

Forty Days and Forty Nights

March 5, 2017

A Reading from the Gospel According to Matthew

Chapter 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led by the spirit up into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he hungered. ³And coming up to him, the tempter said, “If you are the son of God, speak and make these stones loaves of bread.”

⁴But Jesus answered, saying, “It is written in Deuteronomy: ‘One lives not on bread alone but on every word coming through the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the parapet of the temple, ⁶and said to him, “If you are the son of God, cast yourself down, for in the Psalms it is written: ‘he will command his angels to care for you, and with their hands they will hold you up so you will not smash your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him, “Again in Deuteronomy it is written: ‘You must not tempt the lord, your God.’”

⁸Once more the devil led him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹and said to him, “All this I will give you if you fall down before me and worship me.”

¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan, for it is also written: ‘You will worship the lord, God, and serve him alone.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and look, angels came down and cared for him.

Translated by Willis Barnstone

*

Mark, Matthew, and Luke say very soon after he was baptized, Jesus was driven out or dragged away, tested in the desert, before he preached anywhere or healed anyone in Galilee.

Each year we relive those days he was tempted, taunted, starved, during this muddy, mutable season of Lent.

You won't find any mention of Lent in the Bible, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, for "there was no such thing back then. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted. . . between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until [centuries] later. . . .

"When the world did not end as Jesus. . . said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back. . . .

"Little by little, Christians became devoted to. . . comforts. . . [that] made them feel safe and cared for—if not by God, then by themselves. . . . [B]efore 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. . . avoided extremes. . . decided to be nice instead of holy and." Taylor adds, "God moaned out loud."¹

Lent is the medieval church's response to that moan.

The Hebrews spent forty years roaming their wilderness before they overcame the mindset of slavery. Moses fasted for forty days, listening as God dictated Jewish law. Elijah fretted forty days on that same mountain, hungry and scared, until he heard the still, small voice of God.

Forty in scripture means just long enough for a person to change, to become used to a new way of thinking and behaving, too.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Lenten Discipline," from Home by Another Way (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), pp.65-6.

So each year, we get forty days—not counting Sundays—to figure out how we have cheated ourselves and mistreated each other and neglected God.

Trouble is, though, what happens is what usually happens when church takes control of expressions of faith, which is that something that's supposed to take us somewhere gets turned into an end in itself. Fasting, for instance—giving up whatever—becomes something people do for its own sake, or as a way to get rid of extra weight. All well and good, but it probably won't bring us closer to God.

That's why our Pilgrim ancestors got rid of Lent altogether.

Yet Matthew isn't urging us here to do without chocolate, or cheeseburgers, or wine. He is trying to help us see where Jesus' absolute loyalties lie, and how that sets Jesus apart from the rest of us. Jesus is someone who deeply believes he will always have everything that he needs; he's convinced that God is with him, no matter where he winds up, or how terrifying life can be; and he refuses to fall for the devil's sales pitches.

I'll be honest. I don't believe in a literal, walking-talking devil. I don't believe in an actual being whose name is Satan with horns on his head, pitchfork and tail, and a goatee.

I believe in the wickedness that he personifies—powerful forces that inflict pain, and condemn millions of people to desperation and misery. I don't think any of us can stand up to them all by ourselves.

Once we celebrate Communion, as we recite our UCC State of Mission, we pledge: "To name and confront the powers of evil within and among us." We can't confront what we pretend's not there.

Let's examine the three temptations Jesus has to resist, see if they ever cause us trouble as well.

I don't think God expects us to refuse to eat something when we've gone hungry for six weeks. Turning stones into bread isn't something we wish we could do just to stay alive; for us, the lure is instant gratification. Indulge yourself, enjoy. You deserve (dot dot dot). Live a little. Why must you work so hard?

The second temptation seems sweeter yet. Not only can I have whatever I desire, as much as I desire, whenever I desire, but. . . . What if I could do whatever I want—without consequences. No one could hurt or make me feel ashamed. I’m who’s important here—you’re not the boss of me! Night after night, I see that guy on TV. . . .

Oh, but even better, what if I told you what to do; whatever you decide to do has to satisfy me? What if I ruled the world—or at least your world, anyway? Maybe you once married someone like this; you tried your best to please, but it was never good enough. . . .

If you think of Lent as time to earn God’s blessings through your good intentions or self-sacrifice, most pastors would say you’re making a theological error. God’s grace is not something people work for as a reward for giving up X, Y, and Z this many days every year.

Maybe that’s how we hoped we’d please our parents; they’d see how hard we tried, realize how good we were, maybe say something to let us know how proud they were. . . . If you never got that or needed more, perhaps unconsciously you’re trying now to win it from an invisible god.

God with a small, not a capital g, because Christ says the One who made heaven and earth loved you even before you were born, and we can’t earn grace anyway. God’s grace is always available to you—you just have to ask—but because that’s vague or so very abstract, maybe a better way to see, feel, and trust that is to throw up your hands, and just like Martin Luther say, “I can’t win. . . . I surrender, heart and soul, to the compassion and mercy of Christ.”

That’s where I think Lent is supposed to lead us: Easter Sunday.

This, too, is why many progressive Christians say, “Let’s observe Lent a different way. Rather than give something up, what if believers took something on?”

Who might we be if we gave ourselves up to the fullness of love?

I want to leave you with part of a Franciscan prayer this morning that captures—better than I can—what all of these cries to “Repent!” really mean, or at least ought to mean for us now:

“May God bless you with discomfort,
At easy answers, half-truths,
And superficial relationships
So that you may live
Deep within your heart.

“May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression,
And exploitation of people,
So that you may work for
Justice, freedom and peace.

“May God bless you with tears,
To shed for those who suffer pain,
Rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand
To comfort them and
To turn their pain to joy.

“And may God bless you
With enough foolishness
To believe that you can
Make a difference in the world,
So that you can do
What others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness
To all our children and the poor.”

God bless you all.