

Lent 1 – The Tree

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Set – Adam and Eve in simple, neutral costumes. Satan in colorful striped robe. Literal garden depiction of plant life, rocks and large potted plant (the central tree). Or an abstract garden of green fabric, draped, clustered or flowing from high points of attachment. The central tree could be the largest and highest piece of green or brown fabric. Eve's action of "taking the fruit" might be removing an intertwined red scarf and twirling with it around her shoulders or head.

Production notes – the scene opens with light music in the background. Eve is dancing in the garden, stopping to enjoy the flowers and raising her hands to play with an imaginary bird. She sits to contemplate a plant leaf when Satan enters. Music fades as Satan enters.

(Eve frolicking in central stage, Adam lower, quieter, and behind her)

Satan: *(enters, music fades)* Well hello, Eve. Interesting plant you have there. Have you given it a name?

Eve: Yes, the name *(insert name)* comes to mind. It is a fitting name ...

Satan: It occurs to me, Eve, how much God must love you and Adam. *(gesturing)* After all, look at this wonderful garden that was created for you—all this plant life, these flowers and animals.

Eve: Oh, I know! God is so loving and thoughtful. Did you know some of the trees are to be enjoyed for their beauty while others are for food and some, as you can see, are for both!

Satan: Hmm. Does that mean you can eat of every tree and shrub here in the garden?

Eve: It does. Well, we can eat from every tree with the exception of that one over there *(gesturing)*, the one in the middle. It's a special tree because, as God said, it gives the power to know right from wrong. It is kept from us. God warned that if we eat or even touch that tree, we will die.

Satan: Really? *(mocking)* Do you really think God will kill you if you eat of that tree? Let me tell you a secret. *(Satan draws close to Eve as if to whisper in her ear)* God knows that on the day you eat the fruit of that tree your eyes will be opened and you will be like God. You will know the difference between right and wrong just as God does. *(even lower)* God is jealous, Eve. That is why it's been kept from you. Don't be afraid. Help yourself. *(Satan recedes to the background)*

Eve: (*approaches the tree*) Hmm. It is pretty, probably delicious, and it will make us wise and God-like! (*takes fruit or dances momentarily with scarf*) Oh! This is good! (*Eve turns and beckons Adam center stage*) Adam! Come and see this! It's delicious. Here, have some. (*Adam takes a bite or Eve entwines his neck with the same red scarf, the two dance together*)

Eve and Adam: (*gradual stopping, realization, lines spoken randomly, overtop of one another*) What have we done? This is exactly what God told us not to do. We did wrong and now we know what wrong is. What will God say? What can we do? (*exit with intentions of fleeing and hiding, Satan exits opposite or through a center aisle.*)

Lent 2 – Nicodemus Talks with Jesus

John 3:1-17

A few nights ago I had a most interesting conversation with a most interesting man. No, it was a soul-searching conversation with a man whom I am coming to think might be the Messiah we are looking for.

(Pause a moment, looking over the congregation with a quizzical expression) What—you don't know me?

Well, if you lived in Jerusalem you'd recognize me as one of the elite of the City, known as a member of the Sanhedrin, that body of seventy men with religious jurisdiction over all Jews anywhere in the world. All right, I won't hold you in suspense. My name is Nicodemus, and I am here to tell you of that meeting and conversation with Jesus.

For as long as I can remember I have had this stirring in my spirit for a more satisfying spiritual experience. One of the psalmists called it a thirst for God. That is why when I became an adult I decided to become a Pharisee, that male-only party that is well known for extreme strictness in keeping the law. To become an official member of this religious party I took an oath in front of three witnesses that I would spend all my life observing every detail of the law of the scribes. I soon found, however, that keeping all the Pharisaic regulations was not only burdensome but it left a great void within my spirit that I still carry today.

