

Sunday, February 14, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
The First Sunday of Lent

Fasting From In-Authenticity, Denying our Selfishness

Last Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—marked the beginning of Lent and this Sunday we gather together as a whole community for the first Sunday of this Lenten journey. So, let's jump into a little Lent 101 so there are no mysteries or secrets about this season. Why is this season called "Lent"? Well, this word derives from an Old English word *lencten* (l-e-n-c-t-e-n) which means *spring* and in its most ancient roots *lengthen*. It simply indicates the lengthening of daylight hours in the northern hemisphere as spring approaches. It is a season of transition for not just the church, but for all of creation from winter towards spring.

You may have noticed all the purple—on the altar, the ambo, and my chasuble. You may wonder why this is the liturgical color for Lent. Well, purple is the color of royalty and, consequentially, during Jesus' incarceration Pilate and his soldiers placed a purple robe on Jesus, shortly before his crucifixion. They exclaimed, "Hail, King of the Jews," mocking him. Purple then evokes both mourning and royalty—a juxtaposition of Christ's suffering and kingship.

This season will last 40 days. It is a season of prayer, of self-reflection, of repentance and reconciliation. So why 40 days? The number 40 days throughout Judeo-Christian history has held great significance. In Genesis, the flood that destroyed the earth was brought about by 40 days of rain. The Hebrews spent 40 years wandering the desert before reaching the Promised Land. Moses fasted 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. And most significantly, there is the story we heard in today's Gospel reading where Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. And so our journey has begun, this Lenten path that leads us to Holy Week.

In considering today's Gospel lesson, I'd like to share with you a poem from *The Book of Poverty and Death* by Bohemian-Austrian poet, novelist, and mystic Rainer Maria Rilke. His poetry is usually directed towards God, the divine one of whom he writes so intimately.

You are the poor one, you the destitute.
You are the stone that has no resting place.
You are the diseased one
whom we fear to touch.
Only the wind is yours.

You are poor like the spring rain
that gently caresses the city;
like wishes muttered in a prison cell, without a world to hold them;
and like the invalid, turning in his bed to ease the pain.
Like flowers along the track, shuddering
as the train roars by, and like the hand
that covers our face when we cry - that poor.

Yours is the suffering of birds on freezing nights,
of dogs who go hungry for days.
Yours the long sad waiting of animals
who are locked up and forgotten.

You are the beggar who averts his face,
the homeless person who has given up asking;
you howl in the storm.

>silence<

This radical identification of God with the lowly, the downcast, and the forgotten is a core theme running like a vein of God through the Gospels, through Jesus' ministry. It is magnified by the diversity of people with whom he spent his time—tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, handicapped, and disenfranchised of his day. As we enter Lent—a traditional time of fasting, especially from excess and lavishness, and it is important for us to remember those from whom excess has no meaning, those who are depicted in this poem as the face of the Divine. In the desert experience we hear about today, Jesus enters into a period of vulnerability—mentally, spiritually, and physically.

During this time, as recounted in today's Gospel lesson, there are three main tests, which very much tie into the theme of this poem. In the first, the devil says to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." This first test we will call: to feed the hungry. As I mentioned, Jesus had been fasting for forty days. To turn the stone into a loaf of bread would ease his hunger. Jesus went into the desert to prepare himself inwardly for the beginning of his ministry, and his ministry would be focused on much more than bread. Feeding people is part of his ministry, Jesus' quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 is a rebuke of the devil that is also a test. Jesus cites the first part of the verse, "One does not live by bread alone . . ." waiting to see if the devil remembers the rest of the verse, which read, ". . . but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus came not only to address the physical needs of the world, but to bring spiritual sustenance as well.

In the second test, which I believe has to do with identity, the devil says to Jesus, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Elsewhere in scripture, the devil is spoken of as 'the ruler of this world' and here he offers Jesus worldly power, management of the worldly kingdoms. The devil offers Jesus it all. As one commentator explains, "Remember that most of the known world in Luke's day was under the heavy-handed control of Rome and its economic, administrative, and military empire. Surely a 'regime change' can only be for the world's good!" But Jesus refuses this offer, once again cleverly quoting from Deuteronomy, this time chapter 6 verse 13 that read, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." While establishing the Kingdom of God was important to Christ, his subsequent ministry would be about more than a kingdom. And his kingdom would be built on justice, on the rightful inheritance of the children of God, not this shortcut through this imposter. Essentially, this test is about integrity, you could say.

In the third test in this account, Luke explains that the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here . . .” and the devil quotes scripture which speaks of God’s angels protecting Christ. The temple was the place where the most righteous did their work and where God was very near. Surely if God’s angels were near, they would be near the temple. But once again, Jesus turns this down. He answered the devil, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” One commentator explains, “Though he refused to turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry (Luke 9:10-17). Though he refused political power, the proclamation of God’s empire of justice and peace is the focus of his preaching and teaching. Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross in confidence that God’s will for life will trump the world’s decision to execute him.”

What Jesus models is a stance of authenticity. Things will be on his terms. His ministry is about something much bigger than each of these three tests, but which enfolds and encompasses all of them. Here, at the beginning of his ministry, the devil tests him to see if he is so set on goals that he would take moral shortcuts to achieve any one of them. Obviously, the devil is in denial or perhaps does not know fully who Jesus is—the Son of God, through whom all things live and move and have their being. And ironically enough, Jerusalem—the location of Temple where the devil last tested him—is the very place where Jesus’ ministry culminated in the Passion, Resurrection, and birth of the church in the Book of Acts. This is, at its core, a story about identity, authenticity, denial, and journey. Those are all very Lenten words. Lent is often framed as a journey of self-denial, but perhaps like Jesus’ encounter with the devil, Lent is a journey of a denial of those temptations which lure us away from being authentic to who we are, who we are called by God to be, and what our right path is in the world. If we consider the Lenten Fast as a fast from all those things which lead us away from authenticity, it is important to consider the words of the Prophet in the Book of Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

It kind of ties back to that Rilke poem we heard at the beginning. If this is our Fast and the journey of Lent is not so much a journey of denying our self, but denying our selfishness, then perhaps it is best not to think of Lent as merely a season. Perhaps Lent is, rather, a ‘reset’ button on our spiritual journey through the year, reorienting us towards pursuing that which is simple and true—in ourselves, in our worship, in our lives and relationships with one another. May we fast from inauthenticity. There’s only one Christ, and he’s the best guy for the job. Likewise, there’s only one you, made in the image of God, and sanctified by God’s presence within you exactly as you truly are. Lent invites you into living more fully from that place of your deepest truth.