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Forty Days

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Forty Days
A play for the first Sunday of Lent from Luke 4:1-13
by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

CHARACTERS

JANET¹ 37 years old, mother of four children, the oldest of which is 12, married for thirteen years to
ADAM 36 years old

SANDY Janet's neighbor and friend, about 45 years old

DEREK 40, a college friend of Janet's

SETH 18, a waiter (too cynical for his age)

LUKE a vicar at Resurrection Church, part of whose job is the training of readers

The scene is the front of the sanctuary of Resurrection Church. There is a lectern on the left. It's late in the evening of the day after Ash Wednesday. The church is dark with just a few lights on in the front. LUKE, a vicar, is carefully arranging the chancel furniture and changing the paraments, etc. JANET enters from the back. She interrupts his concentration . . .

JANET.

(from some distance down the center aisle) Hi, Luke. *(He can't see her very well and so doesn't recognize her immediately)* It's Janet. I'm a reader for Sunday. Would it be possible to, uh, practice?

LUKE.

Oh, Janet. Sure. Good to-- What're you-- Practice? Now? It's-- *(looks at his watch)* 11:00 at night!

JANET.

I know. I work late.

LUKE.

I guess! Well, sure, we can practice. It shouldn't take long. *(pause)*

¹ *The character of JANET and the decision facing her is suggested by "Discernment," by Frank Rogers, Jr., in Practicing Our Faith, ed. Dorothy Bass*

JANET.

OK. (*pause*) What should I do? I've never done this before.

LUKE.

Oh. Well, just go to the lectern and read.

JANET.

Shouldn't I announce the text or something?

LUKE.

We'll get to that. Just begin at the beginning. What *is* the reading for Sunday? It's the first Sunday of Lent, right?

JANET.

Yes. It's Luke chapter 4: 1-13. (*pause*) I'm going to need some serious help with this reading.

LUKE.

Oh. Sure. Well, you know that this is the story of Jesus' temptation by the Devil in the wilderness. It takes place just after his baptism by John. And while he's in the wilderness he's being led by the spirit of the Lord. But while he's deep in prayer and fasting, attempting to discern God's plan for him, the Devil tempts him three times. (*a digression*) Now it's interesting that Luke puts the temptations in a different order than Matthew does--

JANET.

No, I know what the story is *about*. It's the actual *reading* of it . . . you know . . . out loud . . . in front of people . . . who I don't know . . . any more.

LUKE.

OK. Here's exactly what you do: After the choir is finished singing the verse between the second reading and the Gospel, you get up from your pew. Walk to the lectern. The Bible should be open, but if it isn't there'll be a red--no, a green ribbon at the place where you should start reading. Now just in case the second reader has forgotten to put the green ribbon in the right place, you bring your bulletin with you from the pew keeping your thumb on the Gospel reading-

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JANET.

LUKE! What a process! Could you just walk me through it? Better--could you do it the way you want me to and I'll watch? Just once?

LUKE nods in agreement. He gets up and goes to the Bible and places the ribbon in the right place and closes the book. Then he goes to sit in a pew. Janet watches as he silently goes through the steps

CHORUS I: Now!

The CHORUS speaks its lines from seats in the audience.

SETH.

Now!

ADAM.

Well, I'm here now.

SANDY.

What am I supposed to do?

DEREK.

Well, I came all the way out here, God, and I'm waiting.

ADAM.

I took the time off. What do you want me to do?

LUKE.

(stage right; audible now) "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

ADAM.

Forty days! Are you kidding? That's six weeks!

SANDY.

I haven't got that kind of time.

SETH.

They need to know this, now.

DEREK.

I've got to have this now.

SANDY.

I need some help here, now.

ADAM.

I want to do this now.

ALL.

Now. Now, God, now!

Scene. JANET'S kitchen. JANET is speaking to SANDY, who is in her own kitchen.

JANET.

(on the telephone) Now. Adam called and said he wants to come home, now!

SANDY.

Janet, that's nuts.

JANET.

I know.

SANDY.

You're not thinking about it are you? *(no answer)* You're thinking about it, aren't you. I don't believe it.

JANET.

He's my husband.

SANDY.

He's the guy who deserted you and your kids eight months ago and moved in with "the girl at the office."

JANET.

But he says that's over now and the whole thing was a mistake.

SANDY.

Oh, fine. Just when you start to get a life he wants to tear off a big hunk of it for himself. Tell him to shove off.

JANET.

Divorce is wrong.

SANDY.

Living with that liar is wrong. You can't do this. You can't let him back.

JANET.

I won't. At least not for a while. I need some time to think.

SANDY.

