

Sunday, March 6, 2022
First Sunday in Lent (Year C)
Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Luke 4.1-13

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/477937123821484>

(Sermon begins at about 18:25)

“Making it Through the Wilderness”

While Lent officially began four days ago on Ash Wednesday, there is a part of me that feels like the period between Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent is a time to ease into our Lenten journey. A time to get up to speed, as it were. Now, that is not the official position of the Church; it's just my personal view. I think it is because on the First Sunday in Lent, our Gospel reading is always the temptation of Jesus. Perhaps my personal sense that Lent begins in earnest on this day is precisely because the Gospel reading recounts Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil. And that our 40-day Lenten journey—with its own temptations as we struggle with our Lenten disciples—is intended to call to mind, even parallel in some ways, Jesus' 40 days of being tempted and tested.

In actuality, the 40-day Lenten journey does not just have similarities to or parallels with Jesus' time of temptation. There are other “40s” in scripture that also provide similar images for our Lenten journey. In ancient scripture, numbers had significant meaning. The use of 40 was shorthand indicating a long period of time. Generally, one in which something significant happened or during which there was a profound change for those involved. In addition, references to 40 were also meant to remind the ancients of other significant “40s” in their sacred history. The 40 days of rain in the story of Noah and the flood, which brought about a significant change in the landscape of the earth and in the lives of the eight people God chose to be a remnant of humanity. The 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving the Law, reshaping the ways God's people interacted by providing structures for their religious and social lives. The 40 days that Elijah went without food as he journeyed to Mount Horeb, where he had a profound encounter with God, changing his relationship with God and reshaping his mission. And central to the Jewish people's identity—and, in many ways, ours—the 40 years that the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, providing a time for the people to be formed into who God was calling them to be as his chosen people.

Unlike in most years, this year, Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary, our Old Testament reading happens to be a snippet from one of those “40s”—from the 40 years of the Hebrews journey through the wilderness. So, as we kick-off our Lenten journey in earnest, we have two images of wilderness experiences—one 40 days, one 40 years—that help inform what our own 40-day Lenten journey is meant to represent. And these two wilderness accounts—separated by 1,300 years give or take—really share a common theme, which is particularly applicable to our own Lenten journey and why it is so important to our lives of faith.

Our reading from Deuteronomy is from what is essentially Moses' final instructions to the people as they near the end of their 40-year journey through the wilderness. He has led them

to the edge of the Promised Land. Knowing that he will not be the one to lead them into the Promised Land, he takes the opportunity to summarize what they have learned over the last 40 years. In the passage we hear today, Moses starts by telling the assembled people that the first thing they are to do after they enter the Promised Land and establish themselves is to take the first fruits of their first harvest and offer it to God out of gratitude for their safe return home. As a recognition of what God has done for the people. Not just over the last 40 years, but throughout their history as a people. To recognize that God took one man and his family—Abraham—and sent him on a journey into the unknown. A journey that led him to this land they would now call home. But not before other critical journeys that would help form them into who they are today. Taking them down into Egypt, where they grew into a great nation. How in time, out of fear for their increasing numbers, the Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews. How God heard the cries of the people and liberated them. How God, through Moses led them not only back to their ancestral home, but also guided them into becoming a real nation. How God, through Moses, guided them into becoming the people and the nation that God had envisioned and called them to be.

This is essentially a stylized summary of what God has done for the people. Of how God had shaped and formed his chosen people over the centuries. And particularly how God has shaped and formed his chosen people through their 40 years in the wilderness. Recognition of how they have been reliant upon God and owe who they have become to God. By commanding that they make offerings of thanksgiving, Moses is emphasizing just what their journey had been about. Them being shaped into who God created and called them to be. Which is precisely what our own Lenten journey is about. Living more fully into who God has created and called us to be.

