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**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee**  
**The First Sunday of Lent / 6 March 2022**

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11*

*Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16*

*Romans 10:8b-13*

*Luke 4:1-13*

In his 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan used a certain phrase to great effect in his debates with Jimmy Carter. Whenever President Carter made a claim on his own behalf which seemed vulnerable to attack, Reagan would shake his head and say in that smooth, well-oiled actor's voice, "There you go again." This line – and Reagan's delivery of it – was a hit with the media and the American people. It simultaneously made Carter look foolish and inconsistent and made Reagan seem perceptive and confident. And of course Ronald Reagan won the presidency.

I suspect that many people outside the Christian Church use Reagan's phrase when they observe us entering yet another Lent. They may not say it out loud but they think to themselves, "There they go again. Putting ashes on their foreheads. Confessing their sins. Denying themselves innocent pleasures like chocolate and ice cream. Spending more time than usual in prayer. Reading their Bibles more frequently. Going to church more often. There they go again. What's the point? Do they think it really makes any difference?"

And of course it's not just outsiders who may think this. We may say this line to ourselves as well, except with a bit more weariness and exasperation: "Here we go again. One more Lent. One more month-and-a-half of attempted-but-failed self-discipline. One more period of extra stress and strain on an already nervous nervous system. One more reason to feel more guilty than normal. One more Lent. Here we go again."

But this common view of Lent is misguided. Spring does not start this year until March 20<sup>th</sup>, two weeks from now, but I still think that there is, perhaps paradoxically, a spring-like character to the season of Lent – and not just to Easter, as we normally assume. For Lent offers us a chance to do some Spring cleaning in our souls. To open up some of those closets, see what's up in the attic, look under the bed and sofa, and clear away some of those boxes. Lent is a time to sort through the junk in our lives, time get rid of the old things we don't need any more. It's a time to throw open some windows and let in the fresh air and sunlight. Lent should therefore be a positive experience for us, not a negative one.

Because, of course, we *all* need to do some Spring cleaning in our souls. That's the obvious truth of Lent. G. K. Chesterton once said that the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine is the doctrine of sin. We've all fallen short of the mark. We have all, in the words of the General Confession, "sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." We have all "not loved [God] with our whole heart," and we have all "not loved our neighbors as ourselves." To admit this is not to wallow in a pigsty of guilt and self-hatred – it's just to 'fess up. It's just to be honest with God, ourselves, and one another.

So, viewed properly, Lent is perhaps the most *honest* season of the Christian year. Rather than dreading it as an extended exercise in forced confession of fabricated shame and guilt, we should instead welcome it as an opportunity to drop the pious masks we use so often to obscure who we really are, hiding both from others and from ourselves. During Lent we can stop *pretending* that we are actually good, which should come as a great relief. We are all invited to freely admit who we really are, confident that we are *still* loved and accepted by God.

In the gospel accounts, when Jesus comes up from the waters of his baptism, he hears a Voice say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Only *after* hearing that voice, only *after* receiving that unshakable assurance, did Jesus then go into the wilderness for forty days, among the wild beasts, where he was tempted and tested as we heard about a few minutes ago. Such tempting and testing is as unavoidable for us as it was for Jesus. But, likewise, we ourselves cannot enter the Lenten wilderness of the next forty days without first hearing that same divine Voice in the waters of our own baptism and receiving the same assurance.

Lent is absolutely *not* a time when we try to earn God's love and acceptance through our self-discipline. Lent is not an opportunity to gain God's respect by forgoing chocolate. Trying to do so is not only stupid but dangerous. It is a serious mistake to enter Lent without knowing that *already* you are loved, *already* you are forgiven, *already* you are known and accepted as God's beloved child. In Christ and through our union with him in baptism, we must hear God say to each one of us, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That is where Lent must begin. Only then, as in Jesus' own temptation, will it end – not with wild beasts – but with angels.

So let us pray: "Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*" (A Prayer of Self-Dedication, BCP 832–33.)