

“Forty Days”
Bethany UMC
February 28, 2010
Cathryn T. Vitek

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Key Verse: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”



Last Sunday was the first Sunday in the season we call Lent, but in worship we focused on finishing up our Outflow worship and small group series. We were a week behind schedule because we had to take a snow day – any ideas on how we should make that up?---

So this morning we are going to begin to focus on Lent. You may know that Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of Lent. We had a Parish worship service here that evening which included the imposition of ashes. Like Christians all around the world, when we left the sanctuary, our foreheads were marked with grey ash crosses. In scripture the ashes – or dust – symbolize frailty, death, sadness, mourning, judgment and repentance. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Ash Wednesday worship invites us into the season of Lent; it invites us to meditate on our mortality, sinfulness and need for a savior; it invites us to renew our commitment to daily repentance in the Lenten season and in all of life. It invites us into a forty day period of self-denial, a time to focus on one or more practices of imposed self-discipline so that we can remind ourselves of the depth of our sinfulness and the frequency of our failings in our journey with God. Lent is a time of pruning, to be sure. But the point of pruning is to encourage and inspire new, stronger growth, and I think we sometimes miss that in our Lenten practice.



For as long as I can remember, I’ve my favorite kind of tree has been a willow tree. I think it may be because where I grew up, there weren’t very many around. I love their graceful branches – for me they possess a beauty that no other tree can match. I can’t tell you how excited I was the spring my husband Chris told me that we needed to plant a willow tree in our yard to help with a water problem we were having. We went to Home Depot and picked one out and he planted it where we needed it in our backyard. There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t go outside to admire our growing willow, and by the end of the summer and early fall, it had

grown beyond what I expected for the first year, and the branches fell so gracefully over our deck. It was as pretty as a picture. My favorite tree in the world. It did beautifully over the winter and grew even more the following spring and I continued to enjoy it through out that summer and early fall. It made that part of our yard my little garden of Eden.

And then one day I looked out the kitchen window and I noticed there were no lovely, willowy branches in my view and I went outside and my beautiful willow had been reduced to a 5 foot stump. I don't think I have to tell you that I was not happy. "Why did you do that?" I most likely screamed to Chris. He told me to relax, that it needed cut back. "Look," he said, "I made this wreath for you out of a few of the branches." Cut back, I said?



You did not cut that tree back, you have KILLED it! There is nothing green on that tree and it is going to die! He promised me that it would come back the following Spring, but I was not buying his story. And every time I looked at that tree stump I was reminded of his willow-murdering activity. Until late the following Spring when 1 and then 2 and then 3 and then more new branches than I could count emerged from the stump and just as Chris had predicted, my favorite willow came back taller and fuller and more beautiful than before.



I think that pruning is the perfect image for us during this season. While the willow was dormant, things were going on that I couldn't see – things that were necessary for the tree to come back stronger than before. During these forty days of Lent, we are called to self-discipline and self-denial – a time of pruning, if you will -- and that discipline and that denial are supposed to produce something in us that makes us stronger and more prepared for our Christian journey beyond this season.



But often times, I think we get stuck on the pruning part. Cutting back or cutting out is not particularly fun, and so sometimes we spend the season in our sackcloth and our ashes, feeling deprived and desolate, mournful and especially, guilty. Or we abandon the practice and the Lenten journey because the remorse of our sinfulness and our inability to be as perfect as we want to be is overwhelming and we feel that we are punishing ourselves for being human. Or we choose not to be pruned, not to participate in this season's journey because the thought of the pruning process seems too painful, too depressing, or even too impossible. It is a gray feeling, gray like the gray winter days, gray like the color of ashes.

The forty days of Lent are meant to recall for us Jesus' forty days of temptation in the desert. We read Luke's version of that story today. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all



during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.” And it goes on to tell us that Satan took advantage of his weakened physical condition... his hunger, and tempted him to turn stones into bread, and Jesus denied Satan by quoting scripture. Satan tempts Jesus two more times, and two more times, Jesus denied Satan by quoting scripture. The test, though, was not whether or not Jesus could complete the fast, or how committed Jesus was to his knowledge of scripture or even how committed to being in the Spirit that Jesus was. For Jesus, the test was whether or not he would fully embrace his status and mission as the Son of

God.

