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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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The First Sunday in Lent B ~ February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

Many of you may know that in the early 1990s I worked as an Assistant US Attorney in Houston, Texas. The economy had begun to decline when the price of oil suddenly declined sharply, and oil was a mainstay of the economy in Texas then – as it still is today. Gradually, other parts of the country began to see this decline, as well. I was hired to handle cases in Bankruptcy Court. The United States is a creditor in Bankruptcy Court primarily through the Internal Revenue Service, but also through the many Federal agencies that loan money or give benefits to people and businesses in the country. When they've failed to pay what they owe or have been overpaid, the United States become their creditor.

Bankruptcy wasn't a core subject in law school when I studied and I hadn't taken even the one course offered, because I didn't think I'd have anything to do with bankruptcy. I planned to – and succeeded in – practicing law with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the agency that oversees the stock and bond markets in the United States.

But there came a time when I **really** wanted to work for the Department of Justice in the US Attorney's office and they had an opening there, so I was willing to take on a new field. I attended as many continuing education courses as I could find, but they didn't have the point of view of the United States agency as a creditor, so they didn't help me.

Now, the Department of Justice also has a training department – both for practice, like trial skills, but also for the content of various areas of the law. I attended whatever training they offered too, but it just wasn't enough. So I started talking to other Assistant US Attorneys around the country who were becoming familiar with bankruptcy law. We created a group of people we called the Bankruptcy Working Group. We met regularly to discuss problems we were facing in Bankruptcy Courts, and also decided that we needed to have more in-depth training, both for other Assistant US Attorneys who hadn't the background, but also for the hundreds of lawyers who worked for the agencies we represented, but who didn't go to court

themselves. They prepared the materials we Assistant US Attorneys relied on when we went to court, so they had to be trained, too.

We created a curriculum for an introductory course – 3 days of lectures, with supporting written materials to be produced. We had to decide where to hold our first seminar for federal attorneys from throughout the country. No one wanted to volunteer. We weren't educators. We had no idea how to do that. And, in addition to the actual seminar, we'd have to do publicity, register attendees, contract with a hotel where the attorneys would stay and where the lectures would be held. No one wanted to volunteer. Suddenly, I felt driven (maybe by the Spirit) to volunteer. I would be the "guinea pig."

I took on this project while handling my caseload of about 400 cases. When my supervisor learned that I was involved in this project, he became furious – of course, I hadn't asked for his permission, because it's always a better bet asking for forgiveness, right? He said, in other words, that I was getting too big for my britches.

He forbade me to go forward with the project. But we'd already publicized the seminar and I'd started collecting tuition payments; I'd opened a bank account; I'd signed a contract with the hotel.

The Bankruptcy Working Group had a US Attorney who was our mentor and "guardian angel." I appealed to him for support and advocacy in going forward with the seminar. He spoke to the US Attorney under whom I worked. He explained how important this was for the entire Department of Justice and our client agencies. So, my US Attorney told my supervisor to allow me to carry out the seminar. But my supervisor made my life miserable for the rest of the time I served under him. Until I became his supervisor several years later.

This was a time of testing in the wilderness for me. Throughout the preparations, I constantly felt inadequate and worried that I'd fail in front of hundreds of my colleagues. That was what the tempter threw at me, over and over again. But God sent angels to serve me, to affirm my ability, my imagination, my capacity and my desire to complete the seminar. Some of them were the federal lawyers who presented lectures and wrote curricula. Some were other federal lawyers who came to help with less challenging, but more onerous work, like assembling the big binders of course materials for 200 attendees. Some were other federal lawyers and other friends who supported me emotionally and spiritually.

My prayer life was constant in those days. And it seemed that I never waited too long to hear whatever I needed to. All in all, the seminar went very well. But only by the grace of God.

Now, in comparison with the testing, the despair and depression that many people are experiencing today from the effects of the pandemic – the deaths of family members, lost jobs, income, homes, properties, my wilderness experience was nothing. And I had a positive outcome, but people undergoing pandemic testing are unlikely to do so. Their loved ones won't come back to life. Most lost jobs and income won't be recovered. But we can walk in spiritual solidarity with those survivors and – during this Lenten season, we can support them with our alms..

And with the increased focus we are having at this time on racial and cultural inequity in our country, we can work together to change our institutions so that there isn't a racial disproportionality when disasters occur – making the impact even worse for Brown and Black people than for White. Being involved in doing justice is a spiritual discipline we can practice this year, to start to re-weave the fabric of our communities so that we can hope to see a more equitable society when we are restored to a post-pandemic “new normal.”

Jesus' time in the wilderness for forty days is, in fact, our model for Lent. It might have been the proverbial biblical “forty,” not necessarily exactly forty days that he experienced. But like Jesus, we seek to spend a special time – for us the literal span of forty days - preparing, reflecting, praying, readying ourselves, knowing the hard path that comes and anticipating the joyous Easter celebration that follows. In our hurried world, I don't want us to rush through these forty days.

One of the impacts of being “on lock down” has been for some of us to have more time. Others, like working mothers, of course, who also have become homeschool teachers, have less time than they had before. But those of us who don't travel to work or spend entertainment time outside our homes, are able to put more energy into our Lenten journey.

So I encourage you to use the calendars we sent you. Read the daily devotional emails that Deacon Cyrilene and Janice send to members. Download the devotional materials I sent to you last week. If you don't have access to the internet and you want devotional materials, let me or the Church offices at Grace or Epiphany know that you would like a paper copy of the devotional sent to you and we'll do that. Or just spend a little more time reading scripture and in prayer this Lent.

We received in Baptism the affirmation and acceptance and promise of accompaniment from the God who created the heavens and the earth, the One who caused light to shine in the darkness and who raises the dead to life.

What can we NOT accomplish? Of course, we will be called to our own testing and be challenged and suffer and grow – this world God loves needs our care and attention, our action and commitment. God has called us to be part of the struggle as agents of love and protection – as angels serving others. But we don't enter this alone. The same Spirit that held Jesus in hand amid the wild animals in the wilderness also drives us into a world desperate to hear of and to experience God's love. That same Spirit continues to tend us through angels we recognize and others that come to us unawares.

We also will be down, at times we'll feel depressed, at those times and in those places that need special attention because they seem to be hopeless. But we'll always have God's promises to walk with, waiting for the time of God's rule that Jesus inaugurated. We labor and struggle and work and hope, confident that, because Jesus was raised from the dead, nothing can ultimately defeat those aligned with God's love and life.

Let's pray.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen