

Lent: A Time To Resist

Matthew 4:1-11 Psalm 32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Lent just couldn't come soon enough this year! Perhaps, like me, you really need the season of Lent in your life right about now. Perhaps we all could use a break from the hecticness of living life at a pace that just can't be sustained. Perhaps we need a break from the barrage of pervasive divisiveness and polarization which dominates our current culture, especially in this presidential election year, and now that the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has already been politicized.

Over the years, I've tended to approach the season of Lent as a way to encourage us to *add* something to our lives, or to take something on that will better help each of us to connect with Sacred Presence of God within ourselves and within our midst. I have tended, therefore, to de-emphasize the traditional focus of Lent as a time to *give up* or abstain from something. This year, however, **I feel the need to suggest the potential benefits of setting aside, at least for a time, those things that may be draining you 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 more room in our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits for what is truly nourishing and life-giving. Therefore, that can include giving up, and perhaps a better word is **resist**, certain distractions or practices in order to make space for that which gives life.

Deciding what to resist will obviously differ from person to person. But let me suggest something I've mentioned in past years. How different would our next 40 days be if we resisted an almost incessant desire, perhaps obsession, to follow every latest development – and tweet – in the current partisan and divisive circus of our national politics. Yet saying that, we may want to wait to start until after voting in the presidential primary this coming Tuesday. Setting aside, resisting, unplugging from the distractions of following each and every detail of what's happening each and every day in the world around us – yet, while still keeping ourselves informed of things we may need to know – may actually give us more of that time, energy, and sense of presence to engage more in developing or deepening relationships with others, and with God.

Each and every year we are invited to enter the season of Lent as a pilgrimage. And the church has traditionally done that by reflecting upon 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.** The gospel writer Matthew immediately precedes this story with the one of Jesus' baptism – where we learn about Jesus' true identity as a beloved child of God. After being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus fasts for 40 days. He was, in actuality, dying of hunger. We are then told how the tempter tries to convince Jesus to turn stones into bread. That is followed by the temptation to have angels catch him after jumping off the pinnacle of the temple; and finally to obtain all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor if he would just bow down and worship the tempter.

These **three temptations** have been interpreted in a variety of ways in hopes of making personal connections with the temptations we face in life. Often, they are connected **with pride, power, and possession**. Or, **comfort, security, and self-glory**. But here's another way to look at these three temptations, in the voice of the tempter:

- Wouldn't you prefer a shortcut to resources and power?
- Don't you want to be affirmed by the masses, afforded status, privilege, and special treatment?
- Doesn't a guarantee of no pain and suffering sound good to you?
- Beloved child of God is good, but invincibility and limitless wealth, isn't that much better?

Jesus, we know, doesn't give into these temptations. And yet, we ought to take solace in knowing Jesus experienced hunger and pain, loss, grief, and even the urge to do and be less than who he really was. Therefore, **perhaps we can see a bit of our own struggle in these same temptations – to do and be less than who we really are, to deny our true identity as beloved children of God**. And take note that temptation isn't necessarily about blatant wrongdoing. For most of us, those are often resisted with relative ease. While most of us aren't tempted to commit crimes, for example, we do need to explore our deepest motivations for doing what we do. For doing the right thing for the wrong reason can itself become the wrong thing.

Temptation, then, can often come in the form of wanting to compromise, even if just a little, our own integrity or trustworthiness. Here's yet another way to look at the issue of temptation. It comes from biblical commentator Maryetta Anschutz. She writes:

- Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough.
- Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand.
- Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease.
- Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives, or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are.
- Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around.
- Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself.
- These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.

Anschutz concludes with a very helpful understanding of how to approach the season of Lent. "Lenten penitence engages the dark places in our lives that we may

come face to face with them, name them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them. **It is not about guilt. It is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us all**, about the amendment of life and new beginnings." When we approach Lent this way, each and every one of us is encouraged to embrace our own wilderness experience. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we learn that closeness to God will often involve conflict and struggle that will lay bare your and my deepest passion and priorities.

May this season of Lent be for each of us, and together as this community of faith, a time to recalibrate our spiritual lives, to reorient ourselves as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, and to ask of ourselves: What do I need to resist?

Amen.

Resource:

Feasting on the Word

Jill Duffield, *1st Sunday in Lent*, The Presbyterian Outlook

Maggi Dawn, *Sunday, March 9, 2014*, ChristianCentury.org

Rev. Holly McKissick, *Resist*, SALT, Feb. 18, 2020