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Lent I
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Lent, somber and sober, reflections, self-examination, confession, often characterized as a dark season, laden with heaviness and a pall over the liturgy of the church. The themes of readings and hymns have a shadowy and pensive emotion. My experiences of Lent as a young adult helped enforce this deeply weighty season, as the winds blew down the face of the Wasatch Mountains, bringing snow and ice and dark clouds and dismal weather.

The idea of sin, of our failures and mistakes in this life, falling short of the mark of loving God and neighbor, is cast in a similar light as the season itself. Sin, darkness, failure, foolishness, folly, transgression, brokenness, hurt, disappointment, regret, the thesaurus list of our trespasses is long. You can feel the weight of it all and our memories can recall, sometimes with vivid clarity, the things we have done and the things we have left undone. I don't know about you, but I want to pull the covers over my head and hide.

Enter Jesus in the wilderness, a wilderness I visualize as a desert. Here is a wilderness without trees, a wilderness wind-blown, rock-laden and bright with sun. I've lived in the Great Salt Desert near the Bonneville Salt Flats. The full mid-day sun on that salt-laden sand is blinding as any snow field.

There is no hiding in the brightness of desert sunlight. The temptations of Jesus start immediately and continue to the high point of our story, at the end of a 40-day fast. No surprise to me that the first thing offered is food. The second to the last temptation is absolute power, the

ability to command everything, an absolute kingdom with Jesus in charge. And finally, at the end, the offer of perfect security, a life with no fear and marked by celestial protection. And all of this happens in the bright of day, not the cloud and darkness of how we perceive our temptations and our sins.

And consider what Jesus has been offered: Sustenance, power and protection are the basic things that most of us want. They are the building blocks of families, nations and kingdoms of human construction. Take away one of the items in the list and the others will be vulnerable to toppling. I don't want to be hungry, powerless and fearful. I want to be well-fed, free, confident and safe.

In the bright light of day what I want is for me. And that has nothing to do with loving God and working for food, safety and freedom for my neighbor.

How shall we live this Christian life? Lent is the brightness of the desert to allow us to see our shortcomings. It is the bright opportunity to acknowledge, before God and one another, that we have failed. Broken and wounded, we spend more time kneeling before God, asking and receiving forgiveness.

With that is the spiritual practice of being a Christian, in the context of a community. In the deep hungers of the human heart, for sustenance, power and safety, we have heard the Scriptures and the great writers of the church offer the things we should seek.

For Sustenance, The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus is the bread of life. For issues of Power, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us the first shall be last and the last shall be first. For Safety, Mark's Gospel calls us to lose our lives so that we may find them.

So I see Lent, not as the dark memory of late winter days from my younger years, but bright as the lights on a stage, in the light of a spiritual day made more brilliant by the grace and forgiveness of God.