

Sunday, February 14, 2016 - The Desert: Fasting

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

I've got to tell you about a friend of ours, Jessica. They found out her 2 year old daughter, Layla, has cancer about 4 months ago. They're in round number 5 of chemo and she just had surgery this past Wednesday to remove a baseball sized tumor. She's doing well and spending the next 2 weeks in Seattle Children's Hospital. Jessica's other child, Owen, is part of our preschool here at church.

One day in our weekly playground, I asked Jessica how she finds time to care for herself in the midst of caring for her family in this difficult time. Another parent in the room asked if we could gift her with a professional house cleaner. Jessica shook her head no and shared that she loved to clean her home. Like deep clean with a toothbrush-kind of clean. For 3 hours at a time. It was her stress relief. Bringing order to her home, brought order to her life.

Do you like to clean? It feels good to dig through the junk, throw things out, keep the things that bring us joy and get our life in order. Lent is kind of like a spiritual spring cleaning. We take a step back, get a big picture view of our lives, and reflect on the attitudes, behaviors and sin that need to be thrown out. We walk with God and others in that journey. We arrive to the early dawn light of Easter morning with a resurrection on our hands. Something that we thought was dead can actually come to life!

The Desert

Our big theme for the next six weeks is the desert. Most people experience spiritual desert seasons at one point or another.

- *Showing sand:* Our lives feel dry, desolate, unproductive, empty, lost, without direction

We feel like we're doing everything on our own strength and not getting anywhere - we can't hear the voice of God - we read the Bible and pray and hear nothing. It feels like a godforsaken empty desert.

And yet, Jesus went into the desert, **on purpose**.

And if we're seeking to follow Jesus...then that means we follow him into the desert too. God calls us there. Which means there must be something holy, good, worthy in the desert.

History of Lent

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. The church began to commemorate this season and called it Lent. It's a period of time between Ash Wednesday and Easter. It lasts about 40 days, excluding Sundays. It leads us from the mortality of Ash Wednesday to Holy Week, which recalls the Last Supper, Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection of Easter morning.

The number forty is mentioned in other Biblical stories: Moses spent 40 days on Mt Sinai with God, Elijah spent 40 days & nights walking to Mt Horeb, Noah and the animals waited 40 days & nights on the ark during the flood, the Hebrew people wandered in the desert for 40 years on the way to the Promised Land and Jonah told the Ninevites they had 40 days to repent. The number 40 has often represented a season of testing or temptation.

During Lent, we enter into a season of preparation, self-reflection and repentance when we seek to literally "turn around" and realign our lives and focus toward God. It is a time to give up things as well as take on new life-giving practices, helping us rid ourselves of distractions and our own selfish desires. By doing so, we seek to live and love as more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ (www.umc.org).

Fasting

There are a lot of ways to fast from something or add something into your rhythm during Lent. It's not really about the thing you choose to give up or add in. It's all about your intention and spirit behind it. Our Bible text for today reminds us this isn't about impressing someone else or even impressing God. We don't need to post to social media everything we're doing. Don't just say the words, pray the prayers or give something up for me or anybody else. If you want to add or give up something, do it for you and your connection to God. That's it.

Others will likely benefit from your Lenten journey, but don't start with them. **Do this for you.**

In the past, I've given up Facebook. That lasted about 4 days. I've given up soda, which worked well. I haven't drank a soda in about 15 years. I've read a devotional each morning. I've tried to turn off TV after 8pm. Last year, I focused on vulnerability with those closest to me. Some years, I made it a priority and it was amazing how the little extra time I created paid off in a more focused and intentional life. Other years, it was a mess. And I counted on the grace of God to meet me in that mess.

This time two years ago, my husband had gotten a difficult report from the doctor and wanted to make some changes. So for Lent, he decided to eat salad for lunch (which he hates!), exercise 30 minutes/5 days a week and drop all soda. One year later, he'd lost 20 pounds (15 happened during Lent) and has more energy than he's had in years. Those were some big and small sacrifices that a year later have given him a resurrection of sorts. As he cares for the one body God has given him, he's finding ways to give God his full attention.

Lenten questions

Rachel Held Evans shared a great list of Lent ideas on her blog last year. I want to share several of her questions with you this morning.

1. When I wake up on Resurrection Sunday morning, how will I be different? What am I preparing for?
2. Is there something in my life—a habit, a grudge, a fear, a prejudice, an addiction, an emotional barrier, a form of excess—that keeps me from loving God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving my neighbor as myself? How might I address that over the next 40 days?
3. Lent is a time to listen to God, but sometimes God speaks through others, particularly the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and suffering. **To whom should I be listening this season?** How can I cultivate a listening posture toward others whose perspective and experiences might differ from my own?
4. Is there a spiritual discipline—praying the hours, lectio divina, the examen—that I've always wanted to try? How might I alter my daily routine to include one of these disciplines?
5. The cycle of death and resurrection is central to the Christian faith. In what ways is that cycle present in my life right now? **Where might there be necessary change, suffering, death and decay, and how might new life emerge from those experiences?** (<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/40-ideas-for-lent-2015>)

Don't Go Back to Egypt

When we are tempted to turn away from the desert and return to the things we thought brought us comfort, we must remember that God will make a way. God did this even when God heard the complaining of the Israelites who thought it was better to turn around and return to their former lives. As Exodus 13:17 says, “..they will change their minds and *go back to Egypt.*” (emphasis mine).

Don't go back to Egypt. It might feel comfortable and safe. But it's not where the healing and wholeness is. It's not where *real and abundant life* is.

When the Israelites complained, God provided manna and water from a rock. God provided each day, exactly what they needed. God will provide for us too. The grace we need for today. Then tomorrow. God will provide, day after day after day, **until going back to slavery is no longer an option** (inspired by Dorothy Angeles).

As Isaiah 43:19 says, “..I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” **God makes it possible for the desert to be more than a dry place. It can be the place you never realized you always needed to go.** As someone who’s walked around the desert a lot, it’s not as scary as it seems. The resurrections waiting on the other side are worth the journey. Amen.