

Springtime Gardening: Fasting and Repentance

Vincent Caranchini
1st Sunday of Lent – Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

St Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona, AZ
10 AM, Sunday, March 9th, 2025

Opening Versicle

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen (Collect).

Please be seated.

Introduction

Happy Lent! As we begin this liturgical season, I thought it might be helpful to talk briefly about the season's meaning and origin and invite us to consider how we celebrate it.

The word "Lent" itself derives from the Anglo-Saxon words lencten, meaning "spring," and lenctentid, which literally means not only "springtide" but also was the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls.¹

Since the earliest times of the Church, there is evidence of some kind of Lenten preparation for Easter. There are references by St. Irenaeus's (d. 203) letters to Pope Victor I, commenting on Lenten practices of the East and West as early as 203 CE.²

Lent became more regularized after the legalization of Christianity in 313 CE. The Canons, the Council of Nicea (325) call for a meeting of church synods annually with "one before the forty days of Lent."³

In 461, Pope St. Leo preached that the faithful must "fulfill with their fasts the apostolic institution of the forty days," pointing to the apostolic origins of Lent. By the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of Easter preparation known as Lent called for prayer and fasting as its primary spiritual exercises.⁴

Last Sunday, during coffee hour, I had a good conversation with Coyote. She and a few others approached me and asked me, why 40 days?

The number "forty" has always had special spiritual significance regarding preparation. [But it is not a literal meaning. 40, in Hebrew, suggests a significant period of time, or a lengthy duration. We see 40 appear throughout the scriptures]. On Mount Sinai, preparing to receive the Ten Commandments, "Moses stayed there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights, without eating any food or drinking any water...." (Ex

¹ <https://catholiceducation.org/en/culture/history-of-lent.html>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

34:28). Elijah walked “forty days and forty nights” to the mountain of the Lord, Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 19:8).⁵

Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection and before his ascension. Most importantly, Jesus fasted and prayed for “40 days” in the desert before He began His public ministry (Luke 4:1-2).

Part 1

When we consider Jesus’ time in the desert, it might be helpful to see this time of preparation for his public ministry as a model for how we observe this time in Lent.

I might suggest that we consider the season of Lent in light of its original meaning, “Springtime.” This could be a helpful way to think about our approach to Lent. I know many of us love gardening. We have a beautiful community garden outside next to the parish hall, and many of you care for and cultivate that garden.

Any gardener knows that springtime is full of activity. It’s when you pull up the remains of dead plants, till the soil, remove thistles and rocks, and focus on the growth of the coming season. If we consider Lent as springtime, when we look at ourselves, we might consider this a season of removing dead, unwanted debris, rocks, and obstacles that block our growth.

Fasting, in its many forms, can be understood as the removal that needs to happen for new growth. Fasting can be seen as redirecting our attention to what’s important by putting aside or clearing those things that suffocate us.

We see fasting described this way in our own health culture. Health magazines point to fast and diet trends aimed at removing toxins from the body, helping purge things from our system, and focusing on only the amount of food we need so that we might live longer and healthier.

An interesting aside, in experiments with mice, scientists have discovered that mice deprived of food for periods of time live longer than mice who eat consistently. So maybe there’s something to this fasting.⁶

If you’ve ever fasted for any period of time, you probably found that fasting increases your awareness, focus, and sensitivity. This is a notable contrast to the experience of being really full when you can’t focus or stay awake because of the malaise that sets in. Fasting and removing the excess can help focus our attention.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.sciencealert.com/mice-that-eat-less-live-longer-and-we-may-finally-know-why>

Part 2

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus's confrontation with temptation is at the end of his fast. At the end of Jesus' fast, he is hungry, but he is sharply focused. His awareness in the face of the Devil's taunts is deep, allowing him clarity in the face of these three temptations.

If you notice, the devil in this account preys on weakness. The devil sees Jesus is hungry and says, hey, you're the Son of God; turn these stones to bread, eat! At first glance, nothing seems to be wrong with this idea; he's taunting Jesus to use his power as God to have some food when he's hungry. Jesus is by himself in the desert, so who would know? The food here can be understood as a desire for more or an untamed greed. It might start with a loaf of bread and then become a sandwich, a steak, a buffet, a nice dining room to frame the meal, a mansion, or a castle full of delicious things. If Jesus, as God acted selfishly, what could stop him from turning a rock into anything? A naturally small desire, which seems justified, can become an avalanche of justified wants or greed can distort relationships with God and others. The temptation begins as something simple and mundane but can grow and consume.

