

Sermon: The Infrastructure of Lent

Year C, First Sunday in Lent

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#); [Romans 10:8b-13](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)

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With the Ash Wednesday service, we entered Lent. As I said, it's a season of repentance, a season of preparation for Easter. It's also a season when we are running a Confirmation class. Lindsey has done a great job with the curriculum, opening up the kids to elements of our faith. You guys did a tremendous job supporting her work when it came to prayer. But the Confirmation class is not just influencing the kids. The adults who are engaged in it are also finding new questions and new insights. It's teaching me about stepping back and explaining the origins of some of our traditions.

When you think of Lent, in a popular culture kind of way, I think you think of two things: not having meat on Fridays and "giving up" something. One of the political people I follow on Twitter had a post this week that said "For Lent this year, I decided to give up." Which I fully understand in our political culture. But within our church community, I thought it might be helpful to just take a step back and look at where Lent comes from so we can decide how we personally want to observe it.

The passage from Luke 4:1-13 is one of the primary Scriptural supports for the tradition of Lent. Matthew and Mark have similar accounts. Off the top of your head, or looking in your bulletin, what are the elements of Lent that you see in this passage:

- 40 days (it's actually 46 days from Ash Weds to Holy Saturday, the Saturday before Easter, but the Sundays are feast days)
- Luke 4: it's early in his ministry, just as he's beginning, so the idea is you have to prepare for ministry
- It's early in Jesus ministry and his ministry happens during the journey from Nazareth in the north of Israel to Jerusalem in the south. Jesus' ministry is the journey he takes to the Cross.
- Fasting for 40 days and being famished (Luke 4:2) so it's a physical thing, a physical preparation, it's done in this world with the tools of this world
- The temptations are ones of this world: food when we are hungry, political power, intimacy with God (God doing what we ask when we ask it).
- The devil goes away until an opportune time.

I think it makes sense to prepare for ministry, right? It's not something that you do by the seat of your pants. You can catch an opportunity, you can grab onto whatever the Holy Spirit is offering in the moment, but even if you are a seize-the-day kind of human, it helps to be prepared.

But why be so specific about the 40 days thing? Now part of it comes the way Bible stories are told. Where else do you remember 40 days from? 40 days and 40 nights? Right, Noah's ark and the flood story. You can build a whole new world in 40 days. So if you've got that image sort of simmering out in the popular culture, 40 days is the right amount of time for Jesus to prepare for ministry.

There's another way to look at "40 days". If I say to you "the wind was blowing at a gazillion miles an hour," you don't know how fast the wind was blowing, but you know it was fast.

Gazillion isn't a number. It's not like "a million". But it takes the place of a number and implies "a whole lot." In ancient Hebrew, they used real numbers instead of a made up word like "gazillion". 40 sheep are one more than 39 and one less than 41. But 40 years is both four decades and "a long time." It's context sensitive. Some people make the argument that "40 days" means "a long time."

Personally, I think it means a couple days few of six weeks. But if you want to say that it's time enough to make a whole new world, or that it's a long time, I won't argue with you. If you take my perspective that the earth spun on its axis forty times, how is that enough preparation for ministry, for a journey to the Cross? Even if you do it every year? Why not prepare 364 days and get Easter off? Or 50 days? We're going to celebrate Pentecost right after Easter and that requires for 50 days.

What's the right amount of time to prepare for ministry? The UCC seems very keen on 3 years of full-time schooling plus extra time before you can be ordained. And I can tell you from personal experience, you're not prepared for ministry even then!

Ministry takes a million forms, of course. But today's reading from Romans does a pretty good job of describing a kind of overarching umbrella of ministries we engage in. "*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart*" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:8b-9) "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" (Romans 10:13)

Here's where I see the 40 days coming into play. In some faith traditions, it matters most what you do. Do you answer the call to prayer five times a day? Of course it matters what you believe as a Muslim, but your actions are how you explore your beliefs. Judaism is the same way. Do you act as a Jew, do your actions reveal your beliefs?

In Christianity, we've taken another path. We say, *if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Romans 10:9). Our argument is that when you believe that, when you truly believe that, your actions will follow your beliefs and they cannot be at odds. That I would argue makes us extremely vulnerable to talking the talk but not walking the walk. I love my neighbors, but they better not build that apartment building in the middle of my view. I love my neighbors, but I would really rather have the subsidized housing on the other side of the tracks, over there, for those people.

We are entering a 40-day period where we prepare physically, in our bodies, using the tools of this world to face the temptations of this world. And one of the largest temptations we face as Christians, built into the infrastructure of our faith tradition, is hypocrisy. If I can reflect on what I believe, if I can truly act on those beliefs, for 40 days, then I am more than prepared for a year of ministry. I am more than prepared to come to Easter Sunday, as flawed as I am, as broken and as much of a sinner as I am, and know that I am a worthy recipient of God's loving promise that death has no dominion over me.

That's why I was so pleased when Scott was able to come to worship with us on the first Sunday in Lent. When you ask Habitat for Humanity what their principles are, the first on the list is "Demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ." Yes, it's through shelter. Yes, home owners and volunteers from the community work together. But you don't restore community through *buildings*. You restore community through people seeing each other as brothers and sisters,

beloved of God. You talk the talk. But, by God, you walk the walk. In closed toe shoes on Thursday and Saturday in Nashua. No tools or experience necessary. Sure, they could use some help with donations too. But walk with Habitat and you'll never let it just be talk.

So as we enter into this period of Lent, I'd invite you to reflect on what preparation you want to make for Easter, so that your beliefs and your actions are wholly congruent. 40 days will be a long time, more than enough time to prepare to build a whole new world, where your beliefs and your actions are built together, like strong communities, where everyone has a decent place to live.