

Wilderness Wisdom – Resisting Temptation©

Deuteronomy 8:1-5; Matthew 4:1-11

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This past Wednesday, many of you came here to participate in the Ash Wednesday soup supper and service. I know some of you who were not here, wanted to be but just weren't able. You were missed and you missed out on some really great soup as well as fun fellowship.

After our supper we came in here for a brief service and we talked about the Lenten journey. The season of Lent is a period of 40 days. Forty is a significant number that we read about in both the Old and New Testament.

- Noah and his family were on the ark for forty days and forty nights, enduring the flood and uncertainty; learning to put their trust in God. Afterwards, God made a covenant to never destroy the earth with a flood again. (Gen 7:4, 12; 8:6; 9:8-17);
- Moses fasted on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights and came back with the tablets of stone that were the Ten Commandments. (Exod 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9)
- Elijah fasted in the desert for forty days and nights waiting to receive a new commission from God. (1 Kgs 19:8)
- The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years as God prepared them for the Promised Land. (e.g., Exod 16:35; Deut 2:7)

And we Christians spend forty days in the season of Lent as we enter into a time of reflection and repentance, a time of fasting and preparing ourselves.

Lent actually is a word that means springtime. We often talk about doing spring-cleaning – a time for sweeping out the signs of winter – cleaning off the salt from our porch, our sidewalks and entryways. We put away our shovels and other winter tools. We organize our closets and get our warmer weather clothes ready, putting away the winter clothes. We throw out the things that aren't useful to us any longer.

And that's really what we are doing in Lent – the springtime of our spiritual lives. We are cleaning out what has accumulated, what is not useful, what can even be harmful to us. Some say forty days is how long it takes to break a habit. We might crave sweets or spend too much time on social media. To get ourselves into a new routine and to break out of the old, it is said a good forty days will be how long it will take to accomplish that goal.

I heard a story the other day about a bug in the south called the Love Bug. This bug comes together with another to mate and then they stick together and look like a two headed bug. They are very acidic and when they fall on a car, or in the grill, or get inside the engine they can damage the paint, or even do a lot of damage under the hood.

I heard they spray to get rid of these bugs and they do it for forty days. If they do it any less, the eggs of the bugs will still survive and will hatch and continue to cause damage. Even if they

stop spraying after thirty-eight days – just two days before the forty, they are apt to still have eggs hatch and continue to have damage done.

So we have forty days to clean our spiritual houses. It is a time to examine all the old stuff in us – what has been filling our hearts and our minds; what is still useful and good and life giving and what is causing harm and even sucking the life out of us. In Lent we sweep out all that old and make room for new things – for the lessons and the vision and the call that God wants for us.

I confess that I am not the most organized person sometimes. I want to be. I like to have things neat and tidy and organized. But I get busy and move from one thing to the next and I accomplish what I'm working on but I get to moving to the next things so fast I often don't tie up all the loose ends at the end of what I was doing before.

So eventually I have a pile of left over things to go through – like papers or files or a bag of books I need to put away, or give back to someone (usually Barb Brown). And before I know it it's kind of piled up on me and I feel overwhelmed. It affects my focus, my thinking, my creativity. And I'm amazed at how much clearer I can think and work once I clean things up.

So Lent is an opportunity to sweep out the old unnecessary clutter in our souls, our hearts and our minds. If you think about it, the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness was a bit like a very long cleaning out. God was doing the cleaning – the shaping – the preparing. God had a future and a vision for the Israelites but they needed to learn lessons of trust before he was going to take them into the Promised Land.

There are many lessons to learn in wilderness wisdom – all are about listening and trusting. Even Jesus was led into the wilderness for a forty day period of fasting and being tested, of trusting and listening to the Father. He was tempted by Satan over and over.

Right at his most vulnerable time when he was very hungry, Satan tempted him to turn rocks into bread. Then the devil tried to get him to take on his power as the Son of God and throw himself off the high steeple of the temple, knowing the angels would not let him fall.

Then the devil took him to a high mountain where he could see all the kingdoms of the world. And as if Satan really owned it all, he said, "If you bow down and worship me, I will give you all of this."

But Jesus, as weak and vulnerable as he was, fought the devil with the one strong weapon he had – the Scriptures. "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Gen 7:4, 12; 8:6; 9:8-17);

"Do not put the Lord your God to test."

"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Jesus did not give in to temptation for his own selfish use. We know that later in his ministry he did take five loaves of bread and a few fish and fed 5,000 people. We know that he walked on water and calmed a storm. He raised a dead man to life. He healed the sick and made the blind see.

Jesus could and did perform miracles but not at the beck and call of the Tempter.

In Lent we have this perfect time to sweep out – to throw out – those things that clutter up our time and our thoughts. It is a time when we can fast from those things that are getting in the way of our spiritual growth and relationship with our heavenly Father. It is a time for preparation.

But what are we preparing for? What is the purpose – the application of this forty-day Lenten practice to our lives today? Is it about making us more aware of Jesus' journey to the cross, of what he did for us, providing forgiveness and freedom from sin, giving us salvation?

Yes. It is about that, but so much more. The season of Lent used to be a time for preparing those who would be baptized on Easter. They would go through a training period and be taught about the faith. They would understand that to be baptized was to die to the old self and to be raised up to new life in Christ. It is to surrender our wills and to become one with God's will.

So Lent is a time for preparing ourselves for growing in faith. It is time for study and becoming so familiar with Scripture that – like Jesus in the wilderness for forty days – we too can lean on the Word of God when we are tempted. In our weakness we can be strong; in our most vulnerable moments we have a mighty tool to rely on – God's living Word that is always reliable, always dependable.

In Jesus' going to the wilderness, he allowed himself to set aside all power and all strength. He was human like you and me. He was hungry and weak and vulnerable. But he was able to pass the test because he relied on God's Word. And he shows us that we too will be able to do the same.

I invite you to give up your independence, your power, your strong will and allow yourselves to be vulnerable. I invite you to take these forty days to clean your spiritual houses and to fill them with Scripture as you read and reflect on those Words of life – words that will be dependable in times of trouble and temptation.

May we, as disciples of Jesus, learn what it means to die in Christ, so we might be fully alive in him. May we, as a congregation, prepare ourselves to hear God's call on us and be led to whatever mission He might have for us in the future.

Welcome to forty days and forty nights of spiritual spring cleaning. May you – may we together as the Church – be blessed. Amen.