Jesus’ journey here establishes for us his commitment and ability to begin his ministry by demonstrating his resolve to follow God’s plan for his life. In turning down Satan’s suggestion of turning the stones into bread, he demonstrates his trust that God would supply for his every need. When Satan offers Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Jesus’ bowing at his feet, Jesus rejects his offer, affirming his unwavering allegiance to God as the only Sovereign Authority. And when Satan takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple of Jerusalem and tempted him to prove who he was by throwing himself down from the temple so that the angels would rescue him as scripture says, Jesus’ refusal proves his trust in God’s own purpose, God’s own ways. So the fasting, the scripture, the prayer, or being in the Holy Spirit were tools Jesus used to survive his time in the desert place, to overcome the temptations offered by Satan, to make him ready for his mission and ministry. They were the means, not the end.

What I think happens for us is that sometimes we forget to connect the discipline part of Lent with the spiritual journey that it’s intended to be. We feel that we need to deprive ourselves of a favorite food or beverage. Or we fast from certain meals or on certain days of the week. Or we begin an exercise program. Or we spend 10 or 15 extra minutes in the Scriptures. And those are all very, very good things in and of themselves. But if we begin to practice these disciplines as part of our Lenten journey, I believe that we need to be firm in how those disciplines deepen our commitment to Christ. For example, when we give up chocolate for these forty days, can we say on Easter Sunday morning that we relied totally and completely on God and somehow come to a deeper understanding and trust in God’s ability to supply our every need; or, do we wake up on Easter Sunday morning and say “I did it! now where’s the chocolate bunny?” Or when we spend that extra time in scripture, at the end of our Lenten journey how did that extra time affect who we are becoming as we mature in our ministry? Do you see what I mean? How we enter into the disciplines of the season affects how much we grow over the 40 days. If we commit to the discipline as an act of obedience, or as an obligation, but don’t connect that act as a means of deepening our relationship with God, then, if successful, we have fulfilled the obligation. But we have missed the pruning opportunity which allows us to come out of this season having grown stronger as a child of God.

There is one more thing I’d like to point out about our scripture today, and that is Jesus’ total and utter surrender to the will of God for his life. The Spirit of God moved him to

the desert and he said, okay, I'll go, because he trusted in God's plan for his life. That's the model he set before us his entire life. Remember when what he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane when he knew that he was going to be crucified? He prayer: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." That is what we Christians are forever trying to do...place ourselves...all that we are, in God's hands at all times. That's a hard thing, a seemingly impossible thing, and sometimes a scary thing.

But there's one more thing about Lent that we sometimes miss, and that is that we enter the season as Easter people. We are called to remember with confidence and gratitude that Christ has already conquered sin and death. In that remembrance we should be motivated by faith and drawn by trust – trust that he has given us repentance as a grace – a personal gift of God to us that comes for the purpose of instilling life in us. We are called to remember that God finds pleasure in his human creation...remember the creation story? When God created human kind, he didn't call us "good", like the rest of his amazing works. He called us "very good". And even though our forefathers and foremothers fell short of the glory of God – they fell to sin, just like we do -- God never, ever stopped loving his created. God never stopped making ways for all of us to return to his presence. God *loves* us so much that God *gave* us his Son to bring God's redemptive love to us: we are called to remember that "... God sent his only begotten Son so that all who believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." We who journey the Lenten wilderness are called to remember God's faithfulness and extraordinary love as we make our way towards the Easter celebration. And I believe our Lenten practice should be out of response to this unfathomable love – not out of guilt, not out of obedience to rituals, but out of the overwhelming gratefulness for God's love on our behalf.

And so I invite you to this season of pruning. I invite you to take a look at your Lenten discipline...or to consider taking one on, if you haven't already – there are some suggestions which might help get you started on the insert in the bulletin. And I encourage you to be attentive to God's Spirit – is God drawing your attention toward an attitude or specific quality that God desires to purge or to enlarge in you? Or is God perhaps forming in you a vision or picture of your journey in faith, a gift of hope to encourage you? Ask God to reveal the ways in which you might need pruned, to that you might be fuller of God's grace and love than you could have ever imagined. May our forty days produce a strength in God that we never knew possible. Amen.

