

Lent 1/Year C
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 9:1-2, 9-16
Luke 4:1-13

Our Journey to Light

Sometimes scripture almost sounds like it came right out of newspaper—it presents a set of facts and moves on, which can makes it pretty easy to overlook the importance of what is being said. Today's Gospel reading from Luke is a perfect example. Jesus, having been baptized in the Jordan River, is lead by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights; during which time, he has three conversations with the Devil who tries unsuccessfully to tempt him, and then leaves Jesus for a more opportune time to do his damage.

A surface reading of the passage does little more than make Jesus sound like Superman—even though he is fasting for 40 days and nights, he is able dismiss the devil three times with just a couple of pithy sentences, and then keeps going about his business. What a guy!

But Luke's Gospel was not written by or, necessarily for, 21st Century Christians. The early Christians would have a more innate sense of this passage's undercurrents, which we miss because of our own time and era. So to get to its deeper meaning we have to pay close attention to what is not being said.

First, the decision to enter into a fast in ancient Israel was not a one entered into lightly. There were many reasons for fasting, but chief among them was to center one's awareness on his or her absolute dependence on God. The Rev. Dr. Kent Berghuis explains in his book, *Christian Fasting—A Theological Approach*:

[T]he Hebrew Bible rather consistently portrays fasting in conjunction with themes of disruption and restoration. In the midst of disruption, fasting comes to symbolize hope. Through repentance and prayer, fasting can signify the centering of the self in humility, the renewal of the relationship to God's sustaining force. As such, fasting takes on a dual significance of mourning and hope.ⁱ

Jesus' decision to fast for 40 days and 40 nights is also significant. 40 is an important number in scripture, because it is always after a period of 40 days, or years, some kind of momentous change takes place.

The primary two examples from the Hebrew scriptures, which Jesus was undoubtedly familiar with were Noah's ark —after raining 40 days and nights, Noah's ark lands in a cleansed world in which God promises never to unleash such destruction on the earth and its creatures again; and after wandering in the desert for 40 years, the Jewish people reach the Promised Land.

Thus this passage from Luke's Gospel of Jesus going into the wilderness to fast for 40 days and 40 nights signals to us some significant change is going to take place.

But beyond these things, we also need to look carefully at the human cost to Jesus as well. By his action he is now making the break from his former life to the one he was put on earth to live. He is leaving behind all things that are familiar and safe to him: his family, his home, his friends, his village. He is leaving behind the understanding and the emphasis he had placed on his human relationships, in exchange for a new understanding and emphasis on his relationship with God, his Abba.

Finally, what Jesus is doing is dangerous.

Depriving the body of food for such a long time results in drastic weight loss, often hair loss, as well as causing disorientation, and sometimes, hallucinations. Jesus truly had to have to focus on God as his source of sustenance, or he could very likely die.

So the decision to enter the wilderness was not a Superman move, but one which was probably very likely frightening because it was at this point Jesus truly put his whole life, his whole destiny, on the line. Assuming he got through this ordeal with integrity, and there is no way it couldn't be an ordeal, nothing for him would ever be the same again.

When we look at the devil's temptations in this light, Jesus' response is all the more extraordinary. Over the course of the 40 days and nights, he is becoming increasingly frail, both physically and mentally.

But his connection with God is so strong, he does get through it. And, nothing is ever the same—not just for him and those of us who choose to follow him, but for the whole of God’s creation which will ultimately be redeemed by his life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus’ time in the wilderness calls to mind, the poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, written by John of the Cross, a Spanish monk and mystic, who lived in the 16th century. The poem narrates the journey of the soul as it travels from bodily form to union with God, an often painful journey but one which ultimately satisfies its deepest longings, longings which can only be satisfied by union with God.

The journey does not end with physical death, but rather gives to those who take it, true life by the death of desires which remove the soul’s focus away from God.

Thus, the dark night of the soul is really about the journey from darkness to light, to illumination.

Which brings us to today and the journey we call Lent, for this is the time set aside every year for us to walk with Jesus into the wilderness.

Lent is a time of testing, repentance, and if done right, an opportunity to discover and come to grips with those things which can lead us astray, take our focus away from God.

Lent is an invitation to our own dark night of the soul—something not to be entered into lightly but embraced nonetheless, because it is an invitation to our fuller union with God. Jesus did not enter the wilderness because he had anything he needed to demonstrate or prove, but because he wanted to know more fully what absolute dependence on God really was and ultimately experience God's life giving love.

No doubt the knowledge he gained in those 40 days and 40 nights sustained him in the darker ones to come.

No doubt such knowledge would serve to sustain us in the inevitable dark days and nights of our lives.

Now, of course there is no perfect way to begin this journey, and God will love us regardless of how we enter, or chose to not enter, into the dark night of the soul.

But Lent gives us the great gift of time when we can ask ourselves every year what keeps us from loving God more fully; what keeps us from participating fully in the life offered us; to ask what it is we let defeat us; and ultimately what we need to do to embrace our life of faith so it will grow, flourish, and sustain not only us, but the whole of God's creation, because the consequences of a Lenten season rightly observed go far beyond the boundaries of our own lives.

We move from darkness to a light that cannot be contained.

Science fiction writer Terry Pratchett wrote in his book *Reaper Man*, "Light thinks it travels faster than anything, but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds that darkness has always got there first and is waiting for it."ⁱⁱ

What Lent teaches us, is while darkness may indeed have gotten there first, once light arrives, darkness cannot be sustained because light will ultimately prevail by filling the space darkness once occupied. This is the promise God makes to us and the reason Jesus could enter the wilderness with hope for what the future would ultimately bring.

By the face of God, may we do the same.

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ⁱ Kent Berghuis, “Chapter 1: Fasting In The Old Testament And Ancient Judaism: Mourning, Repentance, And Prayer In Hope For God’s Presence.” Found at <http://bible.org/seriespage/chapter-1-fasting-old-testament-and-ancient-judaism-mourning-repentance-and-prayer-hope-god’s-presence> (accessed 20 February 2010)

ⁱⁱ Terry Prachett, *Reaper Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).