

Sermon Title: **“Are You Ready For Lent?”**

Bible: **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11**

When: on the First Sunday in Lent, February 26, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, we come to you, as we need you! We come to you, as we need your holy presence. We come to you, as you are the way of life. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. Lent begins!**

The season of Lent began on Ash Wednesday, February 22nd. The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lecten*, which means “spring.” Last week, it was freezing cold, and we could see snow on the tops of the mountains. But spring began on Groundhog Day, and Lent began on Ash Wednesday. We took the time to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. We confessed our mortality, and we remembered God’s everlasting love and grace. For the first time, I had a station for “Ash To Go” in front of our church after the Ash Wednesday Service until 2pm. Thankfully, fourteen people came to “Ash To Go” and got the imposition of ashes. I had a short conversation with a couple. They were caregivers, who needed to work on Sundays. Even though they cannot come to church on Sundays, they received the imposition of Ashes. Thanks be to God!

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. It is not the first Sunday of Lent, but in Lent. Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays. Sundays are always little Easters. During this Lent season, we remember the forty days of Jesus Christ in the wilderness, and we try to engage in more spiritual practices. As Sundays are always little Easters, I hope for us not to forget the joyful expectation of the Resurrection, even in Lent. While we remember our mortality, we expect the joy of the resurrection.

## **2. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**

Today's first scripture reading of Genesis is about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and human disobedience. Many Christians interpret this passage as the story of the first sin, or so-called "Original Sin." But my interpretation or my focus is a little different. Before today's passage, in Genesis 1:28, God blessed the first people and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply." When God created us in God's image, God blessed us. A blessing came first even before the first human disobedience. But this world, even the Garden of Eden, was not like heaven. The world was not temptation-free.

Why did God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil here on earth? Can we understand it like the rainbow after the Flood? The rainbow is a sign or a covenant from God that God will not ever destroy human life on earth again with a massive flood. It is a sign of hope to start again! Can we understand the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a sign or reminder? A sign that even though the world is not temptation-free, God is with us? But in this passage, the first human beings failed. Likewise, sometimes we fail. We forget God's

holy presence in our daily lives. So, in my understanding of today's passage, we are weak and fragile. Behind the passage, I read of God's holy presence, God's pure desire, God's grace and love toward us. God wants to be with us.

### **3. The Temptation of Jesus**

Just like us, our Jesus Christ could not avoid the temptations on the earth. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus faced three temptations. But unlike us, Jesus did not fail. Not once, but three times. When God became a human being, when Jesus came to the earth, Jesus could not escape from the temptations. That's because our world is neither temptation-free nor challenge-free. When Jesus faced temptations and challenges, Jesus remembered God's Words, God's holy presence, and God's guidance.

Many times, the temptations and challenges are very tricky. Some temptations push us to choose only one. "One does not live by bread alone" does not mean that bread is not important. Food is very important for our bodies, but sometimes there is something more important for our souls than food. When we choose something other than food, it does not mean that food is not important. We need wisdom and discernment, according to our situations. Actually when we go grocery shopping, we do not buy everything. We buy what we need and what we want. We choose not to buy something, not because it is not important, but because there are more important things within our limited budget. I believe that even billionaires do not buy everything, even if they have more financial freedom. It is a matter of

priority. When we set up our priorities, we need wisdom and discernment according to our situations.

I remembered when I canceled Bible Study at the church one evening. Bible Study is very important, right? But I canceled it! Would you be understanding if your pastor canceled Bible Study? I did cancel it, when my wife got in a car accident, because my wife needed me, and because I needed my wife. Did my cancellation mean that the Bible Study was not important? Did it mean that I was ignoring the Bible Study? Sometimes we know what our priority is right away. Sometimes, we need to pray and pray to discover our priorities.

Sometimes, the Bible can be misused as we read about the second temptation. During the second temptation, very interestingly, Satan knew the Bible, and used the Bible to test Jesus. When Satan used the scripture, Jesus realized that the motivation was to test God! But this could be more tricky for us, because we cannot see our motivations as well as we see others' motivations. Even though we have the same Bible, we have many different theologies. Even though we have one church, we have many different ideas and visions. Can you distinguish your motivation from God's motivation? Can you distinguish your thoughts from our thoughts? Can you distinguish your vision from our vision?

As you might feel, I am very passionate for this church! Can you feel my passion? Does this mean that my vision should be our church's vision? Is my vision pure and holy, and the same as God's vision? It would be best if my vision could be the same as our vision and God's vision. But it is not always like that. My vision could be different from our vision and God's

vision. To me, the meetings with our church leaders and the conversations with our church members are the tools for looking into my vision and my motivations. This means that I need this church. That's because we, you and I, are the church. I believe that God speaks to us, not only through the Bible, but also through God's people. You are the means of God's wisdom and discernment!

The third temptation of Jesus led me to choose to become a United Methodist pastor. I think that power is one of the pastors' biggest temptations. I saw many great pastors' ugly endings in Korea and in the US. Honor and glory are very tempting, which we confuse with respect and worship. But, even Jesus did not choose to take the place of our Lord. Even Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. One of the characteristics of the UMC is the appointment system. This means that someday, I will need to leave this church, and a new pastor will come and serve this church. What I can do and what I need to do now is to serve this church. That's because we are all here to worship the Lord our God only. I learned that it has been challenging for our church members to have many pastors along our faith journey. Some pastors are good matches, and some pastors are not such good matches. But please remember that we are all here to worship our Lord only, not for the pastors, and not for ourselves. As you are faithful to our Lord, I will be faithful to our Lord!

#### **4. Are You Ready For Lent?**

Are you ready for Lent? Did you start any new spiritual practices? It is natural to face challenges or temptations. When God blessed the first human beings and our ancestors, they

faced the temptations. After Jesus was baptized and was about to begin his ministry, Jesus was taken into the wilderness and faced three temptations. If you start something new during this season of Lent, please do not be afraid of any temptations or challenges. It is natural to see the challenges. But please remember that God is with you. Please remember that God wants to give you wisdom and discernment. To receive God's wisdom and discernment, we need to pray. This might mean that we need to make a time and a place for God to speak to us. Maybe God already speaks to you. During this season of Lent, let us make a time and a place for God to speak to us! May God's wisdom and discernment be with us. May God's guidance and holy presence be with us!

### **Closing Prayer**

O Lord, during this season of Lent, we come to you. We make a time and a place for you to speak to us. Please guide us with your wisdom, your people, and your holy presence. In Jesus' name. Amen.