SACRED RESTRAINT
A SPIRITUAL COMPANION FOR THE LENTEN DESERT

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Welcome to this companion for Lenten retreat. This resource has been created as a guide to highlight the central Lenten themes of discernment, simplicity, and restraint based on the scriptural story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert.

You are invited to use this Lenten companion in whatever way is most helpful at this point in your spiritual journey. You may follow the suggestions for prayer and practice word for word, or allow them to provoke other forms of prayer at the Spirit’s invitation. However you enter in, know that this has been prepared for you in love, with the hope that you will find a necessary balance of comfort and confrontation in the desert of Lent!

It’s helpful to pay attention along the way to what stirs within you as desire or resistance. Use whatever happens as material for discerning the movement of the Holy in your life.

The Lenten path has been well traveled throughout the centuries and yet it is still a path that no one else can walk for you. Feel free at times to rest along the way with fellow travelers, ancient and present, but also notice the intimacy of this way that invites you nearer and nearer to the divine love which is at the heart of all things.

The essence of the Lenten season provides tremendous wisdom for our lives today. You will notice that a primary theme of the readings and practices is sacred restraint. It seems like the too much-ness of our cultures has never been so tempting and intense, with greater impact on our own souls and the soul of the planet. We are witnessing the ways that careless consumption is contributing to the destruction of the earth, of which we are a part. Amid all the opportunities for busyness, achievement, and “progress” is the simple voice in the Lenten desert reminding us of the option to say NO.

Sometimes our sacred NO is our sacred YES to God’s vision of shalom and wholeness for the whole creation, including each of our individual lives. May this Lent be a time of radical release from the too much-ness that claims us, and an invitation to spiritual renewal as we discover again the path to fullest life in God.

Suggested Materials

- Journal
- Hymnal: *Community of Christ Sings*
- Bible (All scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are NRSV)
- Song: “Lead Me, Lord”, Artist: Discovery Singers, Album: “A capella Hymns—Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (available on iTunes) or *Community of Christ Sings* #450
- Song: “In the Calm”, Artist: Scott Krippayne, Album: Simple Worship (available on iTunes or youtube.)
LECTIO DIVINA

*Lectio Divina* is a form of praying with scripture. Breathe deeply and become aware of the presence of God. Enter into the text and allow yourself to be immersed in this living invitation for your life today.

As you read this text, listen within for a word, phrase, or image that captures your attention...

Silence

As you read the text again, pay attention to what touches you or stirs a response within you.

Silence

Reading the text again, is there an invitation for you in these words today? How might this text be speaking to your life?

Silence

As the text is read a final time, simply rest into God's presence. Receive these words deep within your heart.

**Journal:**

- What moved within you during this time of prayer? What captured your attention?
- What is God’s invitation to you through these words?
- What do the temptations of Jesus symbolize in your life today?

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Matthew 4:1-11, NRSV The Temptation of Jesus in the Desert

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.
IN THE DESERT: A Meditation on the Temptation of Christ

I am sitting in the desert with Jesus. We are famished and tired, sweat baked onto our skin from days of high heat, dry air, no option of bathing. As the temptations unfold before us, I ponder momentarily: Is Jesus foolish or wise for turning down all these things I crave?

Hungering with him, he turns away our chance of bread. My stomach growls and I grow irritated. He is gentle and steadfast in his explanations. “Wait for what really sustains,” he encourages. I feel my unsettledness turning slowly to ease. An inner strength begins to form each time we say “no” aloud. How many times in my life has the urge of the instant taken the place of a patient nourishing? This resistance is a spiritual act.

A second time, we are tempted with invincibility, the refusal to acknowledge our human vulnerability. We could make ourselves into gods, untouched by the bounds of mortality. As we speak aloud our “no”, I am flooded with the realization that I often want and try to be more than I really am. Jesus places a hand on my knee, affirming, “You are enough. To live into your full capacity is to also know and respect your limits.” The ease within grows deeper. There’s no need to throw myself against the rocks of busyness or achievement to prove that I can withstand the fall.

A third time, we are tempted with all the power, riches, and glory we could ever imagine. I thought I was becoming well practiced in this sacred resistance, but my ego is aroused. “You could be successful!” it says, “Don’t lose this chance to have all this influence!” I begin to justify how the yes might be ok this time, “But, Jesus, we should consider this one! Think of all the good we could do if only we had this power!”

Yet again, gentle and persistent, he offers a sacred no in response. “God’s kingdom,” he says, “cannot be given or taken, only lived. It belongs not to one, but to all. The road to its gate is not success, but humility.”

