



### Opening Prayer for Lent

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen

### ‘Starter for Ten’ Discussion Question

Have you ever experienced a wilderness period within your life, and if so, what sustained you in the midst of that time?

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 91:1 – 2, 9 – 16

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
**will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.’**

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you,  
**no scourge come near your tent.**

For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

**On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.**

You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

**Those who love me, I will deliver;**

**I will protect those who know my name.**

When they call to me, I will answer them;

**I will be with them in trouble,**

**I will rescue them and honour them.**

With long life I will satisfy them,

**and show them my salvation.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**

**Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves,

and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement

of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,

let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation  
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,  
share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus.

**Amen**

**Reading**     Luke 4:1 – 13

### **Sermon**

During the past two years, I have acquired a range of new skills and sharpened up older ones, not least as a result of regularly producing online worship material. In particular, video editing has now become a regular fixture of my working routine. Playing around with software and discovering interesting features, such as various ways to distort images, has enabled me to create ‘special effects’ when seeking to bring Bible readings to life. However, not all distortions are welcome or positive. One of the most mysterious concepts within the Hebrew Scriptures first appears toward the ending of the opening chapter of Genesis, in which humanity is described as being made in the divine image and likeness, something we hold corporately as a community capable of responding to God in prayer and praises (Genesis 1:27). This astounding claim features within many prayers and liturgies. In particular, some of the Lent material in the *Methodist Worship Book* speaks of our sin “distorting” the image of God within us, which is a concept worth taking some time to explore.

The story of Jesus’s temptations and testing is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. In each case, these events follow on from Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, the same river the Israelites once crossed to

enter the Promised Land. He was declared to be God’s beloved Son with whom God was well-pleased. Before we get to the temptations in Luke’s version, however, we encounter Jesus’s genealogy, which goes right back to Adam. After that dramatic baptismal revelation of Jesus’s divine status, Luke thus makes it clear that he was also fully human. Finally, the Holy Spirit led him out into the wilderness for a prolonged period (which is what is meant when the Bible speaks of ‘forty days’) to discover what the commission granted at his baptism would demand from him. Not surprisingly, Jesus needed space and time to prepare for his public ministry, and grapple with what it would mean to be God’s Messiah and the Holy One of Israel. The parallels with Moses taking forty days to write the covenant for Israel (Exodus 34:27 – 28) and the people experiencing four decades of wilderness wanderings before entering into the Land are not accidental. In both cases, the pitfalls of distortion and seduction were very real, and so needed to be faced down through testing, challenge and growth.

Immediately following this episode, and as Jesus began his ministry by standing up in his home synagogue and setting out his manifesto (Luke 4:14 – 30), he would encounter both praise and criticism. The former was manifest in the way the crowd spoke so well of him after he quoted from Isaiah 61, and the latter because those same people were seriously unimpressed with his talk of including the Gentiles in God’s Kingdom. Both of these responses had the potential to derail his desire to fulfil the vocation affirmed by the Father at his baptism. Very few people set out to render themselves unpopular, and so the temptation when we face criticism and hostility is to change course. This means that we shy away from being who God has made us to be, distorting God’s image within us. Even more dangerously, being showered with praises and adulation is incredibly seductive. It lures us down roads that draw us away from God, and it is no coincidence that a practice associated with radicalisation is ‘love bombing’ those who show some interest in an ideology. Given this background, the

task facing Jesus would prove a real test of his integrity and resolve, as it had been for Israel: could he overcome the devices and desires of his own heart and fulfil his baptismal vocation, even when he was faced with extremes of criticism and praise?

The time Jesus was in the wilderness was therefore crucial. As Tom Wright describes those events, the story does not actually envisage Jesus in conversation with a visible figure; the Devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas, inside his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make a lot of sense. God would not want his beloved Son to be famished with hunger, so why not turn stones into bread? If God wanted Jesus to become sovereign over the world, then why not do so in one easy stride? If Jesus is really Israel's Messiah, then why not prove it with a spectacular display of divine power? It would have been all too easy to succumb to the seductive allure of Satan's whispering in his ear, encouraging self-indulgent, self-aggrandising, and self-serving actions. This would irreparably distort the image of the invisible God he embodied (Colossians 1:15 – 20), meaning that if he should fail to act with integrity within the arena of his own heart, there would be no point in carrying on. Consequently, Jesus needed to focus on what really mattered, which is the basic point of Lent as we encounter it today.

During these forty days and nights, we are invited to take the risk of opening ourselves up to the love of God, which might feel like being refined in the fire. After all, God's love shines an unflinching light on us as we really are, and that is a very uncomfortable place to stand. However, God's motive is not to burden us with distorting criticisms, just as God is not seeking to seduce us with a falsely positive image of ourselves. Instead, the purpose of Lent is to grow into the person God created us to be, reflecting the Christlike image of the God who knows us better than we know ourselves, and loves us more deeply and completely than we could possibly imagine. So, let us pray that, during this Lenten season, we might be prepared to take the risk of

encountering the living God, and seeing the truth of ourselves more fully – both the good to be rejoiced in and the bad to be amended – and hence live authentically and abundantly so that, through us, the wider world might glimpse the love of God in our words and actions, and be changed forever. Amen

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

Take time to reflect on what you might give up or take up during this season of Lent and make a commitment – to yourself and to God – to follow this through.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Let us pray:

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ  
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those places and people beset by conflict,  
especially those in Ukraine, Syria, the Yemen and Myanmar.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who've lost loved ones during the pandemic,  
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,  
and all who have been made homeless during this period.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,  
those in the NHS and social care, and for all key workers.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who struggle with temptation or addiction,  
and for all who are isolated, lonely, or despairing.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for the Church throughout the world,  
that we would be open to interruptions and new insights.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Final Prayer – Collect for the First Sunday of Lent**

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ  
fasted forty days in the wilderness,  
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:  
give us grace to discipline ourselves  
in obedience to your Spirit;  
and, as you know our weakness,  
so may we know your power to save;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**