Jesus' 40-day wilderness experience really parallels his ancestor's 40-year wilderness experience. Occurring immediately after his baptism and in preparation for the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus' wilderness experience is about him living into the fullness of who he was created and called to be. The emphasis on the formation of the Hebrew people in their wilderness experience was about the formation of an entire people, a nation, through the crafting of laws and religious and social structures. The very laws and structures that had shaped and formed Jesus since his birth. But now, in his own wilderness experience, Jesus was being shaped and formed into who he was called to be as an individual. Who he was called to be as the Messiah. And while the temptations Jesus endured at the hands of the devil were specifically designed to test his strength and resolve as the Son of God, the underlying principles apply to all individuals in their lives of faith. And hence, to our Lenten journey.

Certainly, the specific temptations Jesus was presented with are not things that we are presented with in our mortal lives. While we may be tempted to eat something during a time of fasting, or to sneak just one piece of chocolate even though we have given it up for Lent, none of us are tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread. While we may be tempted to pursue wealth and power—not a bad thing in and of itself—none of us are tempted by the devil with the rule of the entire world if we just turn our back on God and worship the devil. (Unless you're Vladimir Putin). While we may be tempted to seek safety and security—again, not a bad thing in and of itself—none of us are tempted by the devil to jump off a high building to see if God will protect and save us. And yet, the general categories of temptations addressed in our

Gospel reading are things that we may all struggle with at one time or another in our lives. Sustenance and comfort. Personal achievement and a sense of self-worth. Safety and security. But again, just because we may struggle with these things, that does not mean that any of these temptations are bad in and of themselves. In fact, these three general categories correspond to many of our basic human needs.

This being the case, we cannot allow the fantastical nature of Jesus' temptations to obscure our understanding of what is really happening in today's Gospel reading. We do not know the time frame of when the devil provided these temptations. We are told, "for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (Lk 4.2a). But then we are told that the devil tempted Jesus with these three things at the end of his time in the wilderness. When he has been fasting for 40 days. When he is at his weakest. There may have been other tests and temptations during those 40 days that were not recorded. But here again, does it really matter the exact chain of events, the exact timing? The important message is contained in how Jesus responded to these three specific temptations. The temptation for food, for power and personal glory, for safety and security.

In response to the first temptation, Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone" (Lk 4.4). Referencing back to a statement in Deuteronomy, which reads: God "humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8.3). That physical sustenance and comfort are important, but so is the sustenance and comfort that comes from following God's commandments and living as God wishes us to live. In response to the second temptation, Jesus says, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Lk 4.8). That while we humans need a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, it is ultimately in God that "we live and move and have our being," as the Apostle Paul tells us (Acts 17.28). As such, what we do is ultimately to the glory not of self, but to the glory of God. And in response to the third temptation, Jesus says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Lk 4.12). That we need to have faith and trust that God does indeed love us and wants what is best for us. Notice a pattern? These three responses can be summarized as being humble before God, being obedient to God, and trusting God. All pointing to the need to rely on God.

Isn't that what our own Lenten journey is about? Not about the specifics of the temptations, but about our responses to those temptations which may come between us and our relationship with God. Regardless of the specific temptations, Jesus tells us there is a universal response. That we are to recognize our reliance upon God. As such, we are to humble ourselves before God by being obedient to and trusting in God.

As Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of St. John the Evangelist wrote at the beginning of Lent, "the forty days of Lent remind us of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. For Jesus, those forty days were a time to re-align himself with why God had given him life: to claim the right purpose, the right power, the right voice God had given him. He was in the desert to be purged of anything in the world that tempted him to stray from his reason for being." (Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE, Brother Give Us a Word email, March 1, 2022).

These same words apply to us our Lenten journey. That this is a time to re-align ourselves with why God has given us life: to claim the right purpose, the right power, the right voice God has given us. To purge us of anything in the world that tempts us to stray from our reason for being. For our reason for living into the fullness of who God has created and call us to be: the Body of Christ in the world.

With Jesus leading the way through the wilderness, with the tools and the insights he provides us—that we are to continually remember that we are reliant upon God, and as such, we are to humble ourselves before God by being obedient to and trusting in God—we are assured that we will come through our Lenten journey strengthened in our life of faith.