

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Forty Days"
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First Sunday in Lent

Here we are again in the forty day period we call "Lent." Most of us understand the week before Easter, is a Holy Week, and we have activities everyday in that week to re-enact the last few days of Jesus' life on earth before his death and resurrection. We perhaps have heard that Lent in ancient times was a time of preparation for candidates for baptism to prepare with both fasting and prayer to make the momentous decision to follow Jesus Christ with their whole lives, minds, hearts, passions, desires.

Lent comes from the German and Old English for "spring." And I hope you have enjoyed a few days of sunshine and spring like conditions here which constitutes our variable Spring time, or the lack thereof. I have enjoyed it and the positive temperatures.

Lent is a time for us to re-examine our faith. The number forty in Scripture is often tied to times of trial and something new about to happen. In Genesis 7, you remember the Flood was how long? That's right, forty days and forty nights. God was rebooting the earth, to use a computer term, and God promised never to do again to that magnitude. God put the rainbow in the sky indicating a possible new kind of atmosphere and that had never happened before, but even more importantly to say that God would not wipe us out, but be "for us" in some new way. Even in the rainbow, there is a hint toward Jesus coming.

But in those ancient times, part of the new way was the Law, which Moses got up on the mountain in what period of time? Yes, 40 days and 40 nights is the answer. The Law was a way to show God's ways and put into words God's standard. But when the people again rebelled and didn't want to take the minority report of the two spies out of the twelve who said the land is wonderful and ready to take... No, they spent how many days spying out the land and the majority report was "we can't do it, no way. The guys over there are taller than basketball players and the city walls are like sky scrapers." We can't do it. Be careful if you are tempted to say this "we can't do it" about a positive but challenging project in church...And so they told the Lord they weren't going to go into that land, and He told them that He would find other real estate for them, in fact, there was some nice desert

property that they would find suitable for how long? Yes, forty years. And that generation died. And the new generation went into the land.

And there are lots of other forties in the Bible, Goliath taunted the Israeli army for forty days until little David responded. And Jonah finally got to Nineveh and preached that they only had forty more days until the city would be destroyed.

And even when 40 represented a judgment or discipline, there was grace. In the desert, the Israelite's clothes did not wear out and their feet didn't swell. In other words, God gave them provision to live even though they had made the wrong choice. And the people of Nineveh chose to change their minds about God. They chose to care about God and follow God and their city was spared. We too need to take this time to receive the grace of God to meet us where we are.

Jesus went into the desert after his baptism and before his ministry started. Mark doesn't record how he was tempted there. It just says he fasted forty days and was with the wild animals and was ministered to afterwards by angels after he fasted.

So all these people had their forty days and it was a time of testing. Not testing in the sense that God was seeing gleefully how they might fail. It was more like we say when we are testing microphones, "Testing, one, two, three, testing." Now what's the point of that? It is seeing if we can hear what is being said. (repeat) That is what Lent is about. Are we taking time to hear what God is saying over us?

For everyone who knows God, He is saying, "You are my beloved child, I am pleased with you." Yes, God knows our sins and rebellion and yet chooses to see us through Jesus, and therefore says to everyone of us who have given ourselves to Jesus, "You are my dearly loved child, I am pleased with you."

With that grace in mind, then we can begin to explore what we give our hearts and our passion to, so that we might once again bring ourselves and our whole lives back to God through Jesus. What matters the most to you? Hold that in your mind for a moment. Have you given that over to the Lord, and simply said, Lord take this concern, this passion, this difficulty, this

relationship, this future, this resource, whatever it is, and simply give it back to God.

The self-denial or the fasting part of Lent is a way to get at what we really long for, to look at what we feel we cannot do without. The self-giving or acts of kindness part of Lent, is seeing how we might go out of our way to care for others.

Both self-denial and self-giving help us confront parts of ourselves which we may not like. How do you become when you haven't had the calories or caffeine or sweets? Some of us become surly, because everyone has their own comforts and patterns that help them on a day to day basis.

Similarly, when we try to help someone, and they don't appreciate it, how does that sit with you? Does it bring out a part of you that you don't like?

A lot of the work that needs to be done on our spiritual paths has to do with what we are like on the inside. We are called to help the community, to love the needy, to care for those who have so little. But we at the same time are called to do the interior work, so that we don't just do what we're supposed to do because we have to do it because it's right. The interior work of Lent is the work of the Holy Spirit showing our needs, showing our dysfunctions, showing our dependence on God and on one another.

We are not as together as sometimes we try to tell others we are. We are often in a wilderness of loneliness. We can feel alone when we are surrounded by people. We can feel abandoned when people are asking to help us. And so during this time, we are encouraged to reach out to another person we trust and get the help and the listening ear that we need.

It's not about faking that we have it all together. It's about acknowledging the reality of the wilderness in our lives, and what is in that desert, whether it is loneliness or depression or self-hatred or whatever it is. And then as we acknowledge these wild animals in our lives, God sends us ministering angels in the form of other people, average, broken people to help us.

The Lenten period is a time of deepening trust in God, and in others. We have been burned in the past, some of us badly so. Yet, we can come and as the hymn says, "earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal." Many of us find it challenging to get in touch with what we need. Then once we have

determined that need, the next goal is to not be so overwhelmed by our need to actually ask others for help. So we can still take these forty days as a time to simply listen.

Listen to God. Listen to what's going on inside. As we do, God meets us right where we are. We can experience the transforming love of God and one another in our most broken, darkest places. But it is risk to share about these. Lent is a time to share our desert experiences.

And the hope that we sense, when we take a fearless moral inventory, as they say in the 12 step groups, is that we are not alone. There is much grace to change. And the next part is the most enlivening part.

Take time in the Scriptures and prayer in this season. Re-read what we have read in Church, if you're not sure where to read in the Bible. Give yourself anew to God without qualification. Listen to what God says to you in that place. Share what you hear in that prayer relationship.

These are simple things. They are something we can all do. And as we do so, may we experience in a way we never have before the ministering angels, and the very presence of God Himself.

Let us pray.