

Lent 1 – Year C

Sermon preached on February 21, 2010

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at Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria

Resource used: Home By Another Way by Barbara Brown Taylor. 1999.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, send your Holy Spirit upon us as we begin this sacred season of Lent, that we might faithfully keep watch with you.

As we pray to God in a spirit of repentance and thanksgiving may your Spirit remain with us as we enter into our own wilderness, mindful of our hungers and thirsts. Amen.

I have to confess that, temperamentally, I am more of an “Ash Wednesday and Lent” type of person than an Easter person. This week when I reflected on all of my memories of going to church at this time of year, more often I found I could relate to ashes and emptiness and longing and loneliness than miracles and empty tombs and Easter eggs. It’s not that I am unduly pessimistic or have experienced a tremendous amount of suffering in my life – far from it. But there was always something very **real** about the season of Lent for me – something that I could relate to. And it helped that this season happened *every year*. Once again I was being given a limited period of time to intentionally think about my life, to reflect on the many things that needed improvement, and to remember that life was finite – that the ashes placed on my forehead were a taste of things to come. As I was smudged with ashes and heard the words “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” I was being reminded of my frailty – that I am mortal, that I am not in control of the universe, and that I am constantly dependent upon God. Sobering thoughts for a teenager and young adult to be sure, but in a strange way I found this to be comforting. I found the rituals that we do at this time of year to ground me in a reality that was bigger than me.

And I know that I am not the only Christian to be strangely attracted to this season of Lent. When I worked in Calgary my office faced the front entrance of the Catholic cathedral and I remember every year marveling at the sheer number of people who would pour out of those big doors after the Ash Wednesday services that were held at the lunch hour and just after work. For Catholics, Ash Wednesday is not a “holy day of obligation” – a day when people are “obliged” to go to church, such as Sundays and Christmas. It is an optional day, just as it is in the Presbyterian and Anglican and many other Christian traditions. And yet the people came – hundreds of them – and I remember sitting at my desk, watching those business people coming out of the church with the smudge of ashes on their foreheads and hurrying back to work or back to their homes, and I would ask myself, “why?”

Why this attraction to a ritual that reminds us of our fragility, and our eventual death? Why this attraction to a set period of time – 40 days – when we try to live our lives with a different focus, in a more disciplined manner?

Well I can only speak for myself, and for me, I think this attraction has something to do with wanting to strengthen my spiritual life, enrich my prayer life, and improve the way in which I conduct myself with my husband Scott and our friends and family and the people I work with – all within the limits of a 40-day period of time! *Forever* is too much for me – too overwhelming, too vast. Being more thoughtful, or forgiving, or patient, or self-disciplined “forever” paralyzes me – it is just too much. But 40 days I can see – 40 days I can feel – I can wrap my head around “40 days.” And so I try to decide on focusing on just a few weak areas in my life for *only 40 days*...with the hopes that some permanent change just might sneak into my unconscious, my overbearing ego, my natural instincts, and that I might emerge from those 40 days a slightly “new and improved” person – with a clearer vision of who I am and whose I am, and what God is inviting me to embrace in my life.

“Lent” is not a word that Jesus ever spoke. If we were to look up the word “Lent” in a Bible dictionary, we certainly would *not* find it there - because there was no such thing back then.

There is some evidence that the early Christians fasted forty *hours* between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty *days* in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

Many centuries ago, when the world did not end as Jesus himself had said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God - and from themselves. Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for—if not by God, then at least by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being *comfortable* and being *Christian*, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be *nice* instead of *holy* and the message of Jesus was getting lost.

Our ancestors in faith wondered how they might call their fellow Christians back to their senses, and when they studied the Bible, some clues were offered. Israel spent *forty* years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Elijah spent *forty* days there before hearing the still, small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent *forty* days listening to God give the law. There was also Luke's story about Jesus' own *forty* days in the wilderness that we heard this morning—a period of preparation between his baptism and his ministry—during which he was sorely tested by the devil. It was hard. It was awful. And it was necessary, if only for the story. Those of us who believe this story, have proof that it is humanly possible to remain loyal to God.

So the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning “spring” or “to lengthen”—not only as a reference to the season before Easter, but also as an invitation to a springtime for our *souls*. Forty days to cleanse our systems and open our eyes to what

remains when all our creature comforts are gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone, and not by what we can supply for ourselves.

The noted preacher Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we might think of the season of Lent as an “Outward Bound” experience for the soul. No one *has* to sign up for it, of course, but if you do, then you give up the illusion that you are *in control* of your life. If any of you have ever done “Outward Bound” or something like it, or if your children or grandchildren have done this sort of exercise, then you know what this is about. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist, or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these are the real test, because while you’re doing them you have plenty of people around and a delicious lunch in a nearby cooler.

The real test comes when you go “solo.” The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere – in a field or a forest or a desert - and wish you luck for the next twenty-four hours. That is when you find out *who* you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you really fear. Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with walls and a door to lock, and others just wish they had a pillow, but all those who have had this sort of experience find out – in those 24 hours - what their pacifiers are; the habits, substances, or surroundings that they normally use to comfort themselves, to block out the pain, loneliness and fear that are normal aspects for us human beings.

Without these pacifiers our emptiness is suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to pain killers whose prescription has just run out. It is hard. It is awful. But it is necessary at times for us to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but *God*. Almost everyone is addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, drinking, gambling, blaming, controlling or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty space inside of us that belongs to God *alone*.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the Holy of Holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it – *nothing* – but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths – in whatever form they come. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole.”

To enter the *wilderness* is to *leave* them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar, or your daily drink of scotch, or your favorite junky television program will do. For forty days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself *why* it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you thirsty? Well, what is wrong with being thirsty? And why is it that a glass of scotch will quench your thirst better than a glass of water? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out about yourself.

Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you insist on giving up your pacifier – these small pleasures that can help to keep us distracted or anesthetised. At first that small voice will say to you, “you’ll starve. You’ll go nuts. You won’t be you anymore.” If that does not work, the voice will move to level two: “That’s not a pacifier. That’s a *power tool*. That very thing helps *you* to be *you!* Can’t you tell the difference?” And if you do not fall for that one, there is always level three: “If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise? Remember – it is *voluntary*.”

If you do not know to whom that voice belongs, read Luke’s story again. Then tell that tempting voice to get lost and decide what you *will* do for Lent. Enter into the wilderness this Lent. Fast from a pacifier and see what happens. Decide *who* you are going to be, and *whose* you are going to be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for less? Amen.