

“The Journey Begins Again: Making our way into the time of Lent”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on February 18, 2018

Scripture Readings: Mark 1: 9-15 and Psalm 25: 1-10
(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

The guidebook for this year's journey into Lent is spare in the details. Mark's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, gives us spotty information about time and the company. We hear only that it took forty days and that he was accompanied by wild beasts and hovering angels.

You have to look in the other gospels for the details, if you wish to learn more about the nature of the temptations or the state of mind and spirit that Jesus was in after forty days of deprivation.

I couldn't help but wonder if the lack of details in Mark's account is like an invitation to open a door, to turn the page to the next chapter, because if we want to know the rest of the story, by necessity, we are going to have to look elsewhere. If we can't find clues in the gospel, then maybe we have to look at one of the other readings for today. I found a few clues in the psalm reading.

Psalm 25 gives us a way through this Lenten season, an invitation all its own, on how we might live through the next forty days. The focus of that psalm is on our relationship with God. Going back to the forty years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness, God's people learned what was expected and how they were to travel. At the end of the journey they better understood that wilderness time became a place for instruction, a time when they learned to trust in God's care. Scholars have shown that the journey the Israelites took over 40 years could likely have been completed in two and a half years. But they twisted and turned and doubled back on their route. They needed to walk the road again. And so it took them forty years of time to learn the lessons of the wilderness. They needed to remember where to put their trust, and so over and over again, they were tested and tried, and through it all, year after year, the people become more aware of their need for forgiveness, humility, courage and vision. Psalm 25 offers the invitation to mindful living and thoughtful walking.

But we might also find clues in traditions and common practices.

Our understanding of the Lenten experience has changed through time. When I was growing up, it was all about making extra offerings to the church's mission work. At my home church, each family was given an empty can and we were told to put it on the kitchen table. Before we sat down to eat a meal, each person had to put a nickel in the can. On Easter Sunday, we were thrilled as children to carry our cans of spare change into the church, and place them on a special table set up at the front for blessing. During the Easter Service we heard stories of how people in far off lands would use our spare change to change the world. Unfortunately this always turned into a busy week for our family. My dad was the treasurer, so it was his job to bring all the cans home, even the one we had

filled up on our own table and brought to church, and as a family we spent the next week counting and rolling coins, and then helping our dad haul it all to the bank. This practice even necessitated that he had to take a couple of days off work to get the job done.

Another tradition involves giving up. During Lent, many people choose to give up something, not something you don't like anyway, like lima beans; really, who does like lima beans anyway? I remember the first time I had dinner with my future sister-in-law. She served lima beans, and I thought, "Wow, she doesn't like me very much." Turned out not to be true. She is the one person in the world who likes lima beans and she likes me.

We give up something that matters, something you will notice the absence of when you can't have it. People traditionally give up desserts, chocolates, coffee. As an aside, have you noticed how the world responds to these sort of challenges? The entire Tim Horton's Roll Up the Rim campaign was planned to coincide with the 40 days of Lent, because so many people at one time were giving up coffee, that sales plummeted every spring. Their marketing team devised a plan, and now more coffee is purchased during Lent than at any other time of year. I wonder what it might mean if you turned your back on advertising and decided to give up Rolling Up the Rim for 40 days.

Writer Trisha Elliot wondered what it might mean for us to limit our use of cell phone time. On average, she has learned that people spend three hours a day checking their email, updating their facebook and doing their banking. She realized, with quite a note of sadness, that three hours on her phone is more time than she spends prepping and eating meals with her family, and more time than she spends with her children. This year, she is trying a phone fast for Lent, not giving it up completely, but creating phone-free zones in her house, like the dining room table and the bedroom, turning off audio notifications every time an email comes in, and setting aside certain times of the day to be phone-free. A week into her phone fast, she has noticed that she is more aware of what deserves her attention. She is actually reading a book with real pages. And she has realized that it takes a lot more effort to make conversation than burying her head in her phone.

Some of you have already told me that giving up is how you observe a holy Lent. When you want what you can't have, then you walk a little more deeply into the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness, as you learn what it means to go without, even for a short span of forty days.

Some people take things on during Lent. They try on new practices, like meditating or reading the Bible or service. We know from research that it takes six weeks to acquire a new habit. The six weeks of Lent is a perfect time to try something you have always wanted to do. Practicing deep breathing and meditation. Choosing to read through a book of the Bible, a chapter a day, or taking up a piece of literature that will be a challenge to your normal reading fare. Giving back to your community through service. To take on helps some people learn more about the nature of God, for we find ways through connection about how we might live into the new life we are promised as followers of Jesus Christ.

In his study of Lenten practices, Brian Erickson notes that how you keep this time of year is not a choice that can be made by a congregation. It must be made by an individual. More than any other time of year, the season of Lent is a reminder that no one else can make the decision of faith for us.

Whatever you decide to do, give up something, take something on, we are reminded that we are on a journey, a road leading to new life. To walk with God through this season with intention of heart and mind, is not to take the easy path. Preacher Frederick Buechner says it this way: "If you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are." Lent is a time to choose, not just who we will be, but more central, whose we will be. Our identity will not be defined by what we claim to believe, but by the road we take. It would be easier and simpler to bypass the wilderness and not look towards a cross, and instead head right for Easter and the empty tomb, but the wisdom of the psalmist and the wisdom of tradition proclaims that Easter Sunday will not make much sense unless we are able to stay the course, and adopt a practice that leads us into wilderness time.

Lent is a season for keeping to the road. You will need to pack patience, and be on the lookout for grace. You will need to carry reminders of faith, and travel with a long view, for it will not be the mountaintop moments that bring you insight as much as your times of solitude and struggle. The right road will not always look like the right road until you travel the path.

This is a time for choosing, for making a decision about who you are and whose you are. Here at the beginning of this strange and sacred time, we answer God's call not with words, but with our steps. May you travel with open eyes and open hearts, and be aware of the lessons that come with the challenges along the way.

Sources Used:

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