

Emerging from the Wilderness
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
February 22, 2026
The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

On Ash Wednesday, I preached a sermon based on an article written by my friend and seminary classmate, The Rev. Dr. Andy Thayer. In his article, "Don't give up chocolate for Lent," Dr. Thayer reminds us that the purpose of this time is more profound and life-changing than fasting from something for 40 days - only to rush back to our same habits.

Dr. Thayer grounds his argument in our Gospel text, as he writes:

Consider Jesus in the wilderness. After his baptism, after hearing the voice name him beloved, he is driven into forty days of testing. The temptations he faces are not random; they are distortions of his vocation. Turn stones into bread. Seize power. Secure glory. Each temptation offers him a shortcut, a way of being Messiah that conforms to the logic of domination, spectacle, and self-preservation. When he resists, he does not do so in order to indulge later. He does not finish forty days in the desert only to start performing miracles on demand, consolidating political control, or throwing himself off the Temple for applause. His resistance is not temporary restraint. **It is alignment.** He is conforming himself to his identity as the beloved Son, refusing forms of power that would betray his vocation. The wilderness is not about proving endurance; it is about clarifying who he is and how he will live.¹

Dr. Thayer continues:

That is what Lent is meant to do in us. It is a season in which we examine the ways we are tempted to live out of fear, ego, resentment, or control, and begin practicing another way. The goal is not to grit our teeth for forty days and then resume business as usual. The goal is to become people whose instincts have shifted, whose desires have been retrained, whose lives are more deeply aligned with the dream of God.²

Friends, Lent should always be more than a diet plan, or even a contemplative exercise. But this year given the state of the world around us, aligning our lives more deeply with the dream of God feels crucial to our survival. Though it's difficult to know where to begin, and how to respond.

Which is why we will be joined on our Lenten path by Professor Hanna Reichel and their book, *For Such a Time as This; An Emergency Devotional*. The introduction of the book describes a nation experiencing political, social, and economic crises. As polarization increases, widening gaps lead to social unrest, economic instability, and violence in the streets. Perceived humiliation turns to resentment, feeding a desire to "be great again." Minorities are scapegoated, and there is growing resentment against intellectuals, immigrants, and anyone who can be classified as "other."

As familiar as it may sound, Reichel is describing Germany, roughly a century ago.³ Oh. It's stunning to realize - that we have been here before. We are staggered by disbelief, frustration, weariness, and a certain amount of understandable despair. Yet, "We have been here before," applies to both the diagnosis **and** the **resources** available to us. If we see parallels to earlier times, then we can draw upon the experience and wisdom of those who have gone before us.

To that end, Reichel utilizes the lessons and wisdom of the portion of the German Protestant churches that resisted integration into the Nazi state, known now as the Confessing Church.⁴ While these voices aren't the only wisdom out there, I've found Reichel's book to be incredibly helpful, and I hope you will as well.

But first, in order for this book to be useful to us, I think we need to resist the temptation to get caught up in terminology. We could spend a lot of our time and energy arguing about rising authoritarianism versus totalitarianism. Or being offended by Reichel's use of the term fascism to describe our current political situation.⁵ But friends, for our purposes, let's agree that whatever language we choose to use, our current situation is not the dream of God. Far from it. The moment has come to stand up and publicly and prophetically proclaim with our words and deeds, what it means to follow Jesus in a time such as this.⁶

Which is where I've found Reichel's book so helpful, as they take us step by step through this "Emergency Devotional." Given that we find ourselves in the wilderness this morning, we have time for our first lesson in how to prepare ourselves to face such a time as this.

Reichel begins with what might be the most important lesson of all - finding calm.

They write:⁷

Many things will happen at once. It will feel like a storm: an onslaught of terrifying developments, an interminable bombardment with threats from all sides, a nauseating cascade of news.

...

It is not easy to stay calm in the storm. But it is necessary.

...

This storm is not a natural catastrophe. It is an intentional strategy. It is meant to shock and awe, to overwhelm and debilitate, to create panic and scatter energy. The projection of unstoppable power will be self-fulfilling if [we] let it. Don't let it.

The author's suggestions are simple, though important to hold onto:⁸

Don't let the storm control our emotions.

Don't let the storm direct our responses.

Don't give the storm more power.

Don't let the storm steal our focus.

Because, as they articulate clearly:⁹

This storm is not an illusion; its dangers are real, even so, it is also a distraction. No one can pay attention to all the things all the time. The highest waves raise [our] alarms - and may hide more inconspicuous but forceful blows.

Reichel reminds us of how this worked in Nazi Germany, writing:¹⁰

When the absurd and the atrocious become the everyday, two things happen: First, people desensitize. We run out of outrage.

...

Second, the craving for normalcy is so strong that people will tolerate exceptional measures. Unbridled decision making without regard for process or legal constraints will feel like relief rather than a threat.

Friends, totalitarianism is about total control. It wants to control not just public spaces, but our private spaces as well.¹¹ Which is why we need to carefully tend our hearts and minds and souls.

In the days ahead, let's practice good self-care in the face of the storm. Let's be strategic with our attention. Checking our social media feed every hour doesn't help us. Having spaces and times free from the news and chaos will.

Reichel suggests we follow the news but limit our exposure. Asking [ourselves]: Am I gaining important information, or am I giving away my attention? Am I focusing on what matters, or am I just getting dizzy?¹²

Keeping some of our life beyond the storm's grasp is hard, but essential. Maintaining our focus, resisting the storm, and giving ourselves the space to tend to our souls, is an act of **resistance**.¹³

Our homework this week is to find calm for our souls, to cultivate spaces that are free from the storm swirling around us. To curate our attention and energy carefully. These are Lenten habits that will truly matter. In such a time as this, finding calm in the storm is the first step toward aligning ourselves with the dream of God.

Grounded in the love of God, may we emerge from the wilderness, and follow Jesus. Step by step working to make God's dream a reality for all of God's children, even now. Especially now. Amen.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Andy Thayer, "Please Don't Give Up Chocolate for Lent," posted Feb 17, 2026, [Andrew Thayer Studio](#), bold my own.

² The Rev. Dr. Andy Thayer, "Please Don't Give Up Chocolate for Lent," posted Feb 17, 2026, [Andrew Thayer Studio](#)

³ Hanna Reichel, *For Such a Time as This, An Emergency Devotional*, Eerdmans, September 4, 2025. Introduction, pages 1-3.

⁴ Reichel, introduction, page 2.

⁵ Reichel, introduction, page 4.

⁶ Reichel, introduction, page 5.

⁷ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, pp 9-10.

⁸ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 10.

⁹ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 11.

¹⁰ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 11.

¹¹ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 13.

¹² Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 13.

¹³ Reichel, Chapter 1, Find Calm, p 13.