

# *St James United Church*



## Message for February 22, 2026

### First Sunday in Lent

“Called Beloved” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-7; John 1:40-52

You may be scratching your heads, having expected a gospel reading about Jesus fasting for forty days and nights. Traditionally Lent begins with this reading, understandably too, the length of Lent aligned to how long Jesus was in the wilderness and many of our practices based on him fasting for that time. But why did Jesus go fasting there in the first place? Because he wanted to understand God’s claim on him in his baptism, something that we are called to do during Lent, pondering not only who Jesus is but who we are through him, reflect on our identity.

That is very much the focus of John 1:40-51. It begins with Andrew, one of John the Baptist’s disciples who earlier in the chapter was told by John that Jesus is the Lamb of God. Curious, he and a companion followed Jesus and ended up speaking with him for the rest of the day. We pick up the story after this as Andrew seeks out his brother Simon to tell him that he believes Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus then gives him the nickname Peter, or Rock. Jesus calls Philip who tells Nathaniel that he believes Jesus is the one Moses and the prophets wrote about, and that he’s a Nazarene. Nathaniel questions if anyone from Nazareth can be good. Jesus overlooks that slight and names him as trustworthy, prompting Nathaniel to then affirm Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel. Again and again, people share not only who Jesus is but they discover something about themselves in him.

This points to the heart of the spiritual life. So often we think there is something wrong with us and seek to become something different than we are. Lent can accentuate this if we approach the season with self judgement, choosing a practice like fasting as a form of punishment or of self-discipline. But why not choose practices that help us become fuller, more integrated versions of ourselves instead? Fasting can be this and I’d like to give gratitude to Skyler who described to a group of us recently the approach he was taught growing up. He was told to abstain from something he did in his life that he felt he shouldn’t do, not doing it a way to put his life more in line with the good. Craving for it is then a prompt to pray and so to nurture his relationship with God. I like that. I also see an opportunity to grow in self-awareness. Often the things I need to give up, what I sense pulls me away from the good, are what subconsciously I use for self-comfort. Fasting helps me become more aware of my triggers, more aware of issues underlying those. I can’t change my experiences, but I can change how I live after them, lessen reacting out of them and start to draw on what I learned through them.

It is helpful here to consider the story in Genesis of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We have long been taught to view this story negatively, that Eve brought sin into the world because by eating the fruit and giving it to her husband she disobeyed God and caused Adam to do as well. This can attach itself to our self-identity, calling ourselves fallen, again prompting a punishment approach to Lenten practices. In addition, this view impacts how women are treated, blamed for the “fall,” ignoring that Adam was with her. Some word play can reinforce this, Aramaic for snake sounding like Eve in Hebrew, *Chavah*. What if it's the other way around? What if she is *Chavah*, the mother of life because she talked to the serpent? We sing at Easter in a traditional chant, “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam that gained for us so great a redeemer.” What if the fault is necessary too because it is really about our growth in awareness, that eating the fruit is not disobedience but growing up and so coming to know the difference between good and evil, losing innocence but in so doing gaining a greater capacity for creativity, God making us co-creators, not just tending the garden passively but shaping it and making it better. We do make mistakes, but we can also reflect on them and make changes. In making this possible, Eve sounds like the mother of life, not static life but life that is dynamic, evolving and ever-redeeming.

With this in mind, I invite you to consider again Jesus' disciples. Remember how they came to know themselves through him. This points to how gaining integration of our past experiences, especially ones where we “fall” only comes through patience and a fair amount of God's grace. Perhaps along with fasting, we can take up prayerfully reading the bible this Lent. Turn to stories where Jesus affirms those he meets, helping them see themselves as he did, not as sinners to be judged but God's beloved children, claimed in love as he was. Imagine him speaking to you. And believe him. Believe too the love he shows from the cross. There he took our sins upon himself. Why? Because pain that is not transformed is transmitted, that is unresolved pain is reacted from, often subconsciously and we hurt those around us. In one sense Jesus models our call to reflect on our experiences, seek therapy if needed, so we can reduce the tendency to transfer traumas on to others, taking the pain within himself rather than passing it on, seen profoundly as he forgave those who killed him. But beyond this, I think he gave us all a spiritual booster, as we join ourselves to him, helping us do that integration work. In this he takes the fruit that divides life into good and evil and brings them together, helps us bring our experiences together, to stop judging ourselves and instead see that we're people who fall but also grow.

Beginning this week we embark on our Lenten journey. We join ourselves to Jesus, looking to him and all that he means to us, not to become different than we are but to let him work through who we are and so to grow in that. May these weeks then not be a time of self judgement as we look down on our falls but rather one where we grow in self-awareness, where we start to see ourselves as Jesus does, as God's beloved, Amen.