

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT (C-RCL) March 6, 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16;

Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

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***Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Ireland; United Kingdom: England,
Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales***

“Songs for the Journey”

Last weekend was a festive time at UniLu. On Saturday, there was a celebration of Pastor Kathleen’s inspiring years of service with us. On Sunday, we observed the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord with singing, with new music, with shared presiding, and with preaching. In Pastor Kathleen’s farewell sermon, she mentioned that mountains in Scripture are spaces where the veil between heaven and earth becomes thinner and places where theophanies occur and epiphanies happen.

But today we start by traveling to a different place – to the wilderness; that is, to a deserted place, an uninhabited region, a desert. This space, too, can be a place of divine meeting, but it can also be a place of demonic danger. Our Gospel text opens: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan ...” At the Jordan, after Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” [Luke 3:21-22]

So: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.” [Luke 4:1] The preposition “by” can also be translated as “in”; thus, “Jesus was led *in* the Spirit ...” In either case, Jesus was Spirit-led in (or, led *into*) a place of being tempted by the devil. Note that *throughout* these forty days Jesus was tempted; the three temptations in the text are just the latest in a string of temptations.

The word “tempted” can also be translated as “tested”. Commentator Brian Stoffregen notes that: “Generally when teachers or driving instructors give tests, they are not trying to flunk the testees, but to help discover what they know and what they can do.” But the Greek word here (peirazo – πειράζω – and ekpeirazo) “can also have negative connotations [as in]: ‘to tempt’ or ‘to try and cause someone to make a mistake’ or ‘to try and cause someone to sin’. At the same time that God is ‘testing’ the strength of one’s faithfulness, the ‘Tempter’ may be ‘tempting’ someone to sin.” [<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke4x1.htm>]

In this period of 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus is tested concerning his baptismal vocation. *How* will Jesus fulfill the Spirit-anointed vocation as Child of God, the Beloved? Will Jesus choose self-indulgence (by turning stones into bread)? Will Jesus choose self-aggrandizement (by claiming authority over all the kingdoms of the earth, albeit with the catch of worshiping the devil)? Will Jesus choose self-serving religious identity (by making a big spectacle of throwing himself off the very pinnacle of the temple – to be caught by angels?) [See Ruth Anne Reese in <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13>] No, Jesus responds to each of these tests with Scripture texts drawn from the book of Deuteronomy [Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13; 6:16]. These Scriptures remind the devil that the Spirit of God is present with God’s people – and with Jesus – not just in happy times, but even in the wilderness. [See Jeremy L. Williams in <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13-5>]

After having been baptized, Jesus prayed. And I am sure that Jesus continued to pray while fasting those 40 days in the wilderness. But I wonder: Did Jesus also *sing* as part of that praying? Might Jesus have *sung* from that prayer book, the book of Psalms?

These 40 days of Lent are a time for us, as it was for Jesus, to affirm our baptismal vocation. And to support us on our Lenten journey, we, too, have the book of Psalms; additionally, we have the songs found in our hymnals. For the next few minutes, let's take a journey through the hymns we are singing in today's service, considering, especially, the authors of these hymn texts and a bit more about their backgrounds. This journey can, perhaps, help us more clearly discover how these hymns illustrate and illuminate today's Scripture texts.

The five authors we will meet on this journey are: Sylvia G. Dunstan; Susan Palo Cherwien; Mary Louise Bringle; Doris Akers; and Ruth Duck. The sixth hymn selected for today, the third Communion hymn, does not have an individual text author – which means that the poets for today's hymns are all women! Though I know it isn't a liturgical season, I do think it appropriate to note that March is Women's History Month, and that Tuesday of this week, March 8th, is International Women's Day. Ann Ferentz is our hymn chooser for March. Thank you, Ann, for offering us the opportunity to lift up, and to give thanks for, these women who are companions on the journey!

