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Lent 1 A

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Grace and Holy Trinity Church

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A few weeks ago I heard a very interesting interview on NPR about the American fascination with crime, especially criminal trials. In the past few months the buzz has been around the Netflix documentary “Making a Murderer” and the “Serial” Podcast, both of which follow trials of individuals who have been accused of heinous crimes and the question surrounding their presumed guilt or innocence. In the interview Michael Mantell the Chief Psychologist of the San Diego Police Department, spoke about the morbid fascination of the American people going back to the Puritans of New England with murder and other violent crimes, but specifically he focused on the drama and intrigue of the criminal justice system. From the Salem Witch Trials to Lizzie Borden, from the Black Dahlia to the Devil in the White City, from the Nicole Brown Simpson murder to whatever the next sensational mystery will be, American’s love a good mystery.

A good mystery engages its audience by allowing them to engage in various roles while the story unfolds. At times it is easy to imagine oneself as the protagonist and at other times the antagonist and sometimes it’s both. Jesus’ trial in today’s Gospel is different. This is why this passage of scripture is so enthralling, because it challenges the audience not to imagine themselves as Jesus but rather to actually recall their own trials with the devil. Jesus’ trial isn’t one to prove his innocence or guilt in a criminal investigation, rather this temptation in the wilderness is a reflection of the temptations which all of us experience.

In the season of Lent Christians are invited to engage and re-engage in the spiritual journey. By taking part in a 40 day period of self-examination and repentance; through prayer, fasting, and self-denial and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. This is the time when Christians are tasked to look closely at their lives and discern if the life they are living is inline with God’s will. This is the time to reconcile one to another and with God. Every year Christians are invited at this time to look more

closely at the things we have done and the things we have left undone. This is a time of confession and repentance, a time of sweet surrender to the will of God, and a time to reconnect to the community of the Church.

This is not an easy feat. Because despite our best intentions human nature and God's will are not always in line. The Gospel today proves that the devil makes some pretty convincing points especially when our bodies are craving sustenance; our minds are striving for control; and our hearts are longing for safety. Especially when people are hungry, powerless and feeling threatened the devil can get weasel into their decision making and that is why during Lent the Church is called once again to return to a right relationship with one another so that humanity might be fed, supported and protected from the temptations of the devil.

Lent is an intentional season one where Christians are called to be mindful of our thoughts our words and deeds, which is why many of Christians either 'give up' something, 'adopt a practice' or 'challenge themselves' to do something out of the norm. But it is hard to know what makes this season different than 'bathing suit season' if all Lent is about is giving up sweets or fatty foods. Or what makes this season different than New Year's Resolution season if it's just about trying to read more books. What makes the Lenten challenge different than the 30 day yoga challenge that I attempted in September? The difference is that Christians are in this season together, all of us, are called to look at all aspects of our lives through the lense of our faith, our foundation, our adoptive family.

No other time in the church year are Christians called to solely called to focus on our individual and communal relationship with God. During the season of Advent we are waiting, hoping and watching for the messiah, in Christmas we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, in Epiphany the light of Christ is worshiped and lifted up in scripture and song, in Easter it's the joy of the resurrection, during Pentecost we witness the life and ministry of Jesus and the spreading of the Gospel through the apostles. In all of the other seasons of the liturgical year, it is possible to sit in the pew, read the prayers, listen to the scripture and not necessarily engage on a personal level. The other seasons of the Church year make individual participation in faith a much less imperative action.

Lent is when Christians are mobilized. Lent is when Christians take stock of identity, beliefs and expectations for the community of the baptized. Lent is when those who have gone astray are welcomed back. Lent is when those who because of notorious sin have been excluded from communion are received into the congregation once again. Lent is when new members are invited to join the family of Christ. Lent is when God's beloved children recall that God loves us and God forgives us, all of us, regardless of the sins committed, the things done and the things left undone.

Lent is when Christians affirm our belief in the Trinity- the perfect example of living in community. The Trinity which consists of the creator which made all things good, the savior who offered himself for the sins of the world, and the spirit who provides a pathway to salvation for all people at all times. This trinity is where Christians find the foundation for our faith. When hungry, or powerless, or uncertain Christians ought to turn to the Trinity for direction. God who created all the plants of the earth, birds of the air, beasts of the field and fish of the sea provides us with enough food for all the nations of the world, for all the families of the nations, and all the members of human race. God who came to earth and lived among us died on the cross and rose again from the dead after 3 days in and doing so overcame the ultimate power of death, has promised us through this defeat that there is nothing more to fear from the devil's empty threats. God who knows all things and sees all things is with us from our first breath to our last and all the threats that the devil makes are illusions when Christians remember this.

Lent is a challenging season. It is much more comfortable to be a witness to the birth narrative, to share in the joy of the resurrection accounts, and to listen to the lessons which Jesus preached in the Galilean countryside than to look at the lives that each of us live day in and day out. Lent isn't for the voyeur Christian. Lent is a challenge. Lent is an opportunity to engage in the community, to engage with the Trinity, to reconnect to the person that God made each of us to be.

Lent is a time for each of us at Grace and Holy Trinity to consider our spiritual journey.

How can and do we joyfully celebrate the Gospel through community, worship, and pastoral care. Today and in this season of Lent let us endeavor to know and support

each other and our neighbors at every stage of life to build a community of faith for people of all ages.

This Lent I invite you to connect or reconnect to this community. There are so many ways that this congregation offers to connect to one another it can be overwhelming to list them all so I have only compiled a short list- which is by no means complete: GHTC offers Lifelong Christian Formation opportunities, a chance to serve through the Red Door Ministry to the poor of Richmond, the Missionary Society's work in Belize builds bridges across cultures, the Local Day of Service for all Ages brings us together across generations. And weekly we have the opportunity most simply and most directly to take a look around us and get to know one another.

Indulge me in a community experiment: Outside of your family members, do you know the name of the person sitting in front or behind you? What about to your right or to your left? Across the aisle? Take a moment right now to "reintroduce yourself" to the people around you. Tell your neighbor your name, and thank them for being here, remind them that God loves them, and that they are an integral part of this community. It's okay I'll wait.

Thank you. You may now sit back down. Truly I tell you, it doesn't matter if you have been here since the day you were born or you just walked in the door for the first time today, know that you are part of what makes up the fabric of the Church. You are essential and where ever you are on your spiritual journey you are not alone. Together we stand through all the trials and tribulations of this life, through the hunger, powerlessness, and uncertainty, together we are stronger than the devil and that is what Lent reminds us of that together we are sustained, together we are powerful and together we are a sure foundation.

While it is part of our cultural DNA as Americans to be obsessed with cases which cannot resolve the question of guilt or innocence beyond a reasonable doubt, Christians know through scripture throughout all time people have turned against God and one another, this is the nature of sin. What the Church has the opportunity to do during Lent is to remind us that Lent isn't about guilt or innocence but about returning to a right relationship with God and one another through prayer, fasting, learning, and supporting one another in our sinfulness. I pray that

we can keep one another from temptation and  
hold one another in grace as we journey together in this  
season of reconciliation.

Amen