We sit together in silence, a strength forming. The temptations may continue coming, but we no longer notice. We enter into that richest space that cannot be bought. After a time, we get up and walk toward the city with clarity of heart, reordered priorities and passions. We move together toward the call that beckons, the deepest yes emerging, now free to respond.

Journal/Reflect:

- What are you called to release and resist in the desert?
- When do you justify saying “yes” when the invitation is to say “no?” How do you discern the difference between the two?
- What would it look like in your life to be free enough to respond to the deepest yes within? Spend some time dwelling in this feeling of freedom and total availability to God.
A SACRED NO: Discerning the Option of Restraint

In the story of Jesus’ desert temptation, the lure of seemingly good things occurred not during but after a period of forty days. The author of Matthew describes Jesus as “famished.” I can hardly imagine the intensity of such a fast, especially in a desert place exposed to the relentless scorching sun and barren landscape offering minimal relief from the dust, wind, and heat. Tired, thirsty, hungry— it seems that this “test” of spiritual resolve began much earlier than the suggestions of reprieve at the heart of the text.

Since it is unlikely that I would ever willingly enter similar conditions, it may be tempting to discard the potency of this story and its meaning for my life today. That would be a mistake. The soul of this narrative invites me into my own interior desert places, where I too feel scorched at times and weathered along the way, even famished. I am especially vulnerable in these times of being enticed into saying yes to things that appear on the surface to be good. What hungry, weary person wouldn’t want bread? Who would turn down the opportunity to prove yourself, or gain power and influence? Jesus demonstrates in the desert that just as sacred as the yes of response is the no of restraint.

God-distractions come in many forms, often disguised as what may seem good. Saying yes to another ministry assignment, for example, may seem like a selfless act of sacred response when really it is crowding out Sabbath and increasing busyness that dulls my attention to the presence of God and the needs of those around me. It may be stone made bread that doesn’t nourish, but intensifies the hunger.

Perhaps it is the option of attaining a possession I have coveted or agreeing to serve on one more committee because I want to feel needed. Maybe it is indulging for a time in unhealthy food to temporarily relieve the burden of stress. Maybe it is choosing to put something on the credit card that falsely promises to add more convenience and happiness to my life. It could even be as simple and subtle as reading a spiritual book instead of entering into prayer when my spiritual life feels distant and dry. If I am honest, I will tell you that at times I busy myself with the “work of God” to avoid the reality of God.

Careful discernment is required when seemingly good things come to the door. What is my motivation for saying yes to the option before me? Does it lead to more God in my life, or more distraction from God and a false sense of self-sufficiency? I can confess to frivolously accepting everything listed, and I am learning that what promises to feel good immediately often comes with the sour after-taste of enlarged longing still persisting in the space that only real encounter with the source of life can fill. We go to the desert to find God. Anything that doesn’t lead that way, no matter how appealing, is probably a way we don’t want to take.

This is not an excuse to evade the invitations that really are holy and helpful, for goodness and growth. Jesus was able to discern the difference between the temptations that threatened to distract and the angels that came to assist. We too are invited to prayerfully decide when sacred restraint is the most faithful option, leading to fuller life and moving us closer to God’s vision of shalom for all.

Later in the gospel of Matthew, we encounter this parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Matthew 13:44, NRSV

The Lenten question for us is—what do you need to sell in your life to buy the field, which is the kingdom of God? What do you need to let go of to receive the one thing you most desire? What sacred no are you invited to say in order to make room for the sacred yes?
BLESSING FOR WALKING THE WILDERNESS WAY

Don’t expect anything.
Empty from your pockets
Any dream of mystical encounter.
Let the path be the path.
Let God be God.
Don’t strain so hard
To make the meaning
Which will reveal itself
In the time it needs to take,
And the form.

Let each turn in the path—
Each bewilderment
Each distraction
Each misstep
And deliberate one,
Close to the center
And back out to the farthest edge—
Let it speak to you
Of the terrain of your own soul,
A holy geography, each landscape
In its own necessary way
Part of the whole.

Let what is narrow and simple
Sometimes tedious and fearsome
Be in you an exhale of gratitude
As you steady yourself again
On steep ledges and make your way
Safely down stony slopes
And may there be in you a
Shift in your intensity of focus
Away from addictions
To grandeur and success
As you concentrate whole-hearted
And with every muscle and bone
And thought and hope
On the next step
And the next.

