

First Sunday in Lent Year A

Engaging Lent

[RCL] **Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**

As Lent means Spring in Old English it for sure favors the later Lent timeline of this year; it is always strange when the season begins during the heart of winter.

For well over a millennium Lent has traditionally been a time of fasting. Communities would fast in various ways, abstaining from food or certain kinds of food, abstaining from various kinds of recreation and utterances. People would dress differently, engage differently and find many other ways to make their lives more austere. All of this resulted in a fast that aided in spiritual preparation and also made the great Feast of Easter so much more exciting.

While Lenten practice is often less vigorous than it was centuries ago the spirit of this fast remains, this is a time when many churches forgo cake at coffee hour, where some do not have coffee hour at all and many individuals take time to abstain from treats, to abstain from social media, to abstain from television or from other kinds of entertainment, to abstain from anything that can feel like a guilty pleasure.

This is not limited to the Christian community either, the movie 40 days and 40 nights and other pieces of pop culture capture people engaging in Lenten fasts who are not Christian and throughout social media it's easy to see just how many are hopping on the fasting bandwagon. It's great. It is an example of our Christian tradition enriching lives well beyond our churches and yet, if this is the only depth to which people and communities of faith engage with it, there is a major opportunity lost.

The first lesson for today features an invitation to abstinence. Adam and is given very clear instructions not to eat of the fruit of good and evil. All is well until the Devil tempts them and they eat of the fruit and suffer the consequences. While frolicking in paradise, presumably enjoying immortality, enjoying the felt physical presence of God and getting to eat from an abundance of delicious fruits may not seem like a fast, it really was.

In the midst of abundance the sense that there was something that was not for them was too difficult for them to bear. The rule around the tree of good and evil was an opportunity for Adam and Eve to deny their desire so that they could remain in right relationship with God. When they didn't, they suffered the consequences. This lesson makes sense on the first Sunday of Lent as we are reminded of just how blessed we are and how discipline in some things can increase our joy in all things and keep us closer to God. Adam and Eve offer a cautionary tale for us as temptation creeps in.

The Gospel passage for today affirms this message and adds to it in important ways. Jesus, coined the 'second Adam' in years to come by the Apostle Paul, is lead by the Spirit into a time of extreme fasting and temptation. While Adam and Eve had to avoid one delicious fruit in the midst of paradise, Jesus

braved an austere wilderness and consumed nothing. It is here that Jesus is offered three distinct temptations. In the first, Jesus is tempted to assuage his hunger by using his power to turn the stones into bread. The mere mention of bread was probably difficult for him to handle given how hungry he was. Jesus says no, citing that it is not by bread alone that one lives, but by the word of God.

In the second temptation Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the Temple and invited to throw himself down in order that the angels may save him. Now this might seem like an easier one to resist at first until it is taken into account just how isolated Jesus must have felt from everyone and especially his heavenly company after an eternity with them. Just how wonderful it would have felt to experience their embrace and a reminder of his place in the midst of this difficult time for him. Jesus again says no, refusing to put God to the test.

Finally, Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world, which are offered to him in exchange for worship. Jesus, on the precipice of embarking on his ministry and building his movement could have much more easily taught and influenced the world from this place but instead said no again, affirming the need to worship God and only God.

Unlike Adam, Jesus resists temptation, passes the test, and goes on to live a ministry that changed the world and brings life to many. The message, in contrast to Adam, is clear: spiritual discipline is good, so is abstinence, may Lent be a time to practice both and be right with God.

That is true, and yet, if we pay closer attention we can learn so much more about how we might live a Holy Lent and for what reasons.

Looking again at the first temptation we see Jesus deny a desire of the flesh, but for what reason? Jesus does this to strengthen his focus on God. While avoiding cookies might be good for physical health it is not the path to everyone strengthening their focus on God. As we consider what we might give up let us think about what may actually give us the opportunity to focus more on God. Perhaps the offering is time in prayer.

In the second one Jesus denied the opportunity to be reminded just how much he mattered. Jesus was in the midst of horrible isolation and often times, isolation can lead people to manipulation of those around them in order to feel reminded of their connection and importance in community. How often do we find ways to test and manipulate those we love to fill the need for connection and mattering? To put it another way, what are the things that we do when we aren't feeling appreciated, or connected, or valued? It would be good to consider these things and consider how we can embrace community and seek connection in healthier ways.

Finally, Jesus denied personal power so he could continue to embrace power with God. While power with God does not offer the same pride benefit and certainly made Jesus' life and ministry more difficult it ultimately saved our world. In this we come to understand how embracing power with, as opposed to power over, can ultimately enrich our lives and ministries.

And so, given all this, our call is to live a Holy Lent, beyond fasting and abstinence, to embracing the truths that will set ourselves and our churches free to live out the fullness of God's mission.

May we all seek to find the abstinences that will strengthen our focus on God and find ways to meet the hunger needs of others.

May we all seek community this Lent and give of our time to give community to those who are particularly isolated.

Finally, let us all consider how we might empower each other and have power and influence together in order to create positive outcomes for the world.

It is this kind of Lent that will truly live into the Spirit of Spring; regardless of what the weather might be doing. It is this kind of Lent that will take us towards an Easter Season full of resurrection and new life. May all the church, with God's help, engage in Lent this way.

Amen.

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