

Sunday, February 21, 2021
First Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Mark 1.9-15

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1739514912888669/>

(Sermon begins at about 14:00)

“Do We Really Need To Do Lent This Year?”

Here we are. The start of another Lenten season. The beginning of another Lenten journey. The 40-day period when we specifically focus on repenting of our sins both individual and communal; with the threefold practices of prayer, fasting, and charity; and a time that we often associate with austerity and deprivation. Looking at the last 11 months, is what we have been through so different than what we associate with Lent? Only it did not come to an end after 40 days. No, here we are at Day 340 of the official “lock down” that we have lived through with varying degrees of intensity. What seems to be a never-ending Lenten season. In fact, when we began this pandemic existence, we were in the middle of Lent 2020. Our last in-person worship was March 15th, the third Sunday in Lent. Sure, we switched to online worship and completed the liturgical season of Lent 2020, doing Holy Week and Easter services in a new way. But it still didn’t quite seem like Lent was over. Even though we celebrated Easter, it still felt like Jesus was in the tomb. Even though we celebrated Pentecost online, there did not seem to be much of a new spirit in the land. Even though we celebrated Advent, preparing for, anticipating, longing for new birth, the celebration of Jesus’ birth at Christmas just was not the same. Throughout it all, there was the specter of COVID. There was the reality of a global pandemic. There was an ongoing sense that we were in a time far more akin to Lent than to Easter or Pentecost or Advent or Christmas.

Interestingly, how we have comported ourselves throughout this time, individually, as a church, and as a society, has been more akin to an extended Lenten season. The threefold Lenten disciplines have been manifest in new and more intense ways. Who of us has not prayed more during this period than any other time in our lives? And we found ways to bring public prayer to people who had to shelter-in-place: Sunday worship services, daily Morning and Evening Prayer services, and weekly Centering Prayer sessions, all done online. And in the process, reaching more people than were being reached prior to the pandemic. So, engagement in prayer has dramatically increased.

Fasting has certainly increased during this time of pandemic. Not so much fasting from food, although some may have had to cut back for financial reasons. But what we notice more is fasting from all sorts of other activities. We have not been able to go out to eat or go to the movies or the theater or engage in any number of other activities that entail large gatherings of people. We have fasted from engaging in social interaction. Social activities at church included. And because of most of us not having to get out as often, we have fasted from the purchase of some categories of items. Of course, our fasting also included some items that we had not anticipated, such as toilet paper and cleaning supplies.

And, at least here at St. Gregory's, acts of charity have increased during this time. A number of parishioners have stepped up and made extra donations to help us keep going during a time when a portion of our income stream, namely donations from groups that normally use our facilities, has disappeared. Others have made additional contributions to help support our outreach ministries and feeding programs. Others have stepped up to help with the labor needed to maintain our outreach ministries—labor that had previously been done by those who now are unable to, due to being in higher risk groups.

Throughout this seemingly unending Lenten season called the coronavirus pandemic, we have certainly felt the sense of austerity and deprivation. If not physically, certainly mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually. So why do we need to do Lent this year? Because we have been living through Lent not for 40 days but for 340 days. Normally, 40 days is bearable because we know Easter is coming. But after 340 days, we have no idea when our metaphorical Easter is coming. Easter 2020 came and went, with no real change. Will Easter 2021 be any different?

Now, of course, things are different. We now have vaccines that are being distributed. Maybe not as quickly as we would like, but the process is improving. We have had periods of things opening up somewhat. And with decreasing infection rates, the government is optimistic that things will start to open up more in the coming weeks and months. Yet, we cry out with the Psalmist "How long, O Lord? Will you forget [us] for ever? How long will you hide your face from [us]?" (Ps 13.1). Because, frankly, it's been too long already. So, do we really need Lent this year? Can't we just jump straight to Easter and be done with it? With all of it?

The answer would be "no." Because maybe while we don't particularly want Lent this year, given the interminable Lent-like year we have just lived through, maybe we still need Lent. Maybe this year more than ever.

