

Sermon for 3-1-20

Scriptures -- Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7

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Over the last 2 weeks, I've spent an inordinate amount of time on a task that must be done every year by every priest in charge of a parish in the Episcopal Church. It's a task that is universally dreaded because it is so very tedious, and there's no way to get out of it!

Completing and filing the annual Parochial Report -- basically, all the statistics from the previous year -- how many members do you have? how many children and youth in Sunday School? how many adults serving in outreach? how much pledge income?

The worst part is calculating your Average Sunday Attendance (ASA). You count up the number of Sundays, you add up the total attendance from all your Sunday worship services, and then you divide to get your average for the year.

Like most parishes, our attendance fluctuates over the course of the year. As I was working through our numbers, I got curious, and decided to map out our attendance month by month and season by season, to get a better picture of the trends in this place.

Conventional wisdom amongst church leaders is that attendance is lowest during the summer months, because so many folks are traveling; and also during January and February, because winter weather keeps people at home on Sunday mornings.

But the conventional wisdom does not apply here at Christ Church! Guess when our worship attendance hits rock bottom? That's right -- during Lent.

Why? Why do fewer people come to church during Lent? Why do we stay away?

I think the answer is obvious: Lent can be a real bummer. Christmas is fun, Easter is fun, Pentecost is fun; but Lent? Lent is no fun at all!

Lent is all about how sinful and wretched we are (who wants to hear that?), how we should to examine ourselves and reflect more (who has the time?), how we need to spend time in the desert (what a boring place!), how we must learn self-control (the polar opposite of fun!), and maybe even change our ways (thanks, but no thanks!).

I think we hate Lent because it contains all the truths we know about ourselves but like to ignore.

We hate Lent because it reminds us that we're not in charge, we're not self-made, we're not perfect, we're not infallible, and we're not nearly as strong or as smart as we think we are.

We hate Lent because it proves, once and for all, that there is some One who sees through all our pretensions and our falsehoods and our armor and knows that we are nothing more and nothing less than works in progress (always in progress).

But friends, here's the thing about Lent, which some of you already know -- if we stop fighting Lent, if we stop resisting Lent, if we lay down our ridiculous illusions of grandeur and acknowledge that we're all just screw-ups bumbling along, trying (and failing) to do a better job with this one precious life God has given us, well, then maybe we just might learn something.

Lent might teach us something we can't learn from any other time.

Our readings on this first Sunday in Lent lay a perfect foundation for the work we're about to do. We heard of two settings, two places where humans dwell -- in the garden and in the desert.

In the garden, we have everything we could ever need right at our fingertips. In the garden, our greatest worry is that we have too many choices, too much freedom. In the garden, there is no pain, or hunger, or sadness, or fear. And yet, when we spend too much time in the garden, we become greedy, undisciplined, power-hungry. We become incapable of humility, of resting in and appreciating the simple blessings of our lives, and we yearn for control. We convince ourselves that we are the rightful masters of the universe, and anything that seems to stand between us and greater power, greater authority, greater control is fair game for destruction. We cease to be stewards of God's gifts and instead become thieves, always grasping for something that is just out of reach, something that was never intended to be ours at all.

The garden is beautiful; but bad things can happen there.

In the desert, there is stillness and quiet and peace. In the desert, life slows down, and we have time to think and pray. In the desert, we don't have much of anything. We may be hungry, or thirsty, or tired. In the desert, we're more alone than we have ever been; but we're never really alone. In the desert, we are not preoccupied, and we begin to notice the intricate beauty of Creation; we begin to feel the slow and steady movement of the Spirit; we begin to hear the whispering voice of God. In the desert, we learn how to control the only thing any of us really can control -- ourselves. We begin to understand the difference between the things we crave, selfishly, and the things we need, honestly. If we spend enough time in the desert, we lose our taste for power. We get to know ourselves, and our Creator, all over again.

And when we come out of the desert, when our sojourn in the wilderness ends and we return to the more familiar places of our lives, we emerge as better disciples, made and remade, sharpened and polished and refined by our time away. The desert gives us clarity of purpose; the desert makes us smarter and stronger; the desert helps us rid ourselves of all the background noise that distracts us from our Bright Morning Star.

The spiritual wisdom of the desert is nothing new. Jesus knew, of course, that he had to spend time there before he began his ministry in earnest. And friends, if even Jesus needed a sojourn in the desert, a time of simplicity and silence and clarity and complete surrender to God, then who are we to say that we don't need it too?

Maybe you've heard of the Desert Fathers (and Mothers). These were Christians in the 4th & 5th centuries who left cities and towns and fled into the desert after Constantine declared Christianity the official faith of the Roman Empire. When Christianity became official, it meant that Christ-followers weren't persecuted or martyred anymore, but it also meant that the Christian faith quickly became intertwined with systems of political, economic, and social power. The Desert Fathers and Mothers fled because they needed to live in the wilderness, apart from the powers of the Empire, in order to preserve and protect their spiritual tradition.

Like Jesus, they weren't big on doctrine. They used stories to teach the faith. This is one of them:

There were 3 good friends, monks, who wanted to follow the Lord's example and dedicate themselves to works such as he did in his earthly life. One chose to be a peacemaker, settling disputes between peoples. Another chose to be a healer, visiting the sick and the dying. The third chose to live in solitude in the desert, devoting himself to prayer. The peacemaker and the healer quickly became overwhelmed and weary, and their spirits began to fail. So they traveled out to the desert, to visit their friend and inquire about his spirit.

When they arrived, they told him everything they had done since they last met, and asked how he was doing. Instead of speaking, the 3rd monk slowly poured some brown, dirty water into a large bowl. He asked his friends to look upon it, and then to sit in prayer with him for a time.

After praying, he said "Now look upon the water again. See how clear it has become." All the dirt had settled at the bottom of the bowl. And the 3 monks saw their own reflections in the water. "So it is with our spirit," said the 3rd monk. "Only by spending time in quiet solitude and prayer can we see ourselves, and our purpose, clearly."

May we cultivate space for stillness and solitude in our own lives, that we might seek and find that precious desert wisdom this Lent. Amen.

ⁱ My paraphrase; story from <https://christdesert.org/prayer/desert-fathers-stories/on-quiet/>