

Sermon Preached on March 6, 2022 – First Sunday in Lent

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St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Dwell with Temptations

On Wednesday evening, our liturgy included an "Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent" in which I said: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; meditating on God's holy Word."

A season of "self-examination and repentance" ...a whole season of "self-examination and repentance" ...five whole weeks? No wonder Lent gets kind of a bad reputation

Sounds pretty dismal to me

To make matters worse, the gospel reading on Wednesday included the instruction from Jesus to, basically, go to our rooms for that "self-examination and repentance" so that we don't look to be doing it for attention or some kind of "most devout Christian" award

Add to that today's gospel reading where Jesus is tempted *by the DEVIL* in the wilderness for 40 days and let's just say that Lent is off to a *great* start

Where's the happy ending? When do we get to experience the warm and fuzzy Jesus stories again? Isn't coming to church supposed to make me feel better and happy? When do we get relief?

Well my friends, our faith is way more real-life than that.

I mean it!

The good news of Jesus, the love and grace of God experienced in its totality, is not the balm to our souls because it takes us *out* of our lives. The healing power of God is in the realization that God accompanies us and knows us in the totality of our lives and doesn't turn away or try to make light of the hard stuff, but, rather, is in the thick of it with us and seeking with us wholeness and liberation

It is society that says we're not supposed to dwell on the hard stuff, it is our culture that tells us we're not supposed to be sad or depressed

It's a cultural norm that we tell people to "buck up" or "you'll get over it soon" or "don't dwell on it"

Greeting cards in the stores say "get better soon" rather than "take your time and don't rush the healing process"

Our workplaces give you, on average, 3 days of paid time off at the death of a parent, grandparent, domestic partner, sibling, grandchild or foster child – 4 days for the death of a spouse or child

Four days!

Lent is a radical invitation into something different

Lent is an invitation to 40 days of self-examination and repentance, 40 days which start with the ultimate recognition that we are very much human – the dust of the earth – as ashes were wiped on our foreheads in the shape of a cross

40 days to go to our inner rooms and to reflect — to invite God into the moments and places where we feel the great tension of broken relationships, hurt, anger, distance, apathy – you know, the stuff that keeps us up at night – and to ask for release, breath, openness, liberation

40 days to get to know our temptations, the devils on our shoulders, the things that lure us into that false sense of being all-powerful, all-knowing, all over the place, and even all-generous – you know, the attributes of God except they're often used with more fancy Latin words: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent

40 days to dwell on the things that society is constantly telling us not to dwell on but rather to shove under rugs and get over, get past

40 days – honestly, is it enough time?

40 days was the amount of time, we're told in today's gospel, that Jesus spent in the wilderness – where, note, the Spirit led him – being tempted by the Devil

It's a glimpse into the challenges and temptations even Jesus faced as he lived and breathed on this earth

Debbie Thomas writes that even Jesus “has to learn how to discern God's presence in a bleak and lonely wasteland. He has to trust that he can be beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable at the same time. He has to learn that God's care resides within his flesh-and-blood humanity — within a fragile vessel that can crack and shatter.”

We and our fragile vessels that can crack and shatter, as Ms. Thomas describes them, live in that “both, and” of being beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable like Jesus

We're taught to want to stay in the beloved and valued bits, and ignore or get over the famished and vulnerable bits

But, “We are loved in our vulnerability. Not out of it,” Ms Thomas writes. “We are the children of a God who accompanies us in our suffering, not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity. Why is this good news?” she asks. “It is good news because we are also the children of a God who resurrects...The story of humanity is not a story that ends in despair. It's a story that culminates at an empty tomb, in a kingdom of hope, healing, consolation, and joy.”

That's where we're headed, friends, to the release and renewal of resurrection

And, resurrection doesn't negate the journey – resurrection joy doesn't diminish the temptations as we go, anticipating resurrection doesn't mean we need to punish ourselves for grieving the hardships along the way

If anything it gives all the more permission to go there during these 40 days, to bravely practice self-examination and repentance knowing God's love and grace see us through to resurrection

In around the 3rd Century after Christ, there was a movement of some Christians out of cities and towns and into secluded areas – they were called the Desert Mothers and Fathers and this aesthetic of pulling themselves out of society and into this intentional space of prayer and reflection was the early basis of Christian monasticism

There was a sincere hope that by recusing themselves from the turmoils of life and dedicating themselves to prayer and reflection – self-examination and repentance – they could gain a greater knowledge of God

Their teachings, often short phrases given in answer to questions from those who went out to them seeking their wisdom, were written down and passed on through the generations

One such Desert Father, Abba Anthony, reflected “Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter the Kingdom of God” and “without temptation no one can be saved”

I don't think Abba Anthony was saying “therefore go out and be tempted so that you can be saved”

I think Abba Anthony knew the universality of temptation, knew the universality of grief – and, rather than saying “go, therefore, and be tempted no more” which is unachievable, Abba Anthony, was offering grace, extending love: “all of us are tempted and all of us will inherit the Kingdom of God”

Lent truly is an invitation, an offer, to spend time in our inner rooms, in self-examination and repentance, getting acquainted with our demons, our temptations – tending to the things that the world says are to be put away, to be ignored – and recognizing, as Abba Anthony did, that even as we are tempted and bereaved, we are forgiven and comforted; that the byproducts of self-examination and repentance are liberation and everlasting love; that even with these burdens of life, resurrection comes

And we journey through Lent in great company – we journey together as the Body of Christ: we come back together each week and offer our prayers, sing songs of faith, and consume the Body of Christ – nourishment for mind, body, and spirit for the journey

And we journey with the Holy Spirit as the lantern to our path, Jesus our sibling who truly gets what it means to be human, and God, our great parent, the all-encompassing love: our refuge and our strength

This is good news, this is great news – this is real-life, messy and glorious, beautiful and sad, hard and with ease, real *life* faith

Thanks be to God, Amen.