

“Full to the Brim”

Joel 2:12-17 & Luke 4:1-13

Pastor James York

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Prayer for Understanding God of the wilderness places in our lives, it can be hard to hear you in the desert. It can be hard to hear you in the city, in the midst of our calendar reminders, rush-hour traffic, and notification alerts. It can be hard to hear you, so we ask: make everything quiet. Pause the chaos. Still the rushing. Ease our racing thoughts. Give us ears to hear your Word for us today which promises that even in the desert you are full to the brim. We are listening. We ache for your good news. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Our theme for Lent is *Full to the Brim*. I am prayerfully studying material from Sanctified Art, a group of Presbyterian pastors and artists; John Shea a contemporary theologian; studying scripture; looking for connection points with your life; and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each week, I will merge the insights into the sermon. I hope to share some statements that reveal a fresh facet of God, take you out of your comfort zone, and motivate you to wrestle with God to see if the statement is true for you. I hope to ask questions that expand love, joy, peace, hope, and grace. *Full to the Brim, An Expensive Lent*. A quest to increase our capacity to receive and give grace.

Our Lenten devotional booklet is from Sanctified Art. The poems I share are in the booklet. The booklet is designed to be a companion to our worship together.

Lent began this past Wednesday with the words of the prophet Joel. **Joel 2:12-17 NLT “The Lord says, “Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Don’t tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.” Return to the Lord your God, for God is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. God is eager to relent and not punish.”**

You are invited to come fully as you are, to return home to God. You are God’s beloved child. Your brokenness, joy, gifts, and doubts all belong to God. Brokenness is a beginning. Breaking our faith open allows us to go deeper. Expansive faith is possible when we break open old faith. Digging deeper requires broken ground. Your journey with God is not a performance. It is intimate and rewarding in ways that usually are not measurable. God loves you, the real you. God loves your stripped-down essence, free from all your accomplishments, stuff, and doings. You are enough. Come as you are, with all that you are.

“On My Way”

A poem by Sarah Speed

You said return to me so here I am skin and bones held together with memories and a little bit of duct tape.

I am bringing the worst of me, consider yourself warned—the furrowed brow, the achy back, the slew of judgments, a pocket full of assumptions, the track of negativity that runs laps in my head.

I am bringing it all because you said return to me, edits not required, so return I will.

And not all of it will be bad.

Some of it will be lovely.

I will bring a wagon full of nostalgia, a melody that won’t let me go, a million stories that start with the words,

“Oh it was beautiful!”

I will bring a mended heart, a glass half-full, two lungs, out of breath from dancing too long, and dreams that taste like honey.

I will bring my whole messy human self because I know, I just know, deep in my bones, that you are already running to meet me.

There are no cuts on this team.

You said you’d take it all, so here I come.

Me and all my humanity.

We are on my way.

The Sanctified Art team wrote this about the theme *Full to the Brim, An Expansive Lent*: “The scriptures for this Lenten season are filled with parables and promises of God’s abundant and expansive grace. We have done nothing to deserve or earn this grace, and yet, like water, it spills over. Full to the Brim is an invitation—into a radically different Lent, into a full life. It is an invitation to be authentically who you are, to counter scarcity and injustice at every turn, to pour out even more grace. It disrupts the scarcity mentality. When we allow ourselves to be filled to the brim with God’s lavish love, that love spills over. Love reaches beyond ourselves; like water, it rushes and flows, touching everything in its path. Lent often emphasize restraint, confession, and piety. The origins of Lent were that one was to leave their old life behind to fast and prepare to be baptized into a new way of living. In essence, this was a practice of stepping away from the rat race, corrupt power, scarcity mentality, and empty rituals in order to live a more expansive and full life. And so, Full to the Brim trusts the promise of our baptisms—God has already claimed us as God’s own and nothing we can do will ever change or erase that. Full to the Brim does not ignore or deny sin and suffering. It does not absolve accountability for wrongdoing. Instead it contextualizes our faith. If love is our beginning, how can we live our lives led by love’s promises? It reminds us to live fully—as we pursue justice and hope, or express grief and gratitude. And so, this Lent, let us trust—fully—that we belong to God. Let us increase our capacity to receive and give grace. Let us discover the expansive life God dreams for us.”

