



Sunday Messages at Scarboro United Church

Lent 1

(Based on Luke 4.1-13)

March 10, 2019

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Today we celebrate the first Sunday in Lent.

A few fun facts in case you were wondering:

- *Lent* comes from the Old English, and means “to lengthen” pointing toward the spring, the lengthening of days that comes in this time of year for the Northern Hemisphere.
- Lent is 40 days which, in the ancient scriptural imagination, “40” was a shorthand way of saying, “for a long time,” and a way of resonating with other key “40’s” in Israel’s sacred memory:
 - the flood’s 40 days of rain (Genesis 7:12),
 - Moses’ 40 days without food on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28),
 - Elijah’s 40 days without food as he journeyed to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8), Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wandering (Deuteronomy 8:2), and,
 - Jesus’ 40 days of wilderness temptation.¹
- But if you’re quick with your dates/math, you might notice that doesn’t add up to 40. A funny quirk there, is that Lent does not include Sundays, because the Sundays are considered “Little Easters.” I love this reasoning, that our church calendar places value on seriousness, and being reflective and somber, but also leaves space for celebration and joy in the midst of that. Some churches will put away or bury their Alleluias for the season, this year, I’m inviting us to live into the celebration of each Sunday and still keep them around.

Some churches, some people, give up certain things for Lent. The original purpose of fasting during Lent is to reflect upon Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness - *at the end of which, he was famished*. The idea is to align ourselves with Christ.

Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for Easter. A time to focus our attention on the one that we follow, knowing that we follow him all the way to cross. When we look back at all of the “40s” that Lent reflects, we see that they are formational times in the lives and mission of those involved. Noah - living into his call, Moses - receiving instruction from God, Elijah - coming to meet God, the People of Israel - finding their way in the wilderness, Jesus - facing that which tempted him. These are all times in which those who worship God, were tested, forged and formed in their identity as those who have a relationship with God, who live in covenant and love. If we are open to it, these 40 days could be the same for us; a time in which we remember our own humanity, but that we also belong to God.

¹ <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/5/the-hidden-fountain-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-1>

Like those who have spent 40 days (a long time) in relationship with God, we are humbled and strengthened in Lent.

Like so many of our texts, this one has been used to maintain the status quo, telling us that “suffering is strengthening”. But what this passage is calling us is to a different way of living - to see that all of these temptations are about the use or misuse of power. Which is a powerful illustration for us, as individuals, church and society.

We see Jesus tempted by the trappings of comfort, prestige, and security. The lessons that he lives echo those in the wilderness before him.

To know that we do not live by bread alone. Reminding us of the Israelites fleeing Egypt, and Elijah fleeing Jezebel, being fed with bread from God. Manna, really - which was provided everyday, and meant to be shared, not squirrelled away or stored up. Manna, the word meaning: “what is it?” Asking us to consider: what is it that truly feeds us?

To see the folly of falling into the trappings of power and prestige. To challenge the temptations of power and privilege. Reminding us to keep our attention on what matters most, to focus our efforts on that new creation we have been promised, to keep working for justice for all people. That there is nothing worth trading our relationship with God.

To caution us against the prosperity gospel, which tells us that if we are faithful enough, God will pave the way for us smoothing out any bumps in our way and making us successful. Reminding us that we know that is not how faith works, and that’s not what it is about.

Jesus is tempted by all these things. Our passage says, by “The Devil.” Is that an actual person, an external force, or perhaps his own inner thoughts after being alone and hungry for a very long time... I’m not sure I know the answer. I’m not sure it matters. The point is that he is tempted. And not that he is so strong that he resists temptation, but that he knows his limitations. That he cannot sustain himself. Because that is what is really tempting here, to look after himself, and his own needs, to buy into the idea that he doesn’t need to rely on God. But he knows that he does, that we are a covenant people, that we are called to surrender to the Most High. He shows us that to be in relationship with God, to resist the temptations of the world, takes not strength, but humility. Over the next 40 days, he will show us what that different way looks like.

As we reflect and prepare for Easter, I invite you to keep in mind the fast that God calls us to, in Isaiah 58: *Is this not 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, cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?*