

"Grace To Grace" Matthew 4:1-11 Invocabit 2024

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

This morning is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a 40-day season. It stretches from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday. Actually, if you were to count up the total number of days on a calendar, you'd have 47 days. So what gives?

When we count the days in Lent, we omit the Sundays. We refer to them as the Sundays in Lent. That's because Sundays are always "Little Easters." So even during the season of Lent, the Sundays in Lent carry with them the joy of Easter morning, when Mary and the disciples found Jesus' empty grave.

The season's forty days come from the gospel passage today about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. After his baptism in the River Jordan, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and praying. In turn, his 40-day wilderness journey is reminiscent of the 40 years that Israel spent wandering in the wilderness after they left Egypt. Jesus returns to the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.

Lent is intended to be a season of preparation. We prepare our hearts and minds for Easter. That preparation involves engaging in various spiritual practices. These traditionally include prayer, confession, acts of service, and almsgiving. It also can involve what's

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called "denial of the flesh." In other words, we give up something for Lent.

The season of Lent is intended to revive our faith. These extra spiritual practices breathe additional oxygen into us. They kindle the flames of faith.

But our Lenten pieties can get the better of us. And here we come to some temptations. Our Lenten practices can tempt us in two opposite ways.

1. They can tempt us into believing that we have to bring ourselves UP. We are unworthy. We haven't lived up to God's expectations for us. So we need to shape up! But there's a problem with this mentality. It makes us responsible for our own righteousness. We got ourselves into trouble, and now we have to get ourselves out of it. But this line of thinking cannot have a good outcome. If we think we've done a good job in our Lenten practices, then we'll pride ourselves on the wonderful job we did. We'll feel that we've done a righteous job on the merits of our efforts. It actually leads us AWAY from God. OR, we'll fail miserably in our disciplines and feel like a spiritual flop. The trap will spring either way.

2. The other way we can be tempted is to bring ourselves LOW. What we need to do is wring ourselves free from any speck of pride. We are completely unworthy! Lent is the season of the church year when

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we prostrate ourselves before the Lord. But there's a problem here, too. This pathway is artificial at best and self-debasing at worst. Ole had lined up a number of Lenten disciplines. He had given up coffee, sugar and television. He read from his Bible for 30 minutes every day. And he had service projects lined up for every week in Lent. Three weeks into his schedule, Ole had been flawless in keeping up with his disciplines. Boy, did that make him GLAD! But as soon as he felt glad, Ole felt BAD for feeling GLAD. He was supposed to be humble! Oh, but then Ole realized he was feeling bad again. So then he was GLAD that he felt BAD for having felt GLAD. Oh, but now he was GLAD again! So now Ole felt bad all over again. In the end, it was all pretty SAD!

Our text today sheds light on the spirituality of Lent. And it all points to grace. The season of Lent begins and ends with grace. It describes our human condition. We are pinned down by sin. The Greek word for sin is "Hamartia." This word has a rich background. And these backstories shed a lot of light on our sinful condition.

The first usage of Hamartia comes from ancient Greek literature. The Greek tragedy revolves around a central figure, the protagonist. But something is wrong with this person. They suffer from something. They suffer from Hamartia. We call that Hamartia their tragic flaw. It may be something they did inadvertently. It might be something that the Fates have destined for them. It might be a situational problem they have no

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control over. But there it is, they have a FLAW, they have Hamartia. And this flaw is going to bring them down.

As people of faith, we understand that we have a tragic flaw. It's called sin. We are sinful by nature. It's in our bones; it's deep in our psyche; it permeates every aspect of who we are. Sin is absolutely engrained in us. From the minute we're born, there it is. And that tragic flaw of sin will take us down. It's a tragic story, and it can only go one way: towards destruction.

That's the first back story on the word Hamartia. The second one has to do with archery. Hamartia means to miss the mark. You're aiming at one thing. But your aim is off. In the end you miss your target and you hit something else.

Because we have this tragic flaw, because we have a sinful nature, our actions are going to miss the mark. Our aim is off; our arrows simply can't fly straight. Our sinful nature leads to our sinful actions. We miss the mark in thing things we do. We miss the mark in the things we leave undone. Every lie, every covetous act, every contemptuous thought, every turning of a blind eye, they're arrows gone astray.

So where is the good news in this? If we're on a tragic path, where lies our hope? Where is the grace for our journey? There is grace aplenty for our journey. Both for our journey through Lent and our journey through life. There's grace abounding because sin and death

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don't have the last word. Oh, there is sin, Paul says. Sin has been with us since the days of Adam! But now, a new Adam has stepped into our human story. Death and sin have ruled since Adam. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, the free gift of God's grace has entered our story. Because of him, the end of our story has been rewritten.

Christ has entered our human story. He has come to intervene on our behalf. Adam was disobedient unto death, but Christ was obedient unto death. His actions have all been to one end: to deliver the gracious love of God into our broken and sinful world. Where Adam brought alienation, Christ has brought reconciliation. Where sin has left us broken, Christ has come to heal. Where our world's tragic flaw spells despair and defeat, Christ brings hope and a victorious end. Where there is bondage, Christ brings freedom. Where there are tears and sorrow, Christ instills joy. Christ is our hope. Christ is our joy. In him, we live with the promise of grace.

We find ourselves in the season of Lent. We've embarked on this 40-day journey. But as we course through Lent, we are encircled by grace. We aren't traveling from sin to grace. We're traveling from grace to grace. From beginning to end, God's grace surrounds us. We engage in this Lenten exploration of our lives and our actions in the midst of this grace. This unending grace goes before and behind us. It allows us

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to make this Lenten journey in hope. And hope does not disappoint us.
Amen.