

Genesis 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11
February 22, 2026

Poetry

My reading group met online this past week to discuss a little paperback book about writing poetry. I have never tried to write poems and include little poetry in sermons, except what is found in scripture, such as the 23rd psalm or the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, or countless others. Much of the Bible *is* poetry.

It is possible that the world's first actual literature, was *poetry*, making its way into the human consciousness even before prose storytelling.

One surprising thing I learned, is how much like poetry is the writing of sermons. I know some preachers shoot from the hip, so to speak; others use outlines or some unique to them system of order, and some just ramble on; but I have always felt better if I wrote them out, and then revised and culled and shaped the final product. Many of the suggestions in this little book about how to write poems apply to sermons as well.

Keep it clean, to the point. Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases. Don't introduce items that might distract. Be judicious about adjectives and adverbs; Don't conflate metaphor and simile or overuse them. Let the reader, or the case of preaching, the hearer, supply some of the content, trust that they know something, are able to work things out. The list goes on. I find myself just marking through things as Friday turns into Saturday and as Sunday comes.

"Poetry is the language of truth," is a common refrain of poets, and in the heights of the scientific age that sounds less vain than silly. Even the scientists must use words to tell their story. Both poems and sermons are an attempt to use words to speak truth.

Words are weak vessels for truth, that is why other kinds of vessels, that of art and music also join the attempt. Nevertheless words are part of the tool kit and some are called to use them. Both poetry and homily attempt to transcend more literal or factual or scientific expressions of truth and get beneath the surface of things, or rise higher than the heights. Both poetry and sermons can give order to the chaos of our thoughts.

Today is the first Lenten Sunday. Lent is an artificial season of the year. It is itself an attempt to give order to the theological message in the gospel. It starts out by helping us focus on one of life's truest experiences; the universal experience of guilt.

Sometimes preachers and other religious voices are criticized for being negative to the point of doing harm by speaking of temptation and guilt and sin. And, when abused, it can be harmful. But spoken rightly it is healthy, this message about human moral limitations, and Lent gives us time to consider it in ways that are positive and helpful.

In the Book of Genesis, for example, we find the serpent attempting to deceive the first couple and convince them that there is no Sin or guilt, but only

divinity, that they would be like god. Added to this is the sensuality of delicious food, and the people failed the test. The deceiver's message turned out not to be true.

In the gospel reading for the day, we find Jesus tested as well. There is a three-fold structure to the temptations; necessary things, food, represented by bread, is presented as an example of things necessary for survival; aspirational things, the temptation to believe that power and wealth overcome the human problem, even if one must sell the soul to attain them. In reality they do not give life; and idolatry, the worship as divine, of that which is not divine.

It has never been the intention of the church, at least not the normal practice, although many people have experienced it this way, to create a false reality by convincing people that Sin is real, which means guilt is real, when in fact they are not.

The reality of testing and Sin is real regardless of whether or not it is proclaimed. Its proclamation is meant to explain a phenomenon already present in human experience. It is good and healthy, it is a grace, to hear the truth about ourselves.

Some have abused the teaching about Sin by preaching it in an illegitimate way, manipulating a behavior, even if it is a good one, under duress. There is little spiritual value in the practice of any good behavior or the confession a right belief under threat or promise of reward.

A greater spiritual benefit accompanies heartfelt devotion and voluntary participation in activities and rituals undergirded by faith, and love or God.

When the Bible tells the story of Adam and Eve, it engages us at this level of truth about our lives. We may not initially like to be told about our attraction to forbidden things, or of the foundational arrogance or pride that drives us to pursue life without God, if that were even a possibility. It doesn't take much to see that whatever we call it, *that* we are tested and sometimes fail represents the truth about all of us.

And, it is a truth that liberates us because another part of the proclamation of the Church is that the weight of our guilt has been carried by Christ on our behalf, and the sentence has been paid, setting us free.

Part of our sinfulness, however, is built on a preference to be innocent, vindicated rather than forgiven. To be vindicated is to be proven innocent in the first place, rendering it unnecessary for Christ to die on our behalf. It is common to latch on to the times when we actually are innocent, or to a reasoning that make it seem so, and to make that innocence the centerpiece of our self-understanding.

But this pursuit is deceiving. All that vindication can do is provide a rationale of innocence up to the present moment. It cannot remove the future burden. Every moment is a great risk of failure.

We have been watching the Olympics for two weeks. For some the pressure of expectations born on the wings of dreams and hard work and years of training turn out to be crushing, causing failure at the crucial moment.

The cross of Christ removes that burden once and for all. As a result we are free to do God's will without fear. Because when failure comes, and it always comes, it is accompanied by Grace. It is better to be forgiven than it is to be vindicated. How does one speak of this magnificent grace? Perhaps a little poetry? The 51st psalm was the reading for Ash Wednesday. Listen to it in the King James Version, which is more poetic than any other, as the concluding words for today:

51 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.
5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.
6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

13 Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.

15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

During this Lenten season, let us give attention to the ways we accept our sinfulness in principle, but not in fact, preferring to deceive ourselves that we are innocent, when we are not. Let us give up the effort to be vindicated and plead guilty, and as it were, beg the mercy of the court.

Since mercy is already given, ready for our acceptance, let us make it our aim to receive it with humility and grace. Amen.

Daniel 6 - The Lion's Den

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, 2 with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. 3 Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. 4 At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. 5 Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

6 So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! 7 The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. 8 Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 9 So King Darius put the decree in writing.

10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a

day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

11 Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. 12 So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?"

The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."

13 Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." 14 When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

15 Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."

16 So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

17 A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. 18 Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without

eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

19 At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. 20 When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

21 Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! 22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty."

23 The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

24 At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

25 Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

"May you prosper greatly!

26 "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God

and he endures forever;

his kingdom will not be destroyed,

his dominion will never end.

27 He rescues and he saves;

he performs signs and wonders

in the heavens and on the earth.

He has rescued Daniel

from the power of the lions."

28 So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

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