

February 17, 2013 / First Sunday in Lent / Rev. Mike Hickcox

LENT ... AGAIN

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil ...

This is the first Sunday of Lent.

Last Wednesday (Ash Wednesday) was the beginning of the season. Easter Sunday will be the culmination.

One of the many positives about Lent coming around every year is that it provides *one more opportunity to try to explain what it is.*

Lent is, first of all, a well-documented season of the Christian Church. As far back as the Council of Nicaea, held in the year 325, Lent was described as a period of 40 days. Those 40 days were used as a time of personal preparation for Easter Sunday. It was in emulation of, or at least inspired by, Jesus' 40 days of preparation in the wilderness.

In the Old Testament, the flood in Genesis happened after 40 days and nights of rain. Moses had a 40 day visit to Mt. Sinai. Elijah took a 40 day trip to Mt. Horeb. Jonah's trip to Nineveh took 40 days. Forty days is clearly long enough to get something worthwhile done.

The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church count the 40 days differently. In the East, Sundays count as days of Lent. In the West, Sundays are set aside as feast days and aren't counted in the 40. In the Western church, it takes about 46 days to get through the 40 day period.

Both churches emphasize *fasting* as a significant element of the season of Lent. Fasting is a way to experience sacrifice, to show penitence, and to focus on self-examination.

In the early centuries of the church, fasting meant you would eat one meal a day. It would be eaten sometime near evening, and it would include no meat, no fish, and no animal products.

By the 800s, it was okay to eat after 3pm. By 1400, the meal could be eaten after noon, but it was still just one meal.

Today, in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, fast days are limited to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but there is a movement to return to a stricter daily regimen, as it has remained in the Orthodox Church.

Because Lent is a season of the Christian Church, and is preparation for Easter (the most important day in the Christian year), *you would think* it would be understood and observed equally throughout Christianity.

You would be wrong.

In the Baptist Church in America, and in most evangelical churches, Lent pretty much doesn't exist. Mainline Protestant churches have some experience with it. And the Episcopalians and Anglicans – more closely related to the Catholic Church – they have more history with observing Lent.

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I grew up in an industrial city in the center of Connecticut, a city with a number of ethnic neighborhoods. Families living in these neighborhoods were mostly from Eastern Europe or Western Europe. People had come to America and found work in the factories. New

Britain is the home of Stanley Works, producer of all those Stanley tools and doors. It was also the home of Fafnir Bearings, Landers, Frary & Clark, American Hardware, B. F. Corbin Locks, North and Judd – all big hardware manufacturers, each with multiple giant industrial buildings. Together, they employed tens of thousands of workers.

These factory workers came in waves of migrations from Europe. In New Britain, there were many churches where people could worship in their own traditions and languages.

We had the Italian-speaking Catholic Church, the Irish-speaking Catholic Church, the Polish-speaking Catholic Church, the French-speaking Catholic Church, the Russian-speaking Orthodox Church ... and the German-speaking Lutheran Church. The *majority* of the ethnic churches were Catholic.

In the public schools, I was surrounded by kids who were observing religious holidays not familiar to me. The Jewish kids had holidays I never heard of in my church. And the Catholic kids had all manner of saints days ... and then came Lent.

In our Methodist Church, we observed Lent, to a certain degree. But to all the Catholic kids, it was a big deal, and it included that little matter of “What do I give up for Lent this year?”

This was a fairly simple observance for kids: “I’m giving up chocolate bars; I’m giving up Life-Savers candy.” ... that kind of thing. But that was part of a larger system of being introduced to the concepts of Lent.

The religious rules about Lent are clearly not universal, but their importance is that they provide a guide for making a difference in your own faith life.

Whatever the rules, they are designed to lead to an understanding of sacrifice, to a sense of penitence, and to an experience of self-reflection.

To the extent that Protestants observe Lent, it is still preparation for Easter.

Lent involves a retelling of the ministry of Jesus, starting at the beginning. On the first Sunday of Lent, we reflect on the Gospel stories of the Temptation of Jesus. This is the beginning of His story as the Son of God.

To put the Temptation of Jesus into terms that are familiar and informative for the Church of the Covenant, today's scripture is a story of Jesus' inward journey, a process that was necessary before he could begin His outward journey.

Jesus went into the wilderness to prepare. It was a time to test his own faith; to stress it, to strengthen it so it was ready to meet any challenge.

We need to remember that this Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, is not about us.

It is about Jesus facing temptations exaggerated by tremendous need.

It is about Jesus turning away from the temptation to eat, when he is famished, if only he would turn away from God.

It is about Jesus turning away from the temptation to be given power and authority, in a time when his own people had little power or authority, if only he would turn away from God.

It is about Jesus rejecting the temptation to achieve superstar status, in a place where his people had very little status, if only he would turn away from God.

He passed the test. He passed all the tests. And now, he could begin the ministry that we know about, a ministry that would lead ultimately to Easter morning.

Again, this scripture is about Jesus; it is not about us.

On the other hand – the response to this scripture is all about us. If we can take this scripture, and others we encounter in Lent, and hold them before us while we consider how faith informs our lives – then maybe Lent can make a difference.