Jesus recognizes what the dark one is up to. He rebukes him, reminding him that there is a deeper desire, a deeper purpose, or fulfillment in life that only life in God brings about. In Jesus' ministry, we see him turn this temptation around. Rather than turning rocks into bread to feed his passing hunger, he takes several simple loaves and fish and feeds thousands. He offers his life and becomes our daily bread, feeding and sustaining the world.

We see Jesus' deep reversal of all three temptations.

In the second temptation, where he is offered the kingdoms of the world, the temptation is about power. Jesus, as God, is not interested in the kind of Kingdom demonstrated by the Roman Empire of his time. He is not interested in submission and conquest. Rather, Jesus points to building a kingdom where the poor, those in need, and the outcasts come first. It's not about Jesus' ego; it's about a kingdom of mercy and care for one's neighbor (whomever they may be).

In the third temptation, when Jesus is taken to a pinnacle, he is tempted with absolute security. As God, he could throw himself off a building and not be harmed. Again, Jesus demonstrates a reversal; through his love of humanity and creation, Jesus willingly lays down his life and is killed. Jesus is killed because he dared to love his enemies while attempting to help them.

Part 3

All three of these passages illustrate the relationship between temptation and sin. We talk a lot about sin during Lent. What is it?

According to our Book of Common Prayer

Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.

[and] Sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted.⁷

Jesus' response to each temptation avoids sin because he does not seek his own will over others. Jesus is free because he first loves the Father and with all those around him. In Lent, we are invited to live in this freedom through him.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that caring for oneself and recognizing our real needs is unimportant. Rather, we are called to see sin as an imbalance, where the self-concerns become disproportionate or overwhelm our ability to see one another or our genuine selves before God.

Part 4

With this in mind, I'd like to pose some questions for meditation and action related to Jesus's temptations. My hope is that you might find one of these helpful in your prayer and fasting (or self-gardening) this Lenten Springtime.

First, fasting (or gardening) can be negative or positive. We might focus on something to abstain from or choose to do something. We could focus on removing rocks or dead growth or choose to actively hoe, fertilize, or plant.

Using the first temptation regarding bread, which we might understand as money or desire – what is our relationship to money? Where are we using it in a way that is honestly good for ourselves, our family, and our community? Where might we be over self-indulgent? Have we allowed little justified treats or things we think we really deserve to get in the way of helping a friend or family member in need? Has compulsive spending prohibited us from saving for important causes or stopped us from contributing to our community's or society's needs?

When we consider power, we see examples of power abuse all around us. This is not new in human history. It is a constant. But are we caught up by the power games? Do we become obsessed with social media or Facebook, seeking likes, or the dopamine from receiving acknowledgments and approvals, draining our time from other, more constructive activities? Do we get too caught up in political rage? Do we allow the flurry of social anger to make us dizzy with personal opinions rather than diligently focusing time on efforts that

⁷ Book of Common Prayer, Catechism, BCP, 848-9.

could make a difference? Can we focus time more directly on efforts for the poor, those in need, and those on the margins? It is too easy to mistake our agendas and egos for care. Real care takes time, attention, and a separation of our self-righteousness from real righteousness.

Regarding security, do we become paralyzed by our fears or worries and have difficulty reaching out to others? We grow through risk and relationships. Have we taken risks that might open new doors or new relationships lately?

Conclusion

I offer these considerations not to make us feel bad but so that we might attempt to walk with Jesus this Lent and experience the liberty in the Spirit that he embodies.

The Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit of God walks with us, calls us, and invites us into this springtime desert. This Lent is an opportunity to cultivate, till, and prepare ourselves for Easter's living power, hope, and joy. May our prayer, fasting (and springtime gardening) lead us to a deeper liberation from sin — through the redemption and power that Jesus embodies this Lent and Easter.

Amen