But you know the answer now.

JANET.

(JANET and SANDY drop the phones away from their ears. JANET speaks directly to the audience; SANDY speaks directly to JANET.) No, I don't. I go back and forth on this. First *this* seems like the most important thing; then *that*. I've never had a real job until this one. But, I've never seen the kids so unhappy. Sure, I've had more good days than bad ones in the last eight months, but the bad ones have been absolutely hell.

SANDY.

That's natural, Jan. This is bound to be hard. Have you called that therapist? This can be an agonizing process. You're going to need some professional help. Do you still have that number?

JANET.

(Back on the telephones.) No. I mean yes. I mean, I haven't called yet, but, I promise, I will.
(pause) I want to take some time away. Can you keep the kids for awhile? Just a week.

SANDY.

Well, sure, I guess. Where'll you go?

JANET.

Just away. Far away. Maybe a national park. Or a big city. Somewhere where I can be by myself.

SANDY.

What about your job?

JANET.

I'll work it out. I need to do this. I'll bring the kids over tomorrow night. OK?

SANDY.

OK. Just promise me you'll do what's best for yourself.

JANET.

(She drops the phone and speaks to the audience ironically: "as if. . .") Right. *(JANET hangs up.)* What's the matter with me? I've never been so . . . bewildered. *(She returns to the place where she is watching LUKE read the Gospel.)*

CHORUS II: What?

The CHORUS enters and takes a position stage right.

DEREK.

What?

ADAM.

Well, I'm here now.

SETH.

Welcome to the wilderness! OK. So now what?

DEREK.

I came all the way out here, God, and I'm waiting.

SANDY.

What am I supposed to do?

ADAM.

I'm taking the time off. I hope you'll tell me what to do.

JANET.

What'll I do when I get there?

DEREK.

Forty *years*. And I'm still waiting.

SANDY.

Haven't I waited long enough?

SETH.

For what?

ALL.

What? What, God, what?

LUKE.

(still at the lectern right.) "He ate nothing at all during those days and after they were over he was famished."

LUKE exits left.

Scene. A restaurant in San Francisco. JANET and DEREK sitting at a table with a somewhat impatient waiter, SETH, waiting for a response.

DEREK.

(After an extended pause.) What?

JANET.

What? I'm sorry.

SETH.

What do you want, ma'am?

JANET.

That's the question, isn't it? I mean, uh, vegetarian.

DEREK.

Janet, this is a seafood restaurant. We're on Fisherman's Wharf, remember?

JANET.

I know. And I am hungry. Do you have something with vegetables?

SETH.

(with disapproval) Pasta prima Vera, for the lady. And to drink . . . ?

JANET.

Water, please, for now, thank you. *(SETH nods and leaves)*

Pause.

DEREK.

Hey, it's Derek . . . are you still here?

JANET.

Oh yes, I am here. I'm really here. I was just thinking about the last time we were here.

DEREK.

You remember?

JANET.

How could I ever forget? It was another life.

DEREK.

I just can't get over it. I haven't seen you for fifteen years, and today I bump into you in the city. How long have you *been* here?

JANET.

Almost three weeks.

DEREK.

What were you doing in *that* neighborhood?

JANET.

Research.

DEREK.

Research on what? (*pause*) I'm sorry. If it's none of my business, let's talk about--

JANET.

No. It's a fair question. I wish I had a good--better--answer. I work for a food bank back home. I'm a grant writer. I was looking at facilities.

DEREK.

(*winks*) It's as good an excuse as any for a trip to San Francisco, isn't it?

JANET.

I guess. (*beat*) Life . . . is . . . strange.

DEREK.

Tell me about it. Really. I mean it. Where have you been for the last fifteen years?

JANET.

It's not all that interesting.

DEREK.

Try me. (*The waiter brings DEREK a glass of white wine.*)

JANET.

Well, it all started with a big wedding. Which *you* didn't come to.

DEREK.

Who knew?

JANET.

You knew. I sent you an invitation.

DEREK.

Lost in the mail? (*pause. Tries again.*) I was in Singapore, on business.

JANET.

It's as good an excuse as any. (*winks back. touché.*)

DEREK.

Janet, it was in Topeka! I don't do Kansas.

JANET.

Anyway, it was a big church wedding with a sixteen-place-settings-and-four automatic-bread-maker reception.

DEREK.

Barbie and Ken: the wedding set!

JANET.

Exactly. Then four kids in six years. *(pause)* I have pictures.

DEREK.

You're joking. I mean, you look *great*.

JANET.

(Knows when she is being patronized) Thank-you.

DEREK.

And, uh, . . . *(he's searching for a name)*

JANET.