Following the Presbyterian approach, the theme that emerged from scripture was tested with discussion, prayer, and consensus. The team concluded: “If Lent for you is defined by personal discipline, penitence, and reminders of human sin and finitude, then yes, this theme will be a different experience. We were personally stretched and expanded by this theme. When we asked ourselves if a theme about fullness and expansive grace belonged in Lent, we would return to the scriptures for answers. Time and again, these scriptures show us a God who offers us grace—grace that is undeserved, unearned, illogical, and boundless. In our planning, we shared personal stories about how deeply ingrained the beliefs of unworthiness are in so many of us, how many of these beliefs are rooted in harmful theology, and how they can often shape our lives for the worse. We wrestled with the role of grace and how difficult it can be to receive grace. We talked about how acts of abuse and injustice are often rooted in shame and scarcity. As we studied, discussed, and discerned, it became clear to us that the Holy Spirit was inviting us into a different type of Lent.”

Christian Ethics professor, Mark Douglas commented: “Believing that grace is always a surprise, that apart from God’s grace we can do nothing, and that resurrection is the deepest, most mysterious expression of God’s grace, I simply cannot make theological sense of the claim that any of us can do anything to prepare ourselves for the arrival of such grace on Easter Sunday. Easter is a shock of divine goodness that reveals not the evidence of our worth or the magnitude of our efforts, but God’s astounding power, to which we can but whisper ‘Thank you,’ not ‘Okay: now I’m ready.’ Whatever work we do at learning to discipline our bodies and our lives, we do in response to God’s grace, not in preparation for it. But there, again this response—this disciplining—is not a seasonal exercise; it is a lifelong one.”

“This lent you are invited to look through a lens that highlights the infinite mysteries of Easter even as we journey toward the cross. We cannot prepare for the surprising grace of Easter, but perhaps during this season, we can try to unearth the areas of unworthiness and scarcity in our lives. Perhaps we can practice receiving and extending grace. Perhaps we can strive for a life that is full—full of hope, courage, joy, peace and grace.”

Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman reflects: “Growing up in the church, I always felt like Lent had a particular vibe—a somber, introspective, possibly even self-critical kind of vibe. I remember giving up things for Lent to practice resisting temptation and feeling the weight of my sin like a cloak of guilt. Don’t get me wrong, it’s certainly appropriate that Lent elicits solemnity as we journey alongside Jesus on his journey to death. At times in my life, however, this Lenten energy has become crushing, even to the point of self-hatred. As we went through the scriptures, I was struck by how much of the language and imagery was sprinkled with nurturing affirmations and nourishing comfort. It felt like uncovering breathtaking love letters from a God who desires for us to have full, expansive lives. It was like water in the desert, and I have to say, I dig this Lenten vibe, defined by an abounding Love that bubbles up and spills over, nourishing all of Creation.”

Hannah Garrity reflected: “As a full-time working mother, I have felt perpetually inadequate. I need to be present for the kids, I tell myself. Balancing hours of attention to homework and bedtime, forfeiting exercise windows that would be good for my physical well-being, I have spent the last decade in search of minutes and hours that didn’t exist. All the while, my internal narrative was one of perpetual failure. Failure as a mom, failure as a teacher, failure at meeting a deadline, failure, failure, failure. My husband says to me that we are doing great as parents. And I realize, I am comparing myself to an illusion of patriarchal nostalgia: the stay at home mom who is blissfully happy and effortlessly producing perfect children. My husband is comparing us to another: the glorified hyper-professional making millions, traveling the world, perpetually absent. So, this Lent, I search for the expansive middle ground, the

grace. I allow myself to notice the truly incredible children we are raising. I allow myself to acknowledge the countless successes interwoven in a decade of professional work in art and church and two decades of education. I allow myself to appreciate the multifaceted value of interweaving the parenting and professional years. To me, Full to the Brim is a choice, a way of seeing, a way of being, that God is offering us this Lent.”

