

**Living into Lent**  
**March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019**  
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Today's gospel from Luke recounting Jesus's 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, led me into some readings about this particular story as well as about the season of Lent in general. Luke's gospel, after all, provides the blue print for our practices over the next six weeks, so reading about one can quickly become research into the other. And I come bearing some good news. While I didn't find any theories or long-overlooked historical contexts that would lead me to stand here and wish you all a happy Lent, I can share a few findings that helped me better appreciate the richness of this portion of our liturgical calendar.

There's no getting around the reality that our practices during this period seem geared to emphasize the ways that we fall short, our unavoidable sinfulness. Our service now begins with a form called the Penitential order, a form that puts our confessional prayer right at the outset of our worship experience. It's a time of year when we don't even hear our scriptures without first fessing up that we've been weak, short sighted, and selfish all over again. But there's a context beyond a reminder of sinfulness that's at work in these changes to our service. This is the season when we devote more energy than usual to our own spiritual renovation. Not the recharge-your-batteries kind of

renovation, but the work of getting serious with ourselves, paring away the habits that distract us, and bringing an added dose of mindfulness and discipline to our daily practices. We might think of today as the first Sunday in the season of spring cleaning within our own lives. That analogy seemed apt after learning in my readings this week that the word “Lent” comes from the same root word as “length,” and so “Lent” actually refers to the lengthening days of spring season when we take up this work of spiritual cleansing.

So what does our gospel tell us about the ways that we might go about our own spring cleaning? I think we can take three recommendations from the story of Jesus’s 40 days of fasting and reflection in the wilderness.

The first is that this season is above all a time for learning and self-discipline. That is probably not a surprising conclusion. Many of us quickly associate this time of year with a commitment to do without some convenience or indulgence and with fresh opportunities to learn about our tradition. (I don’t know about you, but I’m all geared up for some Lent Madness.) But it’s worth making the point that the intense self-discipline described in Luke is not represented as a punishment or an atonement. Jesus is not fasting in the wilderness as an act of contrition. Rather, he has taken on a personal discipline that he sees as indispensable to his understanding of scripture, his ability to hear the voice of God rather than the voice of his own

ego in the lessons from Deuteronomy, and his path of self-deprivation serves to put into practice the priorities that he professes. One of the ways that we know this is that Satan appears, functioning like a multiple choice exam with trick answers, and Jesus manages to avoid any responses that validate present ease to the expense of a broader understanding of the Torah. If our Lent echoes Jesus's practice, then this is a time for us to pare away distractions, adopt a discipline that will bring focus to our learning, and devote some deliberately designated hours to study.

So I won't wish you a happy Lent on this first Sunday of the season, but I will pray that all of us take joy in a time of renovation, a time when we are fed by discipline and deep study.

The second recommendation we can take from today's gospel is that we should embrace this season as the occasion for a private journey. So much of our religious experience involves activities shared with others. We are a Book of Common Prayer kind of people. We like taking communion with each other, offering the peace across our pews, singing hymns and chanting psalms as a congregation, and offering our responsive lines in the Prayers for the People. Even our confessions are communal confessions. But when Jesus heads out into the wilderness, he goes alone. In fact, some Bible scholars speculate that Luke tells us this story in a way that invites us to ask how we even know about

this remote experience to begin with. Luke couldn't have been there. In fact, no one else was there—and perhaps that's part of the point of the story. In our religious life together, Lent is set aside as a uniquely private experience. While we certainly share some activities together, much of our spring cleaning has to be left up to our own private labors. This is internal work. Individual work. If our discipline requires some seasonal prohibitions, it's up to us to discern what that self-denial might look like, and it's up to us to follow our own regimen as best we can. We received a similar encouragement to go about our Lenten practice in a private way in the gospel from Matthew for Ash Wednesday where Jesus instructed his followers to give alms in secret, to pray in secret, and to fast in secret so that we may not be seen by others but only by ourselves and by our God who is with us in secret.

It's this need for inwardness that can help us understand some of the changes to our service this time of year, the scaled back music, the silenced alleluias, and even the muted colors on the alter linens. It's not that we feel unworthy of bolder expressions during this time of year. It's more about turning down the volume on our time together, a way of creating a worship experience that is conducive to the private and contemplative labors set aside for this season.

So while I won't wish you a happy Lent, I will pray that our Lent will be a time of renovation when we grow in self-awareness through our own private reflections.

A third and final recommendation that we can hear in Luke's Gospel is that we use this season to deepen our investment in our own Judeo-Christian tradition. It's an odd feature of Lent that it is our own ritual reminder of Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness, an experience which was itself a ritual reminder of Moses's fasting for 40 day on Mount Sinai when he received the 10 Commandments. That connection is one reason why Rev. Maggie recited the 10 Commandments during the procession: the events on the mountain and in the wilderness are linked. What they both share is a remarkable intimacy between God and humanity. In the story of Moses, that intimacy takes the form of the law as the covenant between God and his people; in the story of Jesus, that intimacy is God incarnate at the beginning of his public ministry. We may not have a Moses event in store for us this Lent, but when we step into our 40 days of self-discipline and learning, 40 days of private reflection, we are also encouraged to be mindful of a tradition that tells us that our own preparations are essential to our reception of the word of God.

So may this be a holy Lent, a time devoted to discipline and study, a time set aside for inward reflection, and a time when our own renovation finds sustenance and meaning in the Christian tradition.