Adam?

DEREK.

Adam, of course.

JANET.

It costs money to raise kids and keep a wife happy *at home*. Adam has a good job. I mean it pays a lot. Great benefits. Long hours. It worked for awhile--a good while. Then, he discovered other benefits at the office: a very pretty twenty-something assistant. Long story short: he decided to change our lives. I was not consulted. Only informed--eight months ago. "Don't worry," he said, "you'll have all the money you need." I was devastated, flattened. I cried for a month. I was depressed for another month.

DEREK.

You seem to have come through beautifully!

JANET.

I started to get it together. I went to church for the first time in five years. I'm not even sure why. Just muscle memory, I guess. I volunteered to work in the church's feeding center. I wrote a grant for the center and we got it. Then the pastor hired me as a half-time assistant just to write grants. When the director took another job, I became *(tah-dah!!!)* interim director of The Resurrection Emergency Food Center. Twelve years after graduating with a business administration degree, I finally get a chance to use it.

DEREK.

And now you're in San Francisco having dinner with me. Great story!

JANET.

Ah, but we're nowhere near the end, I'm afraid. The plot thickens.

DEREK.

"The Life of Janet," chapter 3.

JANET.

Last month, eight months after "Honey, I need a change," Adam calls me and says he wants to come back home. He loves me. He loves the kids. He's learned a lot about himself. He'd like us all to be together again.

DEREK.

I've heard this one before.

JANET.

Really? It sure surprised me.

DEREK.

Men, especially men of a certain age, are creatures of impulse. Show them something that looks better than what they've got and they want it. Now. They grab for it and deal with the trade-offs later. They save time that way and time is something they think they're running out of.

JANET.

Ah, is that the way it is! Well, I'm tempted to do that, too. How often in life do you get a good excuse to start fresh. A new life with focus and purpose and satisfaction. After all, *(melodramatically)* mah man done me wrong; who would blame me for moving on alone?

DEREK.

Not me. And, not anyone who counts.

JANET.

What about me? Wouldn't I blame myself?

DEREK.

You learn to forgive yourself; to err is human, to forgive divine.

JANET.

And what about my kids? You have no idea what it's like to be asked questions like, "Mom, why are you leaving now that Dad just got here?" or "Mom, why aren't you and Daddy wearing your rings anymore?"

DEREK.

You're right. I have no idea.

JANET.

I do not want to act out of impulse or in a storm of emotion. So, I am here to do research. I'm in serious need of information to help me make a decision.

DEREK.

Let me *help* you with your research.

JANET.

What?

DEREK.

I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing to say. Habit.

LUKE.

(from off stage) And the Devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Pause.

DEREK.

(He starts again.) Janet, you haven't asked about me, but I'm going to tell you. I've been drifting for a long time. My life has added up to pretty much nothing. Lately, I've been searching, but I still feel lost. I tried going to church, but I get there and I don't know what to do. I don't even know how to pray anymore. I don't know what to pray for.

JANET.

It's hard, Derek. It's so hard. I'm not sure what to pray for. That's why I came 1500 miles from home. To find out *what* to pray for.

DEREK.

I think I know. Things like our meeting don't just happen by simple coincidence. You know, I haven't had a single friendship since college that was anything near as good as ours was. Back then, you called me "your mentor." Now, you're finding your way and you could help me make something out of my life. Maybe I've *been* praying for you and I haven't even known it.

JANET.

Maybe--

The waiter, SETH, arrives with the food.

SETH.

Lobster Thermidor for you, sir, and Pasta prima Vera for the lady. Would you care for anything more to drink ma'am?

LUKE.

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

JANET.

(quietly) I can't do this. I'm sorry, Derek. *(She exits.)*

An awkward pause.

SETH.

More wine, sir?

CHORUS III: Why?

The CHORUS enters from stage right.

SANDY.

Why?

ADAM.

Well, I'm here now.

SANDY.

Great idea to get away and all, but . . . Now what am *I* supposed to do?

DEREK.

I came all the way out here, God, and I'm still waiting.

SETH.

Another one wandering in the wilderness. Why?

DEREK.

Was that you talking? Thanks for nothing.

JANET.

I think I wanted that. I think I still want that. Why?

ADAM.

Let's see, forty divided by seven is . . .

SANDY.

And when do I get mine

DEREK.

Why the detour?

SETH.

Why is this so hard?

ADAM.

Why does this take so long?

ALL.

Why? Why, God, why?

LUKE.

“The devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.”

Scene. The arrival area of an airport. ADAM pacing. JANET enters with a carry-on bag.

JANET.

Why are you here?