May you find reason for praise in
What you cannot control
Cannot contain
Cannot explain or describe or make tidy.

Let the winding way unwind you
Until your thoughts are less frantic and tangled
Until your heart slows to a shared pace,
A collective rhythm to which you belong
And may you find grace in remembering
Those who walked wilderness ways
Before we believed
We were separate from the path.

Spiritual Practice:

Breathe deeply and enter into a time of prayer. As you become aware of God’s presence, allow memories of significant moments in your spiritual journey to surface within. For each significant moment, imagine what type of inner landscape or terrain you were moving through during that time.

If you were to draw your spiritual journey like a topographical map, what would it look like? What type of inner wilderness have you traversed at different points along the way? What deep lessons have you learned from walking along this God-path in your own soul?
FASTING BLESSING

Blessed is the space made
From letting go.
Blessed is each yearning
For what you’ve given
That reminds you of
Why you have given it.

Blessed is what the space can mean,
How it grows inside you
Sturdy for holding
What you never imagined you
Could hold.

Blessed is all that enters
The inward space
As it is being cleared,
The way the Spirit
Stretches outward
Within you
And breathes deep
A joyful sigh of liberation.

Blessed is the emptying,
The heartfelt release,
The desire to love
More than the desire to have.

Blessed is the space for others
That expands as you see
How the One you love
Comes to your threshold
In a thousand faces and forms
Waiting to be received.

Blessed is the emptiness.
Blessed is the openness.
Blessed is the letting go.

Spiritual Practice:

Listen to the song “In The Calm”
(Scott Krippayne, available on iTunes).

Enter into silence. Simply become
aware of the space within. Don’t
attempt to fill it with prayerful words or
thoughts. Be attentively present to
whatever emerges. Approach your own
inner space with holy curiosity. When
thoughts or feelings or task lists begin
to arise, acknowledge but don’t dwell in
them. Notice what they may be
signaling about what is deepest within
you that desires to be heard.

In the calm of God’s presence, simply
listen. Even if you don’t hear or notice
anything, practice making space within
to be available to the Spirit’s voice.

After a significant time of being present
in the silence, reflect on this time of
prayer.

*In the silence, what do you notice about
the state of your heart?*

*If you are able to visualize the space
within, how would you describe it?*

*What predominant movements or
feelings were present with you as you
dwelt in silence? Did they change
during the course of this prayer or do
they still remain?*

*Is there an invitation arising from this
time of prayer?*

*How does it feel to be available to the
voice of the Spirit?*
SACRED RESTRAINT AS PRAYER

One of the first times I became poignantly aware of the incarnate God was in the choice to recycle. I held the plastic bottle in my hands and faced the temptation of convenience. While the waste bin was right beside me, the recycle bin was across the room and around the corner. A phrase from eco-theologian Sallie McFague drifted into my consciousness, “The whole world is the body of God.”

If the whole earth is sacred, then earth care is also prayer. Each act of earth care is an act of healing, co-creation, and restored relationship.

I chose to walk to the recycle bin, each step prayerful. I held the bottle above the bin with a ritualistic slowness and released it with full-hearted intention. It is difficult to explain the peace and purpose that can come from living in a way that recognizes and honors our inherent interconnectedness with all life. That this is biological and spiritual evokes awe in me, and abounding gratitude.

The Lenten act of emptying is linked to the prayerful act of earth healing. In Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert, Terry Tempest Williams suggests, “We have forgotten the option of restraint.” We have become so accustomed to convenience that the option of intentionally restraining seems almost foolish. Why would I choose to sit in the dark at night when I can turn on the light? Why would I choose to walk somewhere when I can drive? Why would I choose to be content with something old if I can buy something new? It is countercultural to imagine that restraint from what is readily accessible could be a form of prayer.

Yet, consider this: What gift could a night in the dark bring? If you unplugged for an evening, what might be yearning to emerge within you that is currently being drowned out by the constant murmur of the television? If you chose to walk instead of drive, what might you notice along the way? Who might you meet? What new insight might a few moments of fresh air bring? How could you be generous with the money saved from purchasing something new? How might simple gratitude grow in you as you finally relaxed into having enough?

Lent is a call to Christian simplicity. We enter this time to remove every distraction from fullest life in God… every distraction. What is about justice is also about our own souls. We are not separate from what is broken, and we are not separate from each intentional movement toward healing. This is also a call of Lent: to reconcile, to remember our oneness.