We in the Sanhedrin heard about that carpenter from Nazareth turned itinerant teacher. From Nazareth in Galilee, of all places! We urbanites look down on the Galileans because to us they are ignorant, uncouth, and speak with a strange accent. But this teacher was different. According to our tradition, when religious teachings are accompanied by miracles, they validate the teacher. So, prepared with this tradition, I decided to investigate the Nazarene teacher myself.

Since Jesus was always surrounded by crowds of people, the only time one could find him alone to converse in private would be at night. I learned that the father of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, has a house in the capital, and after some investigation I found it. John greeted me at the door and accompanied me to the guest room on the rooftop.

The first thing that impressed me was that the teacher received me as he would any other person and did not show any deference because of my wealth or rank. After the usual greeting I launched into the purpose of my visit: "We know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus saw right through my question and answered: "I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." That sounded so preposterous that I blurted out, "How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter the second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus explained that what he meant was that one needs to be born of water and Spirit and that we should not confuse human and

spiritual realities. There was a breeze blowing, and a gust swept in through the open door. Jesus pointed to the flickering candle and explained that just as we don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. I confessed my confusion. Jesus looked at me and in a surprised tone asked, "How can it be that you are a teacher in Israel and don't understand these things?" He used an example from the experience of our ancestors in the desert that I could understand. Our ancestors sinned and God allowed poisonous snakes to enter the camp and some people died as a result of those snake bites. God told Moses to make a snake of brass and put it on a pole so that anyone who was bitten would live by looking at that snake of brass. Jesus added, "In the same way, the Son of Man must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

My mind began to churn. By looking at that snake in faith the people had life again—they were born anew! Now it began to make sense. Jesus undoubtedly noticed the change of expression on my face and clinched his line of reasoning with words I'll never forget: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

We talked a bit more. I thanked Jesus for taking time to help me understanding more about God and stood up to leave. As we bid each other shalom, Jesus gave one last word: "Remember that it's more than merely believing some things about God, you must act on that belief."

(pause)

Now I must decide.

(Nicodemus turns to leave, walking slowly as in deep and thought, speaking to himself, if amplified with cordless equipment, this line can conclude off-stage) Born from above ... wind and spirit not seen but powerful in what they do ... that's totally opposite of being able to predict and control ... believe in the Son of Man ... put belief into action ... eternal life ... it makes sense and my spirit is responding ... but can I take that step? Am I too old to change? ... It is such a big risk ... what will people say? What about my standing in the Sanhedrin? What about my reputation in this city? Believe in him ... not perish ... life eternal ...

Lent 3 - Water from the Rock

Exodus 17:1-7

Production notes – *one female character, fully memorized and amplified. Neutral dress and sandals carrying a thin walking stick (use for gesturing), standing among rocks.*

Water! Cool, refreshing water now gushes from the rock and the stream flows through our camp, refreshing the lips that only yesterday were parched and dry.

My name is Isabel. My husband, Jonathan, and I have raised our five children in Egyptian captivity. Life in such slavery became so unbearable we had a saying: “If we are ever freed we’ll never complain. Anything will be better than this.”

Well, how our God defeated the Egyptians is no secret around these parts. But the journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the land promised to our foreparents, goes through a punishing desert; “thorns” it’s called in our language, the desert of Zin. We could hardly wait to leave those thorn bushes behind. One day, a rumor ran through the camp that we would be spending some time on the plains of Rephidim. We nourished ourselves on grassy images of grazing cattle and water in abundance.

But that was impossible! After all, this is the dry season and there is no water at all! What disappointment! What a disaster! (*gravely*) Thirst here in the desert is deadly. Our children were weak and crying for a drink. Our cattle were at the point of death. (*frustrated*) How is it that God is able to defeat an Egyptian army but unable to provide the water needed to live? Did that mean God was no longer here among us? Had God abandoned us? Where was God?

