

A Time for Personal Spiritual Renewal

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

1. The Season of Lent

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. This is one of the most important times of the year for Christians. The term Lent originally meant the spring season. During Lent, we meditate on the life of Jesus, his suffering, death, and resurrection. Lent is a time to self-reflect, to pray, repent, and giving.

The early church father, Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-200), wrote of the season of the earliest church. During that time, Lent was two or three days. In 325 AD, the Council of Nicea discussed having a 40-day Lent season. The concept of 40 days came from both Moses and Jesus. In Exodus 34:28, when Moses was on Mount Sinai to receive the ten commandments, he spent 40 days with the Lord. In today's passage, Matthew chapter 4, we notice that Jesus also spends 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

What did Moses and Jesus do for forty days? They fasted. Following the tradition, during Lent, many Christians fast, giving up a luxury to reflect the sacrifice of Jesus in the wilderness. They also read the Bible or have a time of prayer every day. As we prepare for the Lent season, I hope that we use the 40 days to renew our dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Jesus is in the Wilderness

Today's scripture Matthew 4:1-2 say, "***Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty***

nights, and afterwards he was famished.” Jesus went to the wilderness not because he wanted to but because he was led by the Holy Spirit. In Matthew chapter 3, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus when he is baptized by John. This image is the representation of the empowering of Jesus’ ministry by the Holy Spirit. We would naturally think that Jesus might start his ministry by going around speaking in the synagogue. But we see here that Jesus began his ministry by going into the wilderness and fasting for 40 days.

Why did Jesus start his ministry in the wilderness? The wilderness reminds us of the years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness before going into the promised land. The Israelites weren’t happy to be in the wilderness for 40 years. In Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses says to the Israelites, **“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”** The Israelites stayed in the wilderness not because they wanted to but because God was using the experience to humble the people’s heart and to see whether they would keep God’s commandments. It was God’s grace that prepared the people for the promised land.

The Book of Exodus tells us that the Israelites regularly complained while in the wilderness. The people complained that they didn’t have food (Exodus 16:1-3) and water (Exodus 17:1-3). When they needed food and water, God would provide manna, quail and water. In the wilderness they experienced how God would provide for them.

Many people wonder, why does Jesus start his ministry in the wilderness? I believe it is because God wanted Jesus to experience God’s presence, power, and guidance. God wants to equip Jesus before he begins to teach in the synagogues, preach the good news of the kingdom, and heal every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23), and help him to overcome any challenges from someone like the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Because Jesus prayed and fasted in the wilderness, he is able to overcome the devil and the temptations. Fasting and praying in the wilderness makes Jesus get ready for his ministry. In the wilderness Jesus has the opportunity to affirm God’s plan for his ministry.

God will also guide us during the times in life where we feel like we are in a wilderness. God gives us an opportunity to meet God and experience God’s provision and vision for our lives when we are in trouble or facing a big challenge.

3. The Special Session of the General Conference

This Sunday many United Methodists may feel that they are in a wilderness. Last Sunday we shared that our denomination is holding a special session of the General Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. The purpose of the session was to decide on a denomination’s stance on human sexuality. The result was to maintain the present Book of Discipline. For supporters of the motion to change,

this is disappointing. For others, maintaining the church's stance was an important vote win.

The goal of the special session was to seek church unity, but the opposite in many ways has happened. Last week I was worried about the future of the UMC. But on Friday, while I was preparing today's message, I began to see our situation in a very different perspective. I felt that God sent our denomination into the wilderness to take a look at ourselves where we are and where we are going. Our denomination is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be renewed.

If we are in the wilderness, we will be hungry, lonely, and vulnerable. Yet while living in the wilderness the Israelites experienced God's provision and guidance and his power. Today's passage reminds us that we are not alone in the wilderness. The triune God is right there next to us in the wilderness. Yesterday I was encouraged by an article written by Joe Lovino on the UMC.org website.

In his article, Lovino writes, *"A Conference was held. ... Decisions were made. Now what? .. Those happy with the decisions are ready for implementation. Those grieving the results are tempted to react rashly. At times like these, however, Scripture encourages us to pause, listen and actively wait for the Spirit's guidance. As the hymn states, reflecting Psalm 46:10, "Be still, my soul: your God will undertake to guide the future, as in ages past."*

Lovino refers to Numbers 9:22-23 that say, ***"Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out. ²³At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out."*** We can be tempted to try to do something when we face adversity. But the Bible reminds us that the Israelites traveled and camped as God guided. In the same way, instead of trying to do something or fix something, we can seek God and ask the Lord what he wants us to do.

4. One Body & Many Parts

While we wait for God's guidance, one thing we need to remember is that everyone is called by God to be a part of one body. No one can be excluded because of our differences. If we push someone out of our church, we grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). St. Paul says in Ephesian 2:12-14, ***"remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."*** Paul says that no one is alienated from Christ's love or from the body of believers.

That's why Paul says to Christians in Rome that “ **Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.** ¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are**” (Romans 12:15-16). But unfortunately, we did not see any of these loving attitudes in the Special Session of the General Conference. I pray that we can show other believers how to love one another even though we disagree with one another.

5. Conclusion

During Lent, we use the forty days to reflect on Jesus' sacrifice through our spiritual disciplines. We do these to exercise our spiritual health and focus on Jesus Christ as we prepare for Easter.

Along with prayer and Bible reading, one thing many Christians do is fast during Lent. Fasting is where we deny our physical hunger to focus on minds and hearts on our Lord. In the Old Testament, David fasted for the healing of his son (2 Samuel 12:16-17). Nehemiah fasted and was given permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4).

Fasting has been part of the Methodist tradition from the early days. John Wesley advocated fasting every Wednesday and Friday as part of a regular spiritual discipline. Wesley wouldn't ordain anyone who wasn't willing to fast on those days. Later, Wesley would fast Friday every week because Friday was the day that Jesus was crucified.

6. Application

There are many ways we can focus on Jesus during the Lent season. I pray that each one of us takes up one spiritual discipline or more as a way for us to deny ourselves and put Jesus even more at the focus of our lives. When we fast, pray, read the scripture, and give more for God's kingdom, we will be renewed and strengthened spiritually. About a month ago, Wanda Crowell suggested to tithe during Lent if you haven't been tithing. If you try, I am sure that you will experience a great joy of giving. After I finish delivering my message, Sara Connolly has another idea. Whatever God might call us to, I pray that we are able to follow these daily disciplines during Lent as a way to strengthen our faith and to love for God.

Christine, myself, and 5 other people will begin our spiritual journey from this Tuesday visiting Israel the land where Jesus was born, suffered, died, and risen again. Would you remember us in your prayers? We will remember you while travelling the Holy Land. And would you pray for the United Methodist Church so that the Holy Spirit would continue to lead us even in a season in the wilderness to experience God's presence and God's love? Amen.