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Why isn't once enough when it comes to Lent? In very early Christianity, the time leading to Easter was used as period of instruction for the pledges, the novices. It was a time to teach them what it meant to be a Christian so they could be baptized into the faith at Easter. As far as we can tell, it was probably only the newbies that went through this period of preparation.

Why do we go through this same thing over and over again?

Here's one reason why:

In my years of working in radio news, I had my own working definition of what comprises news. It was this: news is *change*, or *the threat of change*.

When I considered whether an event was truly a news story, it had to be about a change in our world, and therefore it would be something

that matters to people: A building burned down. A bank was robbed. The city council made a zoning decision. The school calendar was adjusted. Something changed.

Or, there could be a real threat of change. It looks like a new bridge will be built, a tax will be increased, or the Air Force base will be closed.

These things affect people.

Because I believed news was pretty much limited to *change and threat of change*, there were some forms of so-called news that bothered me – these were stories that seemed manufactured, and very much unworthy of being called news.

One of those types is the “anniversary story.” You see these all the time on the TV news ...

It was one year ago today that a plane crashed somewhere.

It was two years ago today that a flood hit.

It was ten years ago that an epidemic killed thousands.

When I look at that so-called news story, I’m aware that the plane has not crashed in the past year, that the flood has not happened in the past two years, that the epidemic has been history for 10 years. So ... not news.

But what I miss in my equation is that *some people need* to re-visit, emotionally, an event that did change their lives dramatically. Somebody’s child might have died in that plane crash a year ago, in that flood two years ago, or in that epidemic a decade ago. For them, it still matters.

When I worked at United Methodist Communications in Nashville, at 8:30 every morning I sat at a table with the staff of the United Methodist News Service as they talked about stories for that day and for the future.

Every year, sometime in July, one reporter, Kathy, started talking about going back to New Orleans for the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The devastating hurricane had hit the coast of Louisiana on August 29, 2005. Every year, Kathy wanted to start talking about her plans to travel back to New Orleans and do stories about the anniversary of the hurricane, and the rebuilding taking place.

I thought, after one anniversary or two, that this repetitive reporting was a waste of resources.

Eventually, I came to realize that - for this reporter, who grew up near New Orleans - it all had special meaning. She had a need to revisit the story every year, and she knew other people who suffered the same need.

An anniversary story can have great significance for those who have an emotional attachment to the original event, to when it *really was* news ... a lingering attachment to when it *really was change*.

Lent and Easter can be seen in both these ways, too ... they are *old news*, or they are *a story that still matters*.

There are many people for whom Easter is only a repetition of an old story. It does not represent change, and they have no attachment to the original event. Many of these people *do* get dressed up on Easter morning, *do* go to church, and *do* go out for lunch afterward. And that's all they want. They've done Easter. Nothing changed. Nothing was new. No story.

But for those who take it personally, for whom there is the *potential of change* - they want to get more involved. They need to be immersed. They need to engage.

Lent – when used as a time of immersion and engagement - can lead to change.

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The response to the scripture is all about us.

We have the opportunity to set a course for ourselves in the weeks leading up to Easter.

In the wilderness, Jesus was reduced to a lonely, dirty, and famished little man, tempted with food and greatness if he would turn away from God ... and yet, even then, he had the power and integrity to stick to his faith and his principles, moving forward toward his outward journey ... his ministry.

We can use this time to examine our own principles, and to look squarely at the temptations of our own lives. We have the chance to stand up to those things in our lives that call for us to turn our backs on our principles, and on God ... a chance to reject the call to give priority instead to pleasures, to power, to convenience, or to comfort.

We might look for the strength we need by reading daily devotions from the Upper Room magazine, or from the Society of St. Andrew.

We might spend “private wilderness time” in prayer and meditation.

We might follow a discipline of fasting, or the sacrifice of something that would make us feel we are missing something important to us, to

keep us aware of the sacrifices that others suffer, not by choice, but because they are forced by life or by others to do without.

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I know a couple in New York that holds a daily observance they developed on their own. Every afternoon at 2pm, they pause and think of something they are grateful for in their lives. I was with them once at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, when suddenly they paused in our conversation. They closed their eyes for a few moments and recognized something for which they are grateful. They have a daily appointment for a moment with God.

Debra and David are Jewish. They call this time of theirs a Mincha Moment. Mincha is a Hebrew word that is found in the Book of Genesis, when Isaac went out in a field to converse with God. That conversation was a Mincha Moment.

Jesus experienced Mincha moments in the wilderness, when he was away from all others, to converse with God.

I think a daily Mincha Moment would be a wonderful observance for Lent. If, each day at a time we chose, we would pause for a moment with God, to be grateful, or to seek guidance and strength, it could make a difference in how we live our lives.

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Forty days is long enough to accomplish something worthwhile.

Here's the challenge of Lent: Whether you fast or you don't, can you find *some way* to put in the extra effort between Ash Wednesday and Easter?

We have no rules and regulations for the season of Lent. We lay it before you and say, "here it is, available for you to use."

... Like a diet program that promises a thinner you in 40 days.

... Like an exercise program that promises a stronger, healthier you in 40 days.

Envision a faith with greater integrity and strength in 40 days.

Lent – pick the program that fits you. Stick to it for 40 days and you'll see results by Easter morning.

Seriously, if you are better at living out your faith on Easter morning than you are today, then, for you, Lent has made a difference.

This is the first Sunday of Lent.