So we poured out our frustration on Moses, accusing him of drawing us out of Egypt only to kill us in the desert! We were warned not to accuse or test God, but our complaining only grew more menacing. Fearing for his life, Moses cried out to God. “What shall I do with these people?” Amid the noise of cattle and children and complaining, Moses lowered himself to a listening posture. (*with drama, unhurried*) Then, with his staff on one side and trusted leaders on the other, he approached the largest rock. Moses struck the rock with a snap of his rod and a shout went up throughout the camp as water gushed out, splashing on the rocks below! Water flowed around our ankles. Only those who have experienced thirst can know how eagerly we lapped at the water, splashing our faces as we drank.

Today there is water in abundance! Enough for the entire camp including our animals! This water will follow us as we move on from here tomorrow. And yesterday ... yesterday was a mistake. It was wrong to complain against God. Remembering this is the job of tomorrow. May we remember and never complain again. (*exit*)

Lent 4 – The Blind Man Meets Jesus

John 9

Production notes - *An option is to enter shouting “I can see! I can see!” and move toward the front with some creative exuberance, looking at peoples’ faces, asking their names, or asking the color of clothing. Limit this to no longer than a minute or two.*

Once I was blind but now I see! It is all because I met Jesus. Or rather, Jesus met me! So let me tell my story ...

Up until that day I never saw a thing in this world. A disease attacked my eyes soon after I was born, as happens here in Israel, and the common notion is that such persons are born blind. The handicap of blindness was painful to bear but not nearly as painful as the humiliation of needing to beg and depend on the generosity of others. But even that was nothing compared to the stigma that hung over me and my parents like a dark cloud. You see, popular beliefs held that such a handicap is the result of sin. In my case, people probed my family background in order to uncover what sin might be hidden there. Nothing was found. Even so, my parents concluded that this was still a type of punishment, condemnation for some unknown sin of my future.

And so on that particular Sabbath my parents led me with my earthenware cup to my accustomed spot outside the Temple gates to ask for alms from the people entering worship. About mid-morning I sensed a group of people approaching and so I held out my cup. I believed that it was a teacher with his disciples because one of them asked, “Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” There it was again! That awful hurt was like a sharp knife to my heart. But in a voice that softened my anger I heard the teacher’s response: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him.”

Did I hear correctly? Did this teacher respond that no one in my family was responsible? Who can speak such welcome words? Then what followed: “The works of God revealed ... in me? A blind man ... stripped of his dignity ... who feels crushed into the dust by the attitude of the people entering the Temple? Whatever could that mean? Suddenly I heard some shuffling in the ground and some spitting and this man spread soft mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the pool of Siloam. Why should I do such a silly act, especially on the Sabbath and leave my spot at the temple gate? But there was something in the tone of voice—this voice that responded to “Jesus”—that made his different from any I had experienced before. So I picked my way through the Sabbath crowd to the pool where I washed the mud off my eyes and a miracle happened!

I could see! I jumped and shouted for joy and ran home to tell my parents, shouting with each step, “I can see!” I created quite a sensation in our neighborhood, but only a few joined me in celebrating. Some people didn’t believe that I was the one who had been blind. I had to convince them that I was the same man. And then of course they wanted to

know how it happened. I didn't care about how it happened! I could see! All I could say was that a man called Jesus performed a miracle.

The neighbors didn't know what to do with me nor what to make of this miracle, so they took me to the Pharisees. What a miserable mistake! Those religious folk were not one bit interested in what happened to me. They only focused on the fact that all this happened on the Sabbath. To them healing was "work" and as such was prohibited on the Sabbath. Therefore the healer had to be a sinner! Only a sinner would do something like that. They brushed aside the miracle of seeing and began asking me all kinds of irrelevant questions.

They argued among themselves. They went back and forth questioning me and arguing among themselves again and again. Why all this arguing and Sabbath stuff? I could see and I want to explore the world! Finally they asked what I thought of the healer. By this time I realized that this man Jesus was more than a mere man and so I blurted out, "He is a prophet!"

