

February 26, 2023
First Sunday in Lent, Year A
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

Today is the first Sunday *in* Lent.

Note that I didn't say the first Sunday *of* Lent. That word choice is deliberate. It was Lent yesterday and it will be Lent tomorrow, but it's not Lent today. That's because the Sundays from now through Palm Sunday are embedded in Lent, but they aren't part of Lent.

If you don't believe me, count the days for yourself. As everyone knows, Lent lasts 40 days. If you count each day beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending with the Saturday before Easter, the total is 46. It drops down to 40 only if you skip the Sundays. Lent may be the season of penitence, but every Sunday is supposed to be a celebration of the resurrection. Every Sunday is a mini-Easter, if you will.

I can say that, but today we still have purple vestments, concealed ornamentation, the Great Litany, and none of those "a-words." We also have rather dour scripture readings, starting with the one from Genesis. If you were here on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, you heard my grumpiness about the fact that the story of the Fall is required for the Service of Lessons and Carols. Now, less than three months later, here it is again. During the season of Advent, I make it a point to reclaim and proclaim the goodness of the human body, liberated to do that because God is about to get one. I try to keep that going right through the season after the Epiphany. But now, rather abruptly, it's Lent, and rushing back with it is all that bad body-theology, that bad-body theology. A load of it directly targets me, as someone both woman and lesbian. While those most marginalized are also those most vulnerable, no one is safe from it. The rhetoric of sin can be a powerful weapon.

Because the rhetoric of sin has been weaponized against certain people, it's tempting to want to dump it altogether. The problem is, sometimes people do bad things. Sometimes institutions do bad things. Sometimes governments do bad things. We certainly don't want to give them all a pass for their bad behavior. To the contrary, we should hold people and institutions and governments accountable. We should hold ourselves accountable. Seldom is the resolution of the situation as straightforward as one person seeking forgiveness and another person granting it. No, matter that the church holds that up as an ideal, it doesn't often happen when it comes to something truly important.

And so you have it: I spit out my mindset upon entry to Lent this year. Maybe it's too much information. Maybe the gist of it is that I feel ambivalent about Lent this year. And maybe I am not alone. On top of all the usual complications, we're coming off three years of pandemic fright and six years of political turmoil. For now, I suggest we set aside Genesis, set aside Romans, and proceed directly to Matthew.

The gospel reading for today is a version of the story always offered up on the first Sunday in Lent, that of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It mentions the wilderness but mostly it's about Jesus' interaction with his visitor, the devil—or, to use some other words for that guy, Satan, the tempter, the slanderer, the false accuser. On first glance, this might not seem particularly helpful to our Lenten conundrum: I mean, really, time in the wilderness with the devil?

Let's back up and lift up one point: this guy drops by at the *end* of Jesus' 40 days. We don't know what happened before then, but it must have been *something*, because whatever it was, Jesus was ready. He jousts with this fiend—perhaps not physically but certainly verbally, mentally, and spiritually. Verbally, mentally, spiritually, Jesus fends off his adversary. At the end he emerges—not a quivering shadow of himself but rather a leader tender, wise, and strong.

It's 40 days of wilderness for Jesus and 40 days of Lent for us. Frankly, I'd choose 40 days of wilderness over 40 days of Lent. As you might know by now, I'm a lover of wilderness, though it has now been some years since I have been able to experience it. When I was younger, I was a backpacker. Sometimes I even backpacked alone. Even I find that hard to believe now; there weren't cell phones back then. Because I'm not strong enough to carry a lot of weight, the longest trips I ever made were 37 days short of 40. Still, even for three days, there is something important and instructive about paring down to essentials, the things that you can carry, at least when this is by choice and not by necessity. And so it was my choice to be, rather paradoxically, both burdened and unburdened; both gasping for breath and breathing fresh air.

During a sermon last June, I told you a short version of my coming out story. I was 30 years old, living in Seattle. On the morning of July 7, 1992, I called the Lesbian Resource Center for help. What I didn't mention last June was that I was just back from a 3-day-weekend 36-mile backpacking trip on the Olympic Peninsula. I don't think the timing was incidental.

In that case I had access to literal wilderness, but it needn't be that way. Let's use a different metaphor. Imagine clearing the smoke from a room that has been smoky for so long that you even stopped noticing that it's smoky. Suddenly you can see clearly and breathe freely. When you have pared down, when you have cleared space, you can find the truth of your own self: your true loves, your true cravings, your true motivations. I think that truth is God. Adversaries may come your way, but now you are prepared for their challenges, from which you will emerge tender, wise, and strong.

I don't know what if anything you have in mind for Lent this year. But I'm trying to see the metaphorical wilderness of Lent as something like releasing and clearing. In that fresh openness, I hope to find God again.

I said earlier that every Sunday in Lent is a mini-Easter, a celebration of the resurrection. If Lent gets tough for you, you might should remember that. It might also help to remember that, while some people fixate on the cross during Lent, it's always ultimately all about the resurrection. In that case, maybe Lent is actually about accessing the healing necessary to fully occupy a hurting world. So, my suggestion is this. On whatever day you need it, Sunday or Saturday or weekday, look for resurrection in your life. Look for resurrection in the lives of your family members and friends and neighbors. Look for resurrection in your communities even in communities that you are not a part of. Look for it in creation.

Today, with wilderness in mind, I'm keeping this sermon short, so that we can take a few minutes to sit in silence. If you have a meditation practice, and you can use that if you wish. But you might try imagining yourself releasing the weight of the burdens you are carrying; or you might try imagining yourself breathing out air laden with the toxins of life, and breathing in air that is crisp and clean. However you approach it, hear this Lenten message: you do not need an intermediary to access the divine. God speaks in *your* heart.