

Reflection for February March 6, 2022

During Lent, silence is our desert.

We are sent there by the Spirit to encounter temptations.

We are ministered there in our exhaustion, to provide for our souls,
by the mercy that arises in the emptiness.

The desert tells a million stories if we are willing to listen to dust.

How many kinds of dunes have shifted with the winds?

How many cinnamon morning have followed winter rains?

How many dun-coloured miles of endless, quiet rocks and plains have wordlessly
held the stories of upheaval and change?

We are formed by many kinds of silence:

The silence of Gethsemane, after the groaning prayers of blood.

The silence of absent friends when the cross shuddered and wept.

The silence of a stunned world when the clanking chains of the prisoners were
unbound.

We are formed by many kinds of silence:

silence that wounds and betrays,

silence that blesses and renews.

May our silence be a spacious invitation for lost voices in forgotten languages to
share the gospel of mountains and rivers.

Holy One, Great Spirit, Child of Life:

Meet us where we stand, tempted by bread and pinnacles,

and give us words, if words are what you need for justice,

and silence, if that is the way to resist the temptation

to hear only what we want to hear,

to receive only what we want to receive.

Holy One, Great Spirit, Child of Life:

pray your wisdom into our famished desert hearts

until our words and silence dance together

and feast in the wonder of being heard and loved.

-Wendy MacLean

Welcome and Peace ...

This Sunday is the first Sunday in the Season of Lent, that 40 day period of self-examination leading up to Easter. Traditionally this is a time of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer in preparation for baptism. It can be a time for both personal and collective transformation. I love Lent. When the world feels like it is rushing

around me, and especially in these turbulent times when it feels like the chaos might overwhelm me, I am grateful for the call to simplicity, the call to slow down, the call to focus on God, the Source of Love and Life.

Lent is an intentional time to remember who and whose we really are. We remember that we are made of dust – our human limitations. And we remember the power of the Holy Spirit that accompanies us on our journeys. We remember how Jesus loved us, and how he gave his life to show us what is possible. And mercy breathes into chaos the hope of that love, a love without limit or conditions. We remember that we can choose to respond to others with mercy, justice, and compassion.

The scriptures for this Lenten season are filled with parables and promises of God's abundant and expansive grace. Jesus as a mother hen, a prodigal son welcomed home, a fig tree nurtured with care, precious oil poured out lovingly and freely, stones shouting out with praise – these sacred texts are brimming with a gospel of grace. We've done nothing to earn this grace, and yet, like water, it spills over.

This Lent we will be exploring the theme that comes from Sanctified Art (a collective of artists in ministry) – "Full to the Brim." Full to the Brim is an invitation into a full life. It's an invitation to be authentically who you are, to counter scarcity and injustice, to pour out even more grace wherever it is need. It disrupts the scarcity mentality that capitalism, oppression, or hierarchy can plant inside of us. When we allow ourselves to be filled to the brim with God's lavish love, that love spills over. It reaches beyond ourselves; like water, it rushes and flows, touching everything in its path.

Thinking back to the origins of Lent where one was to leave their old life behind to fast and prepare to be baptized into a new way of living. In essence, this was a practice of stepping away from the rat race, corrupt power, scarcity mentality, and empty rituals in order to live a more expansive and full life of faith. And so, Full to the Brim trusts the promise of our baptisms – God has already claimed us for their own and nothing we can do will ever change or erase that.

Full to the Brim doesn't ignore or deny sin and suffering. It doesn't absolve accountability for wrongdoing. Instead, it contextualizes our faith. If love is our beginning, how can we live our lives led by love's promises? It reminds us to live fully – as we pursue justice and hope, or express grief and gratitude. And so, this

Lent, let us trust – fully – that we belong to God. Let us increase our capacity to receive and give grace. Let us discover that expansive life God dreams for us.

Lent in general, being 40 days, and this story in particular resonate with Israel's sacred memory – think of all the Hebrew Scriptures where 40 plays apart (The Flood-Genesis 7:12, Moses' 40 days 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 wanderings-Deuteronomy). And now we have Jesus' 40 days of wilderness temptation.

Newly baptized Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit,” the same Spirit who hovered over him then, now leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Luke casts the devil as a kind of sparring partner, and the Spirit leads Jesus directly into the ring. Just as the Israelites were “humbled” (Deut 8:3), strengthened, and instructed by 40 years in the wilderness, so too will Jesus be humbled, strengthened, and instructed by 40 days there. The Spirit will dwell in him; the devil will oppose him.

For me, the key to understanding Luke's story is to focus on Jesus' responses to the devil's trials. In each temptation, the devil speaks first and Jesus replies.

Underlying the dialogue between the devil and Jesus are two competing storylines. The devil offers a storyline of self-indulgence (make yourself bread from stones), self-aggrandizement (all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me), and self-serving identity (if you are the son of God cast yourself from the top of the temple). Meanwhile, Jesus responds with quotations drawn from the Old Testament that show awareness of the true source of life and identity (he knows that life is more than food), his reliance on God (the one worthy of true worship and service), and his understanding of God's character (not one to be tested). Jesus' responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self for life, glory, and identity.

After a good while in the wilderness, Jesus is famished — and the devil senses an opportunity. In the first trial, the devil says to Jesus that if he is the Son of God, he should transform the stone into bread. (“If” in this instance can also be translated as “since”. *Since* you are the Son of God... I don't think Jesus' identity itself is under question here. I think the question is *how* he will carry out his Spirit-anointed vocation.)