ADAM.

(the answer is obvious to him.) To take you home.

JANET.

No, Sandy’s picking me up. How did you know when I was coming in?

ADAM.

I finally got it out of Sandy. Like pulling teeth! *(JANET groans.)* You’d think you were in the witness protection program or something--

JANET.

Adam, I’m not going home with you. You’re not coming home. You haven’t moved back have you, because if you have, I’ll--

ADAM.

No, I haven’t. But I’m here now. Could we just talk? Janet? It’s so good to see you, alone. *(He touches her.)*

JANET.

(giving in) OK. Not for long. I’m beat.

ADAM.

So, where have you been for three weeks, I--

JANET.

Adam, that's my busin--

ADAM.

OK, OK, I'm sorry. *(a beat)* Janet, I want this separation or whatever it's called to be over now.

JANET.

You want everything now. You wanted out now; you want to come back now. You can't always have everything now.

ADAM.

I'd get down on my knee but I wrecked it doing Tae-BO.²

JANET.

Tae-BO? *(JANET winces in a combination of amusement, sympathetic pain and concern. She still loves him)*

ADAM.

(Adam does not respond; moves on.) I'll give you anything you want. The world! Let's go on a trip. Hawaii, or Paris--right, let's start with Paris.

Janet looks sadly at Adam.

Let's buy a new house. The old one has too many bad memories now. We can put in a gourmet kitchen and a Jacuzzi. And, let's get diamond wedding rings like we always said. We'll start over. I'll make it all up to you.

JANET.

Adam, no. I--

² Or whatever is the hottest, trendiest weight-loss-and-fitness-through-exercise thing now.

ADAM.

Wait, don't say no.

LUKE.

And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you then will worship me, it will all be yours."

ADAM.

Forget the house. Do you want to work? I'll get you a job. An assistant vice-presidency. In marketing. I can do it. I'm the boss. Just be my wife again, Jansie, like before.

JANET.

I have a job.

ADAM.

Doing what?

JANET.

I'm the interim director of Resurrection's emergency food center. I feed poor people.

ADAM.

Oh. Well, great. (*searching*) Janet, tell me what I can do. I'm circling here. I don't know what to say or do or think. I need you. What do I have to do? Do you want me to say "I'm sorry"?

JANET.

I don't want you to do anything. There's nothing you can do, at least not now. Wait a minute, there is something you can do. You can give me time.

ADAM.

Time for what?

JANET.

Time to pray. To hear God's voice. To discover what God wants.

ADAM.

C'mon, Janet. (*pushing the emotional button*) What about the kids? Don't they deserve a stable, two-parent household like we had?

JANET.

Adam, how could you-- (*SANDY enters*)

SANDY.

(*to ADAM*) I knew I shouldn't have told you. Janet, I'm so--

ADAM.

Sandy, thanks but we don't need your help. I'll drive Janet home.

SANDY.

Janet?

ADAM.

Please go away, Sandy. This is my wife and none of your business.

SANDY.

You don't know who "this" is. But I know who *you* are.

ADAM.

(*Making a frustrated, threatening move toward SANDY, but he stops himself.*) Sandy--

SANDY.

Go ahead, do it. That'll make all of this easier.

ADAM.

(*back to JANET, near tears*) Jansie, you're mine, aren't you?

LUKE.

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

SANDY.

Janet?

JANET.

(looks for a long moment at ADAM, then, to SANDY) Thanks. I'll find my own way home.
(They exit.)

CHORUS III: Where?

The CHORUS enters from stage right.

ADAM.

Well, I'm here now.

SANDY.

Where?

SETH.

They're totally lost . . . I think.

DEREK.

I've been at this for six weeks now.

SANDY.

Six weeks and four days to be exact.

JANET.

Where are you taking me, Lord?

LUKE.

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem . . .

DEREK.

Jerusalem? You're kidding!

SETH.

Where?

LUKE.

. . . and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple . . .

ADAM.

Where?

LUKE.

. . . saying to him "if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here . . ."

Phone rings

ALL.

From where?

Scene. JANET is at her desk at Resurrection Emergency Food Center. It is 11:30 PM. SANDY is at home. They speak on the telephone.

SANDY.

From where?

JANET.

From Resurrection.

SANDY.

What are you doing there at 11:30 at night? Where are the kids?

JANET.

I'm catching up on some paperwork. My mother's at home with the kids.

SANDY.

Oh. What are you doing calling me at 11:30 at night?

JANET.

Sandy, you called me.

SANDY.

I did? How did I get this number?

JANET.

I'm having my calls forwarded. So . . . you rang?

LUKE.

"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you."

SANDY.

