

February 21, 2021  
First Sunday in Lent—Year B  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 9:8-17  
Psalm 25:1-9  
1 Peter 3:18-22  
Mark 1:9-15

I want to begin today with a clip from the television series *Community*. If you've never seen it, the show centers around a diverse and quirky group of students who attend a fictional community college in a fictional town in Colorado. The main character, Jeff Winger, is handsome and charming, and also vain and egotistical. Those traits served him well in his former career as an attorney. He lost that career after being disbarred when the Bachelor's degree on his resume was revealed to be a fabrication. That's why Jeff is in community college in his mid-30s. Despite his fall from grace, his ego remains intact. The entire community college enterprise is beneath him—and he's a condescending jerk to everyone associated with it.

In this episode, Jeff, who is into health and fitness—or perhaps maintaining his good looks—has gone to the community college health center for a routine checkup. At this point, he's returning to the health center to get the results of his blood tests. <sup>1</sup> [*Play the referenced episode of Community, 6:16-7:42*]

Let me repeat those last words: “This is a temple of doom!” “There is no God!”

Those words might resonate with us as Christians, after a slight adjustment: “This is a temple of doom!” “Get right with God!” In that we hear the two themes with which Lent begins: mortality and penitence.

Speaking of the beginning of Lent, the last time we worshipped together in person inside the church was last year on the first Sunday in Lent. In other words, on the liturgical calendar, it was a full year ago. Remember that film *Groundhog Day*, in which television weather reporter Bill Murray keeps waking up and repeating the same February 2? It feels a little like we too have been stuck in a time loop: every day for a year, we have woken up on Ash Wednesday. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Sure, the positivity rates and death counts change, but our days drone on with monotony. Remember that you are dust, and wear a mask. Remember that you are dust, and socially distance. Remember that you are dust, and stay home.

“This is a temple of doom!”

As for the getting right with God part, well, we might not put it that way, but I suppose that's what our church community is always about. To put another way, our church community is always concerned with relationship with God. Lent brings a sharper focus on the corrections we might make in order to improve that relationship. Yes, the traditional Lenten connection between mortality and penitence is a sort of finger-wagging “Or else you'll go to hell!” But I don't think that's necessary for it to be meaningful. Instead, Lent provides the opportunity to seriously ponder all the implications of human embodiment. It's a chance to recognize that there is a connection between our embodiment and our faith; that there is a connection between our relationship with our body and our relationship with God; that how we feel about our body is connected to how we feel about God; and that all of that is connected to how we respond to the embodiment of others.

Even the most healthy and fit human has so much bodily need: oxygen, heat, water, food, again and again and again. We die if we don't get them, as this week's news out of Texas reminded us so vividly. And those are only the essentials. There is so very much more.

Embodiment is hard. I imagine that, for each of us, our relationship with our body is complex and shifting. My own relationship with my body shifted most dramatically when I was coming out as a lesbian. It was only afterwards that I could fully occupy and appreciate my own body. Now, my relationship with my body is shifting slowly as I age. I have to do a lot more negotiating with it about what I can reasonably expect from it, and I am less likely to take for granted the more routine things it does for me. Those two examples revolve around one conundrum: human bodies are dangerous. They are dangerous to us of themselves, as the location of need and pain and eventual death. They are dangerous to us because of others, for how they mark or perceive or use them.

This is perhaps a good point from which to join Jesus. Today's Gospel reading brings us back to the beginning of Mark, who gives us three very short stories that we might title: baptism, temptation, and proclamation. Notice that, in the first two stories, Jesus is passive subject. That is, John draws Jesus to the water, where God claims Jesus; and then the Spirit drives Jesus to the wilderness, where Satan tempts Jesus. Only after all that does Jesus become the active player he will remain until his arrest in Gethsemane.

In his Gospel, Mark says nothing about the nature of Satan's temptations. Mark's silence leaves space that we are free to fill. The church tries to do that for us, but has tended to get bogged down in temptations of a sexual nature. You'd think that the Gospels say that Satan parades an alluring woman in front of Jesus, but they don't. I think that's way off the mark.

Still, the Spirit and Satan were doing *something* with Jesus for forty days in the wilderness. Maybe that was the crucible necessary to forge Jesus into the person who would go on to save the world. We often note that Jesus emerged from the Jordan; we less often note that he subsequently emerged from the wilderness. Remember, it goes like this: baptism, and then temptation, and then proclamation, and by that I mean proclamation in both word and deed.

Let's think again about what Satan's temptations for Jesus might have been. It seems to me that the best clues come from looking at what Jesus said and did after overcoming those temptations. It was all about things like healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and including the marginalized. And so maybe his biggest temptations had to do with things like greed or hardheartedness or division. He must have realized how the results of things like greed and hardheartedness and division are ultimately visited on the bodies of others. He surely was concerned about making sure bodies were no more dangerous than they needed to be.

Genesis tells us that, after the flood, God established a new covenant with “every living creature.” God reserves the power to commit further wholesale destruction, but God promises never to do so again. Instead, God recognizes the value and vulnerability of physical creation, and becomes committed to its eternal flourishing. Temple of doom, perhaps, but also garden of delight. For that reason, the next big course correction would involve, not a flood that brought death, but a messiah who brought life and light, and whose central message was this: “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” I just don’t see how you can love your neighbor while lacking concern for their fully embodied self.

Jesus really is a whole lot less about individual salvation and a whole lot more about the salvation of the world. Hence it follows that Lent is less about individual salvation and more about the salvation of the world. If that’s the case, maybe the most important Lenten theme is actually compassion.

Jesus’ disciples go on to baptize new followers, who baptize new followers, and so on, until here we are today. Baptism is fun, but perhaps our very first temptation is to avoid that perilous Spirit-driven trip to the wilderness for further temptations. But maybe such wilderness time tempers us for proclamation, as it did Jesus, to which we bring, as Jesus did, our embodied selves—embodied selves that give us compassion for other embodied selves.

During Lent, we look toward the cross. But we also look beyond the cross to the empty tomb. So much of the doom of the body will be improved by actualizing the reconciled creation that God promises, when justice is no longer subject to markers such as race or class or sexuality. Sure, each of our individual bodies is subject to the random roll of the dice. Still, imagine the healing that will occur for all of us, when embodiment itself is less dangerous for everyone. This temple of doom, and every body, is the dwelling of the creative God, and body of the living Christ.

Mortality and penitence: I understand if neither theme feels particularly attractive right now. If you don’t feel like recognizing Lent this year, then just don’t. Because here’s what I think: we’ve been in the wilderness for a year, and the Holy Spirit is doing her work. Rather than wagging a giant index finger at us, maybe God is even now laying a gentle hand on our shoulder and whispering a tender word in our ear. The results have yet to be revealed, but we have all been changed. Thank God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Community*, season 2, episode 2. “The Psychology of Letting Go,” directed by Anthony Russo, written by Hilary Winston, aired October 7, 2010, on NBC. It is currently available for streaming on Hulu.