. I think what is common is that all 3 of activities that Jesus is tempted to do are all really good things. Think about the temptation to turn rocks into bread. Imagine if Jesus had accepted that mission. Jesus could have fed the world. Think of that - a world that does not know hunger. That would be good. Or, think about the temptation for Jesus to rule the world. Don't you think that having Jesus as a benevolent dictator might actually be a wonderful idea? Particularly compared to the spoiled brats that are currently running the show? Think of that - a world that does not know inequity. The third temptation was for Jesus to be a miracle worker. Wouldn't that have been a useful gift to the world? Jesus was tempted by very good things. But Jesus rejected those temptations because his mission lay elsewhere.

[image: for lent I'm just giving up]

And what about us? How often have we been tempted by something that was

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“good”. And we settled for that even though we knew we had better things to do, that we could do better than “good”. For example, how many of us have given up chocolate for Lent. Well, that’s good. But we can do better. Much better. Giving up chocolate for a short period of time will not really change your life or the lives of those around you. How about giving up something more important? The problem will be finding something that is more important than chocolate. I mean, what is more important than chocolate?

[image: list of things to give up]

I’m glad you asked. Here is a short list of things you might want to give up for Lent this year: fear of failure, feelings of unworthiness, impatience, trying to make everyone happy, comparing yourself to others, passing the buck, being overcommitted to the point that you accomplish nothing, feelings of entitlement, apathy, hatred, negativity, being a complainer, settling for happiness instead of joy, bitterness, lack of commitment to what is important to you, mediocrity, worrying, idolizing others, being resistant to change, pride, holding a small view of God, being envious, being ungrateful, resisting forgiveness.

Give up those things - or even just 1 of them - and you will change your life forever and the lives of those around you. Forget chocolate - give up something that actually matters.

And I invite is to consider one more temptation. This is a temptation I have sensed in every congregation I have served. One temptation that we absolutely have to resist. And we must resist it as individuals, and as a congregation. It is perhaps the biggest temptation at all.

It’s the temptation to believe that we are too old, or too weak, or too small, or too poor, or too powerless to help be and bring the kingdom of God right here right now. To act as if there is no hope, in spite of the presence of God in our midst.

The biggest temptation of all is to believe that we cannot change.

Wake up! And welcome to Lent!

*Amen.*