

It may surprise you to know that even I, a pastor, have moments when I feel that God is distant from me. When I have questions about where God is in the midst of a situation. When I sometimes forget that God is ultimately the one who has power in my life. Especially in times of wilderness, where I'm not entirely sure where I'm going or what I'm doing, it's easy to lean on things outside of God or the Holy Spirit to guide me.

But one of the ways that brings me back to feeling supported and in God's loving embrace and guidance, is singing the words of a holy song to myself. I am certainly not alone in these moments of wondering where God is in the midst of hardship, and leaning on the words and art of others helps in guiding me back. The song changes depending on the situation, but hymns are usually a good place to start. Our Psalm reading today provides the scriptural inspiration for a dearly beloved hymn, "On Eagle's Wings", that I know is a comfort not only to myself but to many of you too. I pray that in moments when you feel distant from God, or that God is being distant from you, or you need words guiding you where to turn, that you can remember perhaps these powerful and enduring words of trust, or others that center you on God's holy presence, and who God truly is.

Jesus is in such a time in today's Gospel reading, when he feels distant from God. This time of torment by the devil does not tell him God isn't there, but it's not hard to imagine that being tempted by the literal devil would make God feel a little more distant than normal.

In his time of trial in the wilderness, Jesus cites three bits of wisdom about God that recenter him on who he is and who God is. One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

When we hear Jesus say that we do not live by bread alone, it's not to discourage us from the necessity of bodily care and nourishment - these things are absolutely important, and it's because of God's great and generous love, reflected in the bounty of creation, that we do have enough to daily nourish ourselves. Plentiful food, things to drink, air to breathe, all

of these. And in order to preserve this bountiful creation God has given us and continue to be able to have enough for our and all our neighbors' daily bread, we must be better stewards of the earth to ensure nourishment for generations to come.

But this physical, bodily care and nourishment isn't the only important part of life. We do not live by bodily care alone. We truly live when our minds, hearts, and spirits are nourished too. And this statement from Jesus reminds us that even when he is starving and desperately in need of some physical nourishment, he trusts that there is more to his life than just that moment. Even when we are physically ill, our mental and spiritual well-being often suffers too. All three are so deeply connected, and God blesses and loves us in each of these parts of ourselves and calls them good. When we are struggling or in a particularly low place, or in the wilderness not knowing where to go or what to do next - the best way we can nourish ourselves is by reaching out to someone else to process with and heal with. Reach out to a beloved neighbor, someone who will help to bear you up when things get rough. God is certainly here for us too even when we feel most distant from him - we need simply to reach out in prayer or worship or any other practice that brings us spiritually closer.

When we get to these low moments in life, it's easy to find what the world and our current culture proclaim as "easy" solutions. Climbing the ladder, hustling for our self-worth, busyness on busyness to distract us from really feeling and knowing who we are and were created to be by our God of life and love. Rampant self-help and plans and protocols written to make money for the often unqualified creators, influencers, and authors at the expense of others' struggles and pain. It's so very easy to get sucked into the lures of these false gods of easy healing. But as Jesus proclaims in the face of his temptation - "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Only God is the one who has the power to create life, and indeed co-creates new life within and with us each and every day. Only God is the one who has the power to lift us up on eagles' wings and bear us on the breath of dawn - God is the one who makes each day new with the rising of the sun. Only God is the one who has the power to lead us from the powers of sin and death and raise us up in new life of hope and true, enduring joy.

Only God knows every hair on our heads, fearfully and wonderfully made people in the body of Christ, deeply loved from the earliest moments of creation. Only God has the power to stand up in the face of the devil, in the midst of the unknown, and proclaim a way forward in love. God did this for Jesus in the face of the devil, and indeed in Jesus' own death on the cross. And God raised Jesus to new life for our sake, to free us from the powers of sin and death and indeed give us the power of his great love for new life rooted in hope and joy and resurrection glory. All with Jesus to guide us in our humanness, beloved by the God who divinely created us too.

Jesus' last words to the devil in the midst of his torment are this - "Do not put the Lord your God to the test". The devil thrives in places and situations of sin and death - the things that test and threaten to separate us from God. But because of Jesus, because of his humble strength and human empathy and divine power, we are never truly separated from God. Jesus defeated death on the cross for our sake, so that we may be saved by God's great love for humanity, given to us through grace and mercy. Jesus overcame the power of sin not only in the face of the devil here in his forty days of torment in the wilderness, but also in his dying on the cross, having done nothing wrong, taking on the sin of humanity, and rising from it in new life and eternal grace and forgiveness.

In our forty day season of Lent, we have an opportunity to embrace the sacrifices Jesus made for us, and instead of being filled with guilt and remorse, find ways that we can become closer to Jesus and lean into the great love he has for us. Lean into the grace and mercy and hope that Jesus provides in his resurrection, his strength, his deep and enduring love for all of humanity. Nothing will ever, ever separate us from that love - not our shortcomings, our sins, our times of feeling separate, our need of Holy Spirit guidance, not even the devil himself - will separate us from the love of God. I pray that in your Lenten journey, you remember the words and guidance of Jesus, made known to us in the scriptures and also in the acts of worship we engage in. Our prayers, our readings, our love for neighbors, our songs and arts, are all blessed and beloved by God. May you be strengthened in your faith and feel the life-saving, life-affirming,

life-engaging guidance of Christ in your life, in this season and always.  
Thanks be to God, Amen.