That was not the answer they wanted! Some were still not satisfied that I'd been blind and so their questioning was directed to my parents. They confirmed my belonging and my blindness but nothing more. You see, they were afraid of the ruling of these religious folk that anyone who confessed Jesus to be Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue for thirty days. So my parents simply told the Pharisees to talk to me. All I could say was that once I was blind but now I see. The religious folk wanted to know whether I thought Jesus was a sinner. How was I to know, except that if he were a sinner, God would not listen to him. Finally in frustration I asked why they asked all these questions unless they wanted to be Jesus' disciples too. That made them so angry that they expelled me from the synagogue.

(short pause, with emotion)

Then a marvelous thing happened. Jesus heard that I was expelled so he came looking for me. After a short conversation Jesus asked if I believed in the Son of Man, the Messiah. After all that he did for me, I was open to anything he would teach me so I answered, "Who is he? Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus confided, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

(pause, with emotion)

I met Jesus, the Man, the Healer, the Prophet, the Messiah, who opened my eyes. Now I see! All I could do was fall down and worship him.

Lent 5 – Martha talks about Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life

John 11

Production notes – *the focus in this story is the raising of Lazarus. However the central truth is found in Jesus' conversation with Martha. Hence the story is told from her point of view.*

Lazarus lives! He's alive again! Have you heard? He actually died, but Jesus came and brought him back to life. Words cannot express our happiness. As his sister, this is the story I must tell: I am Martha. Lazarus is the oldest of three and together with my sister, Mary, we have great need of him. Ever since my husband died, Mary and I have relied on Lazarus for our everyday needs. Father had a good fruit business with customers in Jerusalem and Jericho so since his death Lazarus has been managing the date stand. His income helps provide what we need. Simply put, we are glad to have him back, for family reasons as well as for business. But perhaps more importantly, we are grateful to have learned something new about Jesus.

Our village, Bethany, is a short distance from Jerusalem through the rolling hills between Jerusalem and Jericho. Given as many travelers as there are, my love of hospitality has served us well. I enjoy having visitors in our home, and Jesus is always welcome in our rooftop guestroom, or for a meal, or just to rest after the climb into town. One day he made that climb and something extraordinary happened ...

About two weeks ago Jesus stopped here briefly en route to a small village on the other side of the Jordan. His visit was rushed because some religious leaders in Jerusalem were out to kill him. Though everyone knows the risks of working on the Sabbath, Jesus had given sight to a blind man on the Holy day. It was shortly after this incident that Lazarus became sick.

We called our local physician, who recommended another in Jerusalem, who came, but our brother only grew worse. So then we sent a messenger to tell Jesus that Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loved, was gravely ill. Given his affection for our family, we expected him to come at once. To our disappointment the messenger returned alone. Then again, he came bearing good news. He heard Jesus tell his disciples that this sickness would not end in death but would instead bring glory to God and God's son.

(slow, grave) The very next day Lazarus died. Imagine our confusion! Yes, we could understand Jesus' reluctance to return to a hostile city, but why didn't he just say the word, just heal my brother from where he was? He did it with the centurion, after all! And why the hope? Why tell us the sickness would not end in death? Our grief was compounded by confusion, disappointment, and for me, anger.

So, we gave our brother a proper burial according to our custom and religious practices. His body was well wrapped with prepared spices and placed in our family tomb the following day. On the fourth day, with a house still full of relatives, mourners, and guests—many of whom were my brother’s customers—someone came in quietly and whispered that Jesus was on his way up the hill. Not wanting to create a scene, I set out for my confrontation with Jesus. I confess that I was angry; I was angry that Jesus delayed his coming, and my tone disguised nothing. “Lord, if you had been here,” I said, “my brother would not have died.” He assured me that Lazarus would indeed live again. “Oh yes,” I said sarcastically, “on the last day when all the dead are raised.” Jesus looked me straight in the eye: “I am the resurrection and the life. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Eye to eye with our teacher and friend, my anger dissolved. “Yes, Lord,” I said, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.” I believed him to be the one we hoped would come into the world.

