

LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

Part 1: Journey Through the Wilderness

“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
He fasted forty days and forty nights....” Matthew 4:1-2a

Matthew 4:1-11 Psalm 23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The official wording of the invitation to enter into the season of Lent, as stated in our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, and typically spoken on Ash Wednesday, goes like this:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

This year, however, I think a more appropriate invitation for many of us comes from Jesus' comforting words in Matthew 11:28:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

Perhaps, like me, you really need the season of Lent in your life right about now.

Perhaps you need a break from the hecticness of living your life at a pace that just can't be sustained. Perhaps you need a break from the barrage of pervasive divisiveness and polarization which seems to dominate our current culture. As demonstrated during the Time With the Children this morning, perhaps you're seeing the glass as half empty even more than usual. But either way, half empty or half full, notice that the glass isn't full at all – with either all water or air.

So perhaps you long for the time when you could join the ancient psalmist when he joyfully declares, “my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5). When our Worship & Music ministry team gathered to discuss a theme for this year's season of Lent, we realized that it's hard to pour ourselves out for others when our own cup isn't full. **We wondered, “How do we fill our cup?” so that we have something to give.** So as we walk through the assigned lectionary scripture passages each Sunday in Lent on our way to Easter, we will be exploring the wisdom and ways we can fill our cup, as individuals and as a congregation.

Let's go back for just a moment, however, and explore just what it is that may be making you and I weary or anxious, perhaps even more so than usual. As you know, I tend to approach the season of Lent as a way to encourage us to *add* something to our lives that will better help each of us to connect with Sacred Presence of God withing

ourselves and within our midst. I have tended, therefore, to de-emphasize the traditional focus of Lent as a time to *give up* something. This year, however, I'm realizing the potential benefits of **setting aside, at least for a time, those things that are draining me of energy, joy, and the ability to live life to the fullest.**

Remember, the purpose of Lent is to spiritually rebalance our souls, and to make room for what is truly important. It is about giving up distraction and finding space for what gives life. So during the 40 days of Lent this year, I've discerned that one of the things I will be giving up is my incessant desire, almost obsession, to follow every latest development in the current partisan and divisive circus of our national politics. I'm hoping that setting aside the distraction of what's happening each and every day in Washington D.C. may actually give me more time and energy to engage in locally, and may help me find ways to connect on a deeper level with my own neighbors here in Tulsa. In other words, **I need to unplug for a while.**

I encourage you, therefore, to identify those things that are draining you – draining your cup – physically, emotionally and spiritually, and then consider setting those things aside for a time. Perhaps the best way to begin filling our cup, then, is to recognize that life is often like a difficult and trying journey through the wilderness. Each and every year we are invited to enter the season of Lent as a pilgrimage that begins with Jesus' own journey in the wilderness. It is appropriate, then, to reflect upon the metaphor of 'wilderness experiences' and the particular temptations that each of us face in our own lives.

In this biblical story, Matthew tells us that it was immediately after Jesus' baptism that he "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished." (Matthew 4:1-2). We are then told how the tempter tries to convince Jesus to turn stones into bread; to have angels catch him after jumping off the pinnacle of the temple; and obtain all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor if Jesus would just bow down and worship Satan.

While there is a wealth of theological issues to explore in this story, one thing particularly important to recognize is that **the wilderness (as a metaphor) is not necessarily an evil or bad place in and of itself.** In fact, most people, including myself, find that it is in those tough and trying times of life that our faith tends to stretch, strengthen and grow. **Difficult circumstances in life often prove to be the times when we become more intentional about seeking to connect with our own understanding of God.** But let's be honest, the emotions of anxiety and fear of the future, including tomorrow, can become overwhelming.

One of the greatest temptations when we find ourselves in the wilderness is to lose faith that God is with us. Many feel that they have been abandoned by God, or are being punished for something they have done, or haven't done. But times in the wilderness, what one mystic, St. John of the Cross, has described as "the dark night of the soul," can also be **an opportunity to trust in God's presence. Fear, anxiety and temptation, then, can often be overcome with a new level of strength and courage.** This is one way in which our journey through the wilderness can actually help fill our cup. So the season of Lent is a special opportunity for each of us to reflect upon our own wilderness experiences.

Lent can also be a season for exploring the mysteries of faith, examining your own motives and desires, asking yourself where you are headed, evaluating where your real commitments and priorities lie. A few years ago a preacher named Charles

Henderson delivered a sermon entitled, *The Science of Repentance: A Meditation on the Meaning of Lent*. He writes:

I would suggest that while exploring the mystery of the atom was the frontier of the twentieth century, **exploring the mystery of the soul is our next real frontier.**

Think what we could accomplish if we actually knew what makes for good or evil. What is it that leads to peace of mind or peace among nations? If we really knew how to bring both justice and freedom to the peoples of the world, especially those living on our own city streets; if we really knew how to use our own energies to their fullest; if we could see God's light shining more clearly in our own lives, and feel God's presence in our own hearts.

That is the challenge of this season. Lent can be a time for exploring the hidden depths, for looking beneath the surface, for asking what really makes things tick. If we are brave enough, this can be a time for pushing beyond the conventional wisdom, and for re-examining traditional understandings.

It is this metaphor of being in the wilderness (with both its temptations and its opportunities for spiritual growth) that I want to leave you with this day. And by the way, there was never a promise that your and my endeavor to fill our cup was going to be easy. That's just how it is in the wilderness.

Amen.

Resource:

The Science of Repentance - A meditation on the meaning of Lent by Charles Henderson 2/23/98 - your About.com Guide to: Christianity - general