Terry Tempest Williams describes her choice to move to the desert as seeking the more of life in a deliberate emptiness.

“We wanted more. We wanted less. We wanted more time, fewer distractions. We wanted more time together, time to write, to breathe, to be more conscious with our lives. We wanted to be closer to wild places where we could walk and witness the seasonal changes, even the changing constellations… In the vastness of the desert, I want to create my days as a ceremony around s l o w n e s s ....”

Even though moving to the desert is not currently an option for most of us, we can begin to see more clearly the link between our spiritual health and the health of the planet which daily sustains our life.

Journal/Reflect:
How might the more you are seeking be living within the invitation of less? What option of restraint are you invited to practice as a form of prayer?

Spend time gazing prayerfully at the image above.

**Journal/Reflect:**
- What captures your attention as you dwell in this image, and why? Notice what you notice.
- If you were to locate yourself in this image, where would you be? Is there a part of the picture that symbolically represents you?
- What does this image say to you about your own spiritual journey?
- What is God’s invitation to you in this image?

**Praying with Song:**

Listen to the song, “Lead Me, Lord”
(Discovery Singers, available on iTunes or Community of Christ Sings #450)

In what circumstances in your life are you praying “lead me, lord?”

What would it mean to follow this leading?

Listen to the song a second time.

Imagine a path emerging in the midst of your inner wilderness. How would you describe the path (rocky, smooth, level ground or mountainous)? How is the Spirit making plain the way of the Lord in your life?

Listen to the song once more.

Rest in the assurance that you are invited to dwell in the safety of God’s presence and love even in the desert moments of life.

“Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.”
–Psalm 5:8, NRSV
THE NO WE NEED: A Lenten Confession

Maybe what the world needs is more good people willing to say no to the things that cause destruction. Maybe we haven’t been awake or aware enough to see the impact of our incessant want, to realize the brokenness of body and planet that comes from saying YES too often to what is not essential.

Maybe the things we think we can’t live without are the temptations we’ve succumbed to.
And still we are desperate in our hunger, aching in our thirst.
Our impulsiveness is no substitute for the source of life we crave.

“Buy more. Be more. Do more. MORE! MORE! MORE!” screech the voices around us, temptations in this consumer culture desert of daily life.

“Repent, return, reconcile,” says the voice of the Holy in the heart of Lent.

We have forgotten the truth of our connectedness.
Forgive us, O God.
We have forgotten that each act, no matter how small, ripples through the whole of creation.
Forgive us, O God.
We have become careless as we buy without thought to just relationship of workers and earth.
Forgive us, O God.
We have become apathetic with our resources, allowing consumption to overcome generosity.
Forgive us, O God.
We prioritize our own perceived well-being over the well-being of the whole human family.
Forgive us, O God.
We are busy and distracted, fragmented and fatigued, attempting too much and neglecting our own souls.
Forgive us, O God.
We have been tempted to believe that individualism is justified, greed deserved, and success a measure of our worth.
Forgive us, O God.

We have forgotten that we belong in you and with each other.
Reconcile us, O God.

May we find the strength for a sacred no even when it disrupts our status quo, prolongs our hunger, and deepens our thirst. Give us patience when urgency lures, that we might feast on what sustains. Develop within us the courage to resist, restrain, release that your world may be whole, and that we may find ourselves whole within it.

We pray for the wisdom to see ourselves through your compassion and love, an affirmation that we are your beloved and that is ENOUGH.

Help us to remember the NO we need that makes the space for the YES we are.

Journal/Reflect:
What distances, distractions, or divisions are you invited to confess on this Lenten journey?
Where does the reconciliation path lead in your life?
This is what comes next, after the desert fast, and the no you needed to say. It is clarity of call that is no longer afraid. It opens vast within you and expands beyond you. It is your heart aligning with the heart of the Holy pulsing in all life.

It is raw courage, now free within you, that compels you to unroll the scroll of ancient wisdom and speak the truth of your ancestor’s vision aloud.

In the gospel of Luke, immediately following the story of the desert temptation, Jesus returns to the city full with the Holy Spirit and proclaims:

“*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”

(Luke 4:18-19, NRSV)

May it also be with us. May this Lent be the beginning again of justice. May we find renewal in a rhythm of restoration, reconnecting to the whole. May this Lent release in us the courage needed to respond to God’s deep call. May the simplicity of the desert restore in us prophetic vision, sparking the clarity needed to speak words of compassion and act in peace. This is where mission begins. May we have the wisdom to say each sacred no making space for God’s sacred yes.