Jesus asked for Mary, my sister, so I went back to the house to get her. Well! When Mary, the sensitive emotional one, saw Jesus she burst into tears and collapsed at his feet. “Lord, if you had been here,” she sobbed, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” The same words; the same words I had used, but Mary, so filled with grief and emotion, moved Jesus to tears.

Jesus asked where Lazarus was laid, and we went with him to the cave in the cemetery. The cave had a large stone covering the opening, and Jesus ordered some in the crowd who had followed us there to take the stone away. “Oh no,” I gasped, “He has been dead four days, and the stench will be bad.” Jesus looked at me and asked, “Didn’t I tell you that if you had faith you would see the glory of God?” Then Jesus looked toward heaven, prayed, and, turning to the cave, he shouted at the top of his lungs, “Lazarus, come out!”

To our utter amazement my brother came shuffling out of the cave. He shuffled because he was tightly wrapped and so couldn’t walk. Then he just stood there, stiff as a statue. Jesus ordered the people nearby to unbind him and let him go. Lazarus was alive again! We were overjoyed! Mourning turned into singing, tears into laughter. The whole village danced and sang all night.

So now the three of us are together again. We met Jesus in a new and special way and he has a very special place in our hearts and home. But more than that, we know the full meaning of those words that Jesus is the resurrection and the life for all who believe.

Lent 6 – Jesus Enters Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-11

What a day! We who are Jesus' disciples are excited, even elated this evening! This first day of Passover Week has been almost everything we could have hoped for. We're not sure what all will happen this week, so please forgive me if I sound a bit exuberant as I tell some of the events of the day.

I am Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples. Yesterday we spent a quiet Sabbath with friends in the village of Bethany, and today about mid-morning we started out toward Jerusalem. The road was full of pilgrims in a festive mood who were going to the Passover Festival. We joined them in singing some of the Psalms that pilgrims sing on the way to the festival. I particularly recall singing the one that began:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
We were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter
And our tongues with shouts of joy.

We, the disciples of Jesus, as well as some others, expect that during this week our Teacher will declare himself the long awaited Messiah, the King of Israel. Therefore we sang the Psalm as a prophecy about to be fulfilled. But Jesus did not sing as we did. I don't know why.

As we approached the crossroad at Bethphage, Jesus sent Thomas and me ahead to the house of Joel, who is a friend of Jesus, to fetch the donkey and its colt that were tied at the gate. We went, and as Jesus had warned us, Joel and another man were standing there and asked what we were doing. We responded, as Jesus told us: "The Teacher needs it and will send it back." Joel simply replied, "Take it."

It seemed highly unusual that Jesus should ride on a lowly donkey rather than a horse if he is to declare himself the King of Israel, but we followed our Teacher's direction. By the time we returned to where Jesus was waiting, many in the crowd recognized him. They were from towns in Galilee—people who had seen some of Jesus' miracles—and from Bethany who knew of the raising of Lazarus to life. They were telling each other what they knew or had heard about Jesus. Some of us put our outer cloaks on the donkey's back and helped Jesus mount the animal. That sparked a spontaneous outburst of praise and demonstration. People laid their cloaks in front of the donkey. Others cut branches from trees to spread on the rocky road, forming a rude matting. We began singing, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." The song "Hosanna in the highest heaven" rose to a higher and higher pitch. As we entered the City the atmosphere was alive! It was as fire leaping from heart to heart!

But there seemed to be a disconnect. Instead of responding to our songs and praises, Jesus appeared unmoved, even sad. In fact, he wept when he looked down on the City from the Mount of Olives.

When we approached the Temple, Jesus dismounted and looked around. He appeared troubled by what he saw. It was late afternoon. Jesus simply said, "Let's return to Bethany," which we did, walking in silence, each with our own thoughts. I left the donkey and colt at Joel's house. *(pause)* I was trying to make sense of all that happened today when I recalled a Scripture from the prophet Zechariah: "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey." Yes, that is what happened today. Our king has come, and, as the prophet said, he came humbly.