(a moment's pause while SANDY clears her head) Janet, I'm just going to say this because--, because I have to say it. Every day that goes by, I'm more sure that you should make this separation permanent and go it alone.

JANET.

We've had this discussion before and you know how I feel.

SANDY.

You may think you know how you feel, but that's only fear. Once you're on your own, that fear will fade day by day as you get stronger. I know, I've been there. It seems all wrong, at first, and then one day you realize "I'm free of all that bad stuff!" And then you'll thank me.

JANET.

I've always been taught that divorce is a sin.

SANDY.

By who?

JANET.

My parents. My church.

SANDY.

Your church! After all the work you've done for that food center. They'd have a lot of nerve to criticize you. You're a saint. God knows that. God will take care of you.

LUKE.

"On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

JANET.

What about the children?

SANDY.

The sooner children learn the world isn't perfect, the better. (*JANET doesn't answer.*) Look, I'm so tired I can't see straight, but real soon I want you to have lunch with me and a friend. She's a first-rate divorce lawyer. Sweetheart, you've got all the cards in this hand. This is your chance. You're ready now! (*JANET goes to the lectern.*)

Silence.

SANDY.

Janet, are you OK? Are you still there?

LUKE.

(*Re-entering from the rear of the church*) Janet? Are you OK? Finish the reading and let's call it a night.

JANET.

(*to SANDY*) Yes, I'm here.

(reading) Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ When the Devil had finished every test he departed from him until an opportune time.” *This is the word of the Lord.*

So the Devil gets the last word.

LUKE.

In this Gospel reading, yes.

JANET.

And, he’ll be back.

LUKE.

He’ll always be back. At least here in the wilderness.

JANET.

Why is this called “the Gospel”?

LUKE .

Good question. It’s kind of a bad news, good news situation, isn’t it?

JANET.

What’s the good news?

LUKE.

Well, how about this. No matter *how* bad things get, no matter *how* hard you think it is to hear God’s voice, no matter *how* tempting the temptations are, you know Jesus has been there before you.

JANET

Still sounds like the bad news. When do we get to the really Good News?

LUKE.

Six weeks from now.

LUKE.

Remember, this is only the first Sunday of Lent. We've got a long way to go. Lots of readings.

JANET.

What a process!

LUKE.

Forty days of prayer and fasting. And then the feast of the Resurrection. Now wilderness seems like a good place to start, don't you think? Good night?

JANET

(to LUKE) Yes.

(to SANDY) Good night. *(LUKE and SANDY exit)*

(to herself; to God.) Should I do this?

Janet takes out a cell phone at the lectern.

CHORUS V: There?

The CHORUS enters from stage right.

DEREK.

There?

SANDY.

Who invented waiting periods?

ADAM.

Is this the good news or the bad news?

DEREK.

I think I'm finally out of the wilderness. Is that the edge?

SANDY.

Of a cliff.

JANET.

Is this your voice, Lord? Am I hearing you?

SETH.

How would you know? There are so many.

ADAM.

Well, I'm here now. At least.

SANDY.

Are we there yet?

ALL.

Are we there yet? *(beat)* Can we talk?

JANET checks a piece of paper with a phone number on it, then dials deliberately. She gets an answer.

JANET.

Adam, can we talk?

ADAM.

What time is it? Jansie? It's so sweet to hear your voice. You want to talk now? I'll be right home.

JANET.

No, not at home. At Resurrection. I know it's late, but I'd like to talk here. You *remember* where the church is, don't you?

ADAM.

(defensive) Yes. I'll be right there-- Is this going to be good news or bad news?

JANET.

Adam, give me about forty minutes, OK?

ADAM.

Forty minutes. Anything you say. *(hangs up)*

Janet puts the phone down and decides to practice her reading. She carefully arranges the ribbons. Closes the Bible and then reopens it. She begins reading:

JANET.

Today's Gospel comes from Luke, the fourth chapter, verses one through thirteen. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." *(JANET remembers Luke's words:)* "The wilderness seems like a good place to start, don't you think?" I'm only just starting? *(Preoccupied with this thought, she continues to read down the page of the Bible in front of her until she discovers verse 18. It seems to her that God has given her this verse.)*

(reading)

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

The Spirit of the Lord *IS* upon me. Will this be the year of the Lord's favor?

A five-count pause.

DEREK.

What?

SANDY.

Where?

SETH.

Why?

ADAM.

When?

LUKE.

Now!

END

The playwright suggests that the audience respond to *Forty Days* by singing “Spirit of Gentleness,” words and music by James K. Manley, #684 in *With One Voice* (Augsburg Fortress, 1995)