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St. John in the Wilderness  
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## The Fifth Sunday in Lent

### The Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

### Jeremiah 32:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for

they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

### Unruly Wills and Affections

We have some solid readings this morning as we search for what God might be saying to us on the Fifth Sunday in Lent. And yet I'd be willing to wager that for most Episcopal priests, if we had the option on any given Sunday, we would often -- perhaps almost always -- choose to reflect on the Collect of the Day rather than the Scriptures, and today is no exception.

I wonder how you engage with these Collects. Here's the deal with them: Each Sunday, as well as feast days and fast days, are assigned a special "Collect" or prayer that kicks things off for us. They tend to reflect the seasons of the Church. They offer a jumping off point to the readings to which we listen closely. These prayers collect us and I always wonder if you hear them, if you encounter God through them, if you pray them with me as I say them. I wonder if your "Amen" really means "so be it," which is what *amen* means.

I like to hold a bit of silence before I say Collect of the Day. This practice of a few seconds of silence is uncommon among Episcopal clergy and unsettling for worshippers. But the way I was trained at Sewanee in seminary taught me that after the "Let us pray," we should all be praying in our own ways, individually and silently, that God's

presence might be made known as we gather, and then the celebrant says that Collect of the Day to bring us all together, united, in worship and praise. It's a good way of getting things going! Not to mention the deeply scriptural and sacramental sources of these collects, or how they unite us to the first Anglicans in the 15th century, to Anglicans today, and to Christians worldwide as so many of these transcend affiliation. (And I love how in Morning or Evening Prayer, we say Sunday's collect again and again, all week long. It frames the entire week!)

The depth of these collects consistently nourishes and challenges me and today's opening prayer is no exception:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found....

I wonder which part of this prayer speaks to you this morning. For me, I have been thinking all week about our "unruly wills and affections," as the opening of our collect says, combined with the "swift and varied changes of the world." *Unruly* is about right, I think. We humans are an unruly bunch, aren't we? It's a word I don't use enough. (Our collects are friends of lexicographers, too!) Unruly wills and affections -- now we are getting to the heart of the season of Lent that calls for self-

examination and a bit of honesty. “Unruly” sounds like a teenager or a toddler. They’re so unruly. It sounds like an aged relative who just stops caring about all of the expectations and customs they’ve had to submit to for so long.

I remember as a middle school student -- I think I was twelve -- my local soccer club lured me into refereeing, or “reffing,” as we called it. They told me that I could make a lot of cash on Saturdays and Sundays -- for me it was mostly just Saturdays because Sundays were for church and you can see where that got me. I could make a couple hundred bucks in a full day of reffing. First you had to take a class with other awkward teenagers (and that one adult who was there for some reason) and you had to learn the rules of the beautiful game. Now, we had been playing soccer for years at that point so we already knew the rules, or so we thought. We had to master the offsides rule which is a foil to many a parent upset that their kid’s goal did not actually count. She was offside by a mile! We had to learn about direct and indirect free kicks, drop balls, substitutions, cautioning players, keeping time, and so on. The rules were many but the money was good for a twelve year old. Really good.

They started you out with the five and under game. My old man calls that “amoeba ball” because the kids just create this amoeba-like organism around the ball that changes shape as they kick each other.

Those kids are not really unruly; they just don't yet have the skills to play the game . Next they move you up to “ref” and under-8 or under-9 game and those usually go ok. It’s when you get to the U-10 or U-11 advanced games (meaning the kids had to try out to make the team) that things start to get unruly. And I’m not talking about the players. They’re fine. There is always the hard hitter in there but that’s no big deal. You know who is unruly? The parents! They are completely obnoxious. It’s as if the family honor is all riding on little Johnny who is playing left midfield. I cannot tell you how many unruly parents I had to kick out. It’s never good when a thirteen-year-old is telling a forty-year-old dad that enough is enough. Some of those games got pretty ugly and very unruly.

Most of us have learned the rules to life by now. We know what’s offside or when it’s out of bounds. Occasionally we would like to sub someone else in which is hard to do in work or family life. If we don’t know the rules, we are at least competent pretenders. We can outwardly keep in line, usually avoiding getting a yellow card or any other kind of trouble. But our wills and affections, that’s another story. Our inner, emotional, and spiritual lives can be catastrophically unruly. We anger easily. We struggle to not react when other people unload on us. We dismiss those who challenge us as incomprehensible. We struggle to make changes voluntarily, like keeping resolutions or following through with goals, and when change is involuntary, it makes us want to scream.

Our psalmist asks today, “How shall a young man cleanse his way?” and prays, “let me not stray from your commandments” (Psalm 119:9-10). Who can teach us properly? Who can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners? Who can bring order and peace to our inner selves where chaos and reactivity often rule the day?

I am made hopeful by the words of the prophet Jeremiah this morning. We see this throughout the Old Testament. God calls God’s people back to faithfulness, back to loyalty, back to the covenant that God has made with their forefathers and foremothers. Sometimes things get pretty ugly when we ignore the rules and the promises that we have made. Even with our unruliness, there is this moment when God enters in in spite of us:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors... that they broke. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. In those days, they won’t even have to teach their little ones about me, says the Lord, for they will all know me. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

For us, the days have come when a new covenant has been made with us. First God entered into our unruly world in Jesus Christ to show us how to love and forgive and to break bread together. And this Jesus gave us his life for us -- died for us -- and like a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies, he has born much fruit. That fruit looks a lot like you and me. The Spirit of Christ has entered into our hearts to dwell in the most unruly place of all, where our wills and affections are tossed about by the swift and varied changes of the world. We will take him in again today as we eat his body and become his Body. God's law is within us. It is written on our hearts. We may often learn obedience through what we suffer -- in Lent we can take on this obedient suffering voluntarily -- but have no doubt that God is at work here (in this place), God is at work here (in my heart), God is at work in you to fix your hearts to where true joys are to be found.

And that is why we can pray:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*