The 40 days of Lent are meant to reflect the 40 days Jesus spends in the wilderness being tempted and tested. What we heard in today's Gospel. Now, Mark's version of the story merely tells us that Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mk 1.13). Matthew and Luke provide more detail about the ways Jesus was specifically tempted: with food, with power and authority, with protection and security. Things that most of us want to some degree or another. But Mark's version, with minimal detail, is more appropriate for our own wilderness time. For our collective wilderness time. Because the ways we are tested, the ways we are tempted, during normal Lenten seasons and certainly during this protracted Lent-like pandemic season, are unique to the individual. How we are tested and tempted is going to depend on our particular circumstances. So, Mark's telling leaves it a little more open for us to be able to relate to on a personal level.

One of the important things of Jesus' time in the wilderness is certainly the length of time. Forty days. It is these 40 days that is obviously the basis for the 40-day Lenten season. But 40 days has an even broader symbolism. In scripture, 40 was a symbolic way of saying "for a long time," regardless of the actual amount of time. So, yeah, symbolically, this works for the long time we have been in this pandemic. But there was a scriptural basis for the emphasis on 40. The use of

40 was also a way to call to mind other key 40s in the Bible: the 40 days and nights that it rained after Noah built the ark; Moses' 40 days on Mount Sinai, when he received the Ten Commandments from God; the 40 years the Hebrew people spent wandering in the wilderness. The latter certainly being a significant time of temptation and testing, not just of the individuals, but of the society as a whole. Although all these events carried some element of trial and testing. So, there is deep symbolism in our 40-day Lenten journey. And given the other 40s in Biblical history, its not so much about the actual number of days (or years) but about what happened during those periods. And about how the people were transformed.

As Mother Sharon noted in her sermon on Ash Wednesday, "we can be tempted to let Lent stand on its own, to be a six-week period set apart from everything we do, and then we go back to business as usual. This is not what Lent is about. Rather, Lent is a time when we firm up the foundation of our lives in Christ, when we get ourselves re-used to the discipline that this life requires. We know that we will stumble and fall in our faith; well, here's a time to deliberately do our best in order that we might go a little longer before the next time we fall, with God's help."¹ The point Mother Sharon was making was that Lent is not supposed to be a time when we take on particular disciplines for 40 days, only to abandon them come Easter Sunday. The real intent of Lent and the associated disciplines is to be a designated time to intentionally focus on making changes to our relationship with God and our relationships with others. To have a time when we can purposefully and intentionally work on those things that need to be changed, or that we want to change, to live more fully into who God desires us to be. To live more fully into who God is continually creating us to be.

Think of it this way. You don't go on a diet or start an exercise program or quit smoking with the intent of only doing it for a few weeks or months. No, you undertake such actions out of a desire to live a healthier life. Out of a desire to have a better quality of life. You undertake such actions with the intent that they will become a permanent part of your life. So too with our Lenten practices. It is about developing habits that we will continue even after Lent ends and Easter comes. That's why you shouldn't give up chocolate for Lent. Because who really wants to give up chocolate for life? That's just so wrong!

So, even though it seems like we have been living in an interminable Lenten season for the last 340 days, and even though many of us have made some positive changes in our lives during that time, the concept of Lent—the official demarcation of a period of Lent—is important to our wellbeing. Particularly our spiritual wellbeing. Again, it is about continually seeking ways to live more fully into what it means to be beloved children of God.

At the end of his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus emerged transformed, strengthened, and renewed, ready to begin his public ministry, as evidenced by his first recorded words in Mark's Gospel: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mk 1.15). In other words, Jesus, in what was his first sermon, is saying to change your hearts and minds to be in alignment with what God desires and live into the fullness of the kingdom of God. And of course, the rest of his life and ministry was about doing just that. Demonstrating what it means to live as God desires for all as beloved children in his kingdom.

Right now, as we begin Lent 2021, it can seem like Lent has been going on forever. It can seem like Lent is never ending. But just as Jesus came out to the wilderness following his 40 days of being tempted and tested, we, too, shall come out of the wilderness of this pandemic transformed, strengthened, and renewed—be it in 40 days or 340 days—ready to resume our life and ministries in new and renewed ways.

Blessings on your Lenten journey.

¹ The Rev. Sharon Sheffield, sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021.