

Lenten Sermon Series: Preparing for the New Creation-“The Challenge”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13, Romans 10:8-13

Salem United Methodist Church; March 10, 2019

Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

This past Wednesday we began our annual forty day journey to the cross by receiving ashes on our foreheads. It seems like a strange tradition, but its purpose is to remind us to be humble because we are mortal beings. So the words are said, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” We are reminded once again that God is in control. We are not. We are reminded as we journey to the cross with Jesus that we too will die one day, but we have every opportunity before this time to turn our lives around, to repent, and to believe that through Jesus we can receive love, forgiveness, and resurrected joy.

The number, forty, appears often in the biblical texts. Moses and the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days. And the season of Lent lasts forty days. The number forty doesn't necessarily refer to an exact one-to-one correspondence of days or years, but forty is used to refer to the right amount of time. During Lent, forty days seems like the right amount of time for self-examination, repentance, and the practice of new spiritual disciplines. To keep a holy Lent the spiritual disciplines such as fasting, praying, giving, and serving those in need are practiced. Through these practices we deepen our connection with God in Christ and widen our love for humanity. Supposedly if one practices a new routine for forty days it will become a habit. The purpose of practicing a Holy Lent is to make these disciplines a habit in our lives. We may strive to do these during the rest of the year, but then we get busy or forget. Lent provides us with a concentrated time to get back in the habit of fasting, praying, giving, and serving. During Lent we look at ourselves, examine our lives and ask, “What do I need to remove from my life to improve my life of faith? And what spiritual practices can I use to improve the way I live my faith?” Then we can choose one or two spiritual practices that may assist us on our journey of faith. If you are counting the days between Ash Wednesday and Resurrection Sunday, you will find that there are 46 days. Lent is kept only from Monday through Saturday. Sunday is a day off from Lent, especially if you are fasting. Sunday is a feast day, the Lord's Day, a day of worship and celebration.

Fasting from food is an ancient tradition. Its purpose is to assist one to grow closer to God. One can use the time one spends cooking, eating, and cleaning up after a meal to be in prayer with God. This is why there is a celebration with high caloric foods on Fat Tuesday, which in French is called, Mardi Gras. We also call this day, Shrove Tuesday. The term, shrove, comes from an old English word, to shrive which means to absolve. During Lent we seek to be absolved of the sins that separate us from God and find new ways to grow closer to God. We can choose to fast from food or we can fast from anything that takes away from our spiritual connection with God. We can fast from what doesn't feed our soul. We may want to fast from the twenty-four hour news cycle, if it drains us or angers us. We may want to fast from negativity in whatever forms they appear in our lives: from the negative thoughts that run around in our heads to spending time with people who are negative. Find ways to turn those negative thoughts into affirming, encouraging loving thoughts. Find people who are loving, encouraging, and affirming. Fast from being cynical, fearful, angry, judgmental. Replace it with listening to someone with a different point of view. Replace it with an act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Replace it by visiting someone who is lonely. Replace it by helping someone in need. Practice it for the complete amount of time until it becomes routine. Thus the challenge. Can we practice holy living until we are living holy lives?

The Hebrew people needed to wander in the wilderness the right amount of time to be transformed from slaves to being a people who practiced holy living and became God's people. Jesus spent the right amount of time in the wilderness fasting and praying so he could have the spiritual strength to face the challenges of how he would be the Son of God. The wilderness landscape is an arid, dry, lifeless, and

lonely place, and yet this is precisely where spiritual growth occurs. The Hebrew people learned to trust that God was caring for them, leading them, present with them, and transforming them. God provided them with food and water when there wasn't any. God led them by day with a cloud and reminded them with a fiery flame at night that God was with them. God transformed them into a community of people who became devoted to God and cared for every person in their community. All this took the right amount of time for their spiritual growth. For Jesus, he is about to begin his ministry when the Spirit leads him into the wilderness. He has just been baptized. God proclaimed that Jesus is God's Son and he was anointed with God's Spirit when the Spirit led him into the wilderness. Jesus spent forty days, the right amount of time, in solitude, praying, and connecting with God some more. Did he need to do this when he was just anointed with God's Spirit? Yes, God needed to know how Jesus was going to handle his ministry. Would he be able to take on the challenges of this world, or would the challenges take him? Would he use his creative powers to change the order of life to meet his basic needs? Would Jesus use his divine power for his personal gain and safety? Would Jesus call on God to protect him from harm, and perhaps even try to save himself from death on the cross? In the right amount of time, Jesus was able to show God that, yes, he not only knew he was, the Son of God, but he was able to prove that he knew *how* to be the Son of God.

Wilderness times will come to all of us in our lives. When they come, do we know how to be the children of God? In our wilderness times, there will be times of loneliness, times of hopelessness, times when we face our own mortality or the mortality of our loved ones, times when our faith is challenged. What do we do during these wilderness times? Do we give up on God like the Israelites did when they built Egyptian idols to worship? Do we yell at God that God has forgotten us like the Israelites did when they had no water? Or do we turn to God, like Jesus did, so he could face our human challenges with divine truths. Lent gives us a focused time, a perfect amount of time to reflect on ourselves, our relationship with God through Christ, and to try a new spiritual practice, or reestablish one that we might have neglected. These spiritual practices become the tools we can use when the challenges of life hit us smack in the face. We can turn the other cheek and look the challenges in the eye, dig deep into our soul, and say, "God's got this with me! I am not alone!" These spiritual practices build spiritual muscles so when we meet the challenges of life and have to do some heavy lifting, we can walk into that wilderness time courageously, with no fear, because we know God is already there, waiting to meet us. Times of being in the wilderness are but just a season. When the wilderness time is over, there is still another challenge. Like Moses instructed the Israelites to remember what God did for them during their wilderness journey, to tell the story over and over again, to give thanks and celebrate, so must we. We need to remember what we have been through and who got us through it. We need to tell this story over and over again so others can know that they too can get through the wilderness times of their lives. We also need to give thanks to the One who met us in the wilderness, provided for us, guided us, and transformed us there. And we need to celebrate with joy!

This, too, is part of our Lenten journey. We will remember what God has done for us. We will tell the story again of Jesus' Crucifixion and his Resurrection. We will give thanks on both Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning as we celebrate with joy. To God, Be the Glory Great Things God Has Done, Is Doing, and Will Do!

Reflection Questions: During this perfect amount of time, the season of Lent, which spiritual practices will you try: fasting, prayer, and/or giving? What practice that gets in the way of your relationship with God will you give up? And with what will you replace it?

Resources: *Lent: The Gift of New Creation* by Thomas Ehrich; "Sunday by Sunday," March 10, 2019, www.goodgroundpress.com