Our Gathering Hymn this morning was "Bless Now, O God, the Journey" [ELW 326] Have you ever thought about who wrote the words? Hymns downloaded for our bulletin are laid out a bit differently from those that are found printed in the hymnals. For example, the downloaded versions don't include the hymn meters, but they do still include the author of the text and the source of the music. This text and music information can be found in the small print at the lower left of each hymn. The author of our Gathering Hymn was Sylvia G. Dunstan. Who is Sylvia? Born in 1955, she was a Canadian, who after "a brief, arduous battle with liver cancer," died in 1993 at the age of thirty-

eight. Before her early death, she served for thirteen years in the United Church of Canada as a parish minister and as a prison chaplain. Those who knew her remembered her for “her passion for those in need, her gift of writing, and her love of liturgy.” [https://hymnary.org/person/Dunstan_SG] Her reference to “the lands of promise / where milk and honey flow” connects us to the people that Moses led. The trail of this journey, she writes, “is found in desert and winds the mountain round”. Despite the trials of her cancer, Sylvia Dunstan wrote about 45 hymn texts in her lifetime, five of which are in the *ACS*, and four of which are in the *ELW* – including “All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly” and “Crashing Waters at Creation”, thus illustrating her lasting influence on our liturgy and aiding us today in our own prayer and reflection on Scripture.

Continuing our journey, we come to the Hymn of the Day, “As Your Spirit in the Desert” [ACS 923]. As you can see in the fine print, the text is by Susan Palo Cherwien. Eight of her texts are in the *ACS*; another eight are in the *ELW*. In the third stanza of the hymn we are singing today, the wild beasts that “may lurk in shadow” are the wild beasts found in *Mark’s* account of the temptation of Jesus. Susan invites us for our Lenten journey to “cross into the wilderness / so to walk where Christ has gone.” The last stanza opens: “God of desert, God of promise, / you have bid us journey on / through the days of dust and darkness to the rising of the sun.” To Susan’s birth date of 1953 in the hymnal, we now, sadly, must add her death date, as she died the morning of December 28, 2021, from brain cancer. Another of her hymns, which is found in the *ELW*, is “O Blessed Spring”. The morning after Susan’s death, her husband of 40 years, organist and composer David Cherwien, posted on her CaringBridge site stanzas 4 and 5 of that hymn:

*As winter comes, as winters must
We breathe our last, return to dust;
Still held in Christ, our souls take wing
And trust the promise of the spring.*

*Christ, holy Vine, Christ, living Tree,
Be praised for this blest mystery:
That Word and water thus revive
And join us to your Tree of Life.*

David adds: “I was struck by one word in ‘O Blessed Spring’ that I had not noticed before: ‘Still’. Her text doesn’t say God waits to the moment of death to swoop ‘down’ to haul the soul off, but has been there all along. ‘Still held in Christ, our souls take wing.’ Ah.”

We continue our journey to the first Communion hymn, “As the Winter Days Grow Longer”. [ACS 924] The text of this hymn was written by Mary Louise (Mel) Bringle, who was born in 1953, the same year as Susan Cherwien. The hymn speaks of “yearning people” gathering together. We are reminded that we are “Lenten people” gathering together to seek “lives refreshed from sin”. “As we journey through this season”, we are “pilgrims through a thirsty land”. And we are “wand'ring people” gathered here “to rest along our way.” The *ELW* has three of Mel’s texts, while the *ACS* has no fewer than twelve! One of these, “When the Heavens Start to Whisper”, we sang in Advent. Mel – “a teacher at heart and a theologian by training” – began writing hymn texts in 1999. A winner of numerous international hymn-writing competitions, she has been called an “emerging text writer” by the The Hymn Society in the US and Canada.