Jesus responds by quoting the Torah (Deuteronomy 8:3)—the law of the God of Israel—essentially stating that a human’s life is more than its cravings. Jesus quotes the Torah to assert that humans are not solely responsible for their own well-being. Humans should lean into the Spirit’s leading—even in uncertain circumstances. We can learn from the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During those uncertain times, God provided manna to nourish them (Exodus 16). The Spirit leads to God’s uncommon provision. This gives with what Jesus would say later in Luke 12:15 that “life is more than an abundance of possessions.” Jesus’ power was rooted in confidently following the Spirit into the unknown.

In the second of the Devil’s trials, he claims that he can give Jesus authority and fame over the kingdoms of the inhabited world. Jesus is offered prestige. The Devil’s requirement is that Jesus worship him. Jesus calls his bluff through quoting the Torah again. Jesus asserts that the Lord is the only one to be worshipped (Deuteronomy 6:13).

Jesus declares that the power that the Devil and the emperor think they have is limited. Their fame and authority are not priorities for Jesus, because he answers to a higher authority. Jesus recognizes that if attaining fame requires becoming a servant to the Devil, the cost is too high. If pursuing prestige requires ignoring the eternal Source of all life, then that prominence will last as long as the instant in which the Devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the Roman Empire -the known world (Luke 4:5). Jesus rejects his offer. The Devil has miscalculated his power and does not recognize that there is no price on Jesus’ loyalty.

In the third trial the Devil quotes passages from the Psalms. Perhaps this is his response to Jesus quoting from the Hebrew Bible to counter his earlier propositions. The Devil weaves together two psalms to convince Jesus to throw himself down from the highest point of the Jerusalem Temple. He suggests that God’s angels would protect Jesus from harm. Jesus counters him again with a passage from the Torah. The passage from Deuteronomy 6:16 that he quotes recalls when Yahweh provided water from a rock for the complaining Israelites.

Here the Devil attempts to get Jesus to put God on trial. Jesus’ response insinuates that the Scriptures should not be used to cast doubt on God’s presence with God’s people. They should not be used for a game of “gotcha” nor should

they be recited to serve selfish interests. Instead, the Scriptures are reminders of God's powerful presence with God's people even in the wilderness. There the Spirit leads them to resist the allures of the Devil and empire.

For Luke, Jesus is the Child of God, but also the Child of Humanity, the Human One. What emerges from this story, then, is a picture of the human being not as an independent actor over-against God, but rather as a humble creature made for reliance on God. Relying on God for what? For sustenance, for guidance, and for loving-kindness. Not heroic "self-reliance," then, but rather genuinely strong, humble communion with God, is this story's central theme. Indeed, the devil tempts Jesus *toward* "fortitude" and "self-sufficiency," at least as the world often defines them (*sustain yourself! rule the world! trust no one!*). I think self-sufficiency is something that our society promotes. It is seen as weakness to admit dependance on anyone or anything else. "Stand on your own two feet." "Pull yourself up by your boots straps." "They are self-made." I think it is a little delusional not to realize that we cannot do it all ourselves. Jesus declines to pursue this path, testifying instead to his deeply intimate, empowering communion with God, the fountain of blessings at the center of his life.

I wonder...

Whom do you trust for your nourishment?

Whom do you trust with your service?

Whom do you trust to love and care for you?

As Luke tells it, on each of these three fronts, the devil tries to insinuate a wedge between Jesus and the One who, at his baptism, has just declared him to be "my Child, the Beloved" (Luke 3:22).

This, perhaps, is the most fundamental temptation of them all: *Is God with us? Is God's grace really the hidden fountain in our lives? Does God love us — does God love me — or not?*

Jesus' three responses don't just debunk the devil's temptations; they implicitly declare the good news of the Gospel: *Yes — God loves you, and loves us all! God is the One we are made to trust — with humility and grace — for nourishment, guidance, and care. Even as we, too, travel through the wilderness, every good gift in our lives is manna from heaven, our "daily bread" for which we can and should give thanks — and for which we can and should pray afresh each day, presuming nothing, with empty hands and humble hearts. For the God of grace is*

among us — and God’s own child, Emmanuel, “God with us,” walks at our side. In seasons of scarcity and plenty alike, God is the font of every blessing!

We can’t prepare for the surprising grace of Easter, but perhaps during this season of Lent, we can try to unearth the areas of unworthiness and scarcity in our lives. Perhaps we can practice receiving and extending God’s grace. Perhaps we can strive for a life that is full to the brim – full of hope, courage, joy, honesty, and grace.

Sources:

www.sanctifiedart.org

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word commentary

A prayer for those in danger

God of mercy, by whose grace
in all who suffer is Christ crucified,
we pray for those in danger today,
for all who know oppression, injustice or fear,
whose land is invaded,
or whose home is unsafe.
Be with them and shelter them in your love;
give them courage and hope;
enfold them in your grace.
Touch their wounds; heal their trauma.
May the strength of the earth be theirs,
the freedom of the sky, the peace of the trees.
We bear in our hearts all who are afraid.
May they bear our love in theirs, for we are one.
In the unity of your Holy Spirit
you hold us together as one humanity,
one world, one body, one hope.
May your Peace change the hearts
of those who misuse power.
May the Peace of Christ
be with us all.
Amen.

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www.unfoldinglight.net