Pastor Sarah Speed reflected: “After a particularly exhausting season of my life, I sat on a Zoom call with my therapist and said in exasperation, ‘I just feel like there has to be more than this. I think God would want more for me than this nonstop rat race of gym-work-sleep-repeat.’ My therapist nodded and said, ‘You’re looking for an expansive life,’ and I knew she was right. I crave a life overflowing with beauty, drenched in gratitude, and full to the brim with meaningful relationships. I crave space to rejoice in God’s goodness. I crave a life where we don’t forgive once, but seventy times seventy—forgiveness in excess. I crave a life, a love, a faith that is expansive, overflowing and full to the brim. So this Lent we are flipping the script. We are releasing the Lenten view that drills down on devotion as a response to guilt, sin, or grief, which many of us have learned over the years. Instead, we are leaning into the story of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection to open doors to this expansive life we trust God has in mind for us. Maybe the rat race isn’t the answer. Maybe it is time to get off the hamster wheel. Maybe there is more here than the world lets on. Life, love, and faith—full to the brim.”

Pastor Lisle Gwynn Garrity reflected: “On my birthday, my husband surprised me with a video he had compiled of friends and family wishing me happy birthday. For nearly 25 minutes, I watched as loved ones near and far and from different chapters of my life popped on the screen, told a funny story, shared a memory, or simply filmed a moment in their day with a closing, ‘Happy birthday! We miss you!’ It may sound simple, but afterward, I was full to the brim with the undeniable sense of being loved. It buoyed me. All of a sudden, I had more capacity for grace. My heart softened. The conflicts and challenges in my life were dimmed by a new perspective. I found it easier to extend love for people I found hard to love. The noise of my life quieted enough for me to see clearly the point of it all—to be love, to give love, to receive love. My prayer is that you will be buoyed by this same undeniable feeling of God’s love. May love fill you up, spill over, and expand you—so that you can wake up every day fully trusting that you belong to God.”

Pastor Anna Strickland reflected: “Imagine how the world changes when, instead of making ourselves small with self-deprecation, we live more fully into the overflowing goodness and mercy of God.”

A reading from the gospel of Luke: **Luke 4:1-13** “Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry. Then the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread.” But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil took Jesus up and revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. “I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them,” the devil said, “because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will worship me.” Jesus replied, “The Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only God.’” Then the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘God will order the angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’” Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’” When the devil had finished tempting Jesus, he left him until the next opportunity came.”

The first temptation is to reduce each other to our physical needs, to attract and manipulate others by promises of bread, stuff, money, power. This temptation ignores our identity as a beloved member of God’s family. Each of us is much more than recurring physical needs. Each of us is spirit, is unique, is expanding love, joy, and peace.

The second temptation is revealed in the name of the tempter, devil, means one who tears things apart, a divider. Earthly kingdoms are formed by force, by taking from others, by controlling others, by quieting those who seek to live as equals, by tearing apart the reputation of those who are advocating for peace, unity, and justice. John Shea explains: “The second temptation suggests that accusing others and dividing is the way to power. Do not look at yourself or organization as part of the problem. Find outside causes and accuse them, blame them, smear them, to take the heat off of inside scoundrels. Look out the window at the enemy, but never let the window become a mirror and look at yourself. Fight one another so you can plunder without attracting attention. Spin everything so you look good, and others look bad. In sharp contrast God’s kingdom is pure peace, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation. God’s kingdom is pure relationships with everyone, that are mutual, life giving and ever expanding.”

The third temptation is to follow outside appearance rather than inner grace, to chase fame, wealth, success, victory instead of being fully alive, receiving and sharing love, peace and joy. It is always wanting more instead of being grateful for what you have.

“From Here in the Sand”

A poem by Sarah Speed

You’ve been here before.

I squeeze that truth like an orange in my hands, willing some form of comfort to run out, roll down my wrists,
calm these aching nerves.

You’ve been here before—in the wilderness, in the desert, in the place where nothing is what it seems and
everything is sharp.

You’ve been here before so surely you know how hard it is to hold tight to what is real in the middle of a
storm.

But because you’ve been here before, I will stand tall.

I will sing songs of the river, from here in the sand.

I will sing songs of the river, into the wind.

We are all on a pilgrimage away from our true home, heaven. We are all in the wilderness. We are tempted to reject our identity as God’s beloved. We are tempted to divide. We are tempted to leave some behind. We are tempted to diminish. We are tempted to live a dreary, skeptical, tedious, small life. We are tempted to live running on fumes, empty. God is with us. Even in our worst wildernesses God quenches our thirst with the living water of grace. Abundant love will get us through the wilderness to the glory of Easter. My hope and prayer is we will discover how to live life abundantly, to be fully alive, to expand in receiving grace and expand in sharing grace. Amen