[\[https://www.giamusic.com/store/artists/mary-louise-bringle\]](https://www.giamusic.com/store/artists/mary-louise-bringle)

We aren't finished yet! We journey next to the second Communion hymn, "Lead Me, Guide Me" [ELW768], where the text *and* music are by Doris Akers. This is the only hymn we have by Doris in the *ELW*, although *This Far by Faith* also includes her hymn, "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place" [TFE 102]. Doris was born to an interracial couple, the eighth of ten children. In addition to being a writer and a composer and arranger of songs, she was a singer, a pianist, and a choir director, developing and directing "a large gospel choir for the Sky Pilot Radio Church." "She was one of the first and foremost gospel artists to cross racial boundaries." She has been called "one of the most underrated gospel composers of the 20th century [who] wrote more than 500 songs". [quoted in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doris_Akers] Born in 1923, she died of spinal cancer in 1995. In 2001, Doris was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

[<https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/doris-akers>] The second stanza of "Lead Me, Guide Me" seems especially appropriate for this First Sunday in Lent when we ask the Lord to "...be my aid when Satan and sin oppress."

We pause on our journey to note that the third Communion hymn, "Guide My Feet" [ACS 987], is an African American spiritual with no single author of the text given. Although we don't know the origins of this spiritual, we can still give thanks for the prayer it offers for our Lenten journey: "Guide my feet / while I run this race; Hold my hand ...Stand by me ... ; Search my heart / while I run this race."

We are now nearing the end of our journey through today's hymns. We've come to the Sending Hymn, "When We Are Tested" [ACS 922]. This is a fitting hymn to recap some of the themes and yearnings – as well as temptations – of this First Sunday in Lent. The hymn begins: "When we are tested and

wrestle alone” – and Jesus certainly was tested and wrestled alone. The hymn continues: “famished for bread when the world offers stone”. This is a reversal of Jesus’ encounter with the devil in today’s text when the devil offers Jesus bread *from* stone. It’s also a reference in Matthew’s Gospel to Jesus’ teaching on the persistence of prayer where Jesus asks, “‘Is there anyone among you, who, if your child asks for bread will give a stone?’” [Matthew 11:9] The last stanza of the hymn speaks of “angels of healing, of hope, and of prayer.”

The text of “When We Are Tested” was written by Ruth C. Duck. Born in 1947, Ruth is a minister in the United Church of Christ. Ordained in 1974, she noticed throughout her early years as pastor that the language used in hymnals and worship books for God was, nearly exclusively, masculine. Finding a dearth of inclusive-language resources for worship, she produced two such resources – *Bread for the Journey: Resources for Worship* and *Everflowing Streams: Songs for Worship*, published in 1981. Both of these books – still on my bookshelf – were extremely helpful to me when I started my own journey toward the use of more inclusive language for God. When I started as Protestant Campus Minister at UMass Lowell, I ordered several copies of *Everflowing Streams* for use at worship services with the students. Initially, Ruth adapted older hymn texts into language that was more inclusive. She has since written her own texts using non-gendered language for God. She estimates that she has written “around 150-200” hymn-texts, “about ten a year”. Six of her hymns are in *ACS*; four are in the *ELW*, including “Arise, Your Light Has Come!” [*ELW* 314] Brian Wren, a hymn writer (whose texts are also represented in the *ELW* and *ACS*), has said of Ruth: “Ruth Duck has consistently and persistently sought for worship language that expands our vision of the divine mystery and

makes all human beings visible.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_C._Duck]

In the words of the last stanza of our Sending Hymn:

*When we have struggled and searched through the night,
sorting and sifting the wrong from the right,
Savior, surround us with circles of care,
angels of healing, of hope, and of prayer.*

“Savior, surround us with circles of care ...” During these troubling and troubled times, when we may be tested and tempted to despair, we must pray that we would find support within a circle of care and that we would become angels of hope and encouragement to others. I like to think that the five hymn writers we have studied briefly today – Sylvia G. Dunstan; Susan Palo Cherwien; Mary Louise Bringle; Doris Akers; and Ruth Duck – are part of such circles of care.

To complete the circle, I close now with a new text that uses the five titles of their hymns:

"As the Winter Days Grow Longer"
and as threats to the earth grow stronger;
"When We Are Tested",
O God, protect us!
"As Your Spirit in the Desert"
empowered Jesus to assert,
"Lead Me, Guide Me",
Hold me, help me!
"Bless Now, O God, the Journey";
fill us all with love and mercy. Amen