

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

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Today is the first Sunday in the 40-day season of Lent. Growing up a Southern Baptist as I did, “lint” was something you found in your pocket. Lent was completely foreign to me. In high school I adopted the practice of giving something up – usually junk food. During college and seminary,

though, Lent started to mean more than just an annual 40-day cleanse. In this room are other former Baptists and Lutherans, Methodists and Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Evangelicals, and Presbyterians. There are even a few folks that either grew up in this church, other UCC churches, or no church at all. So, chances are, the season means a little something different to each of us. I'd like to spend a few minutes today talking about what Lent is for me. I'll start by telling you what it isn't.

Just a few days ago a pastor in Mozambique died on the 29th day of his 40-day fast from food and water in imitation of Jesus. Lent is not about that. Truly, Lent isn't about giving up chocolate, junk food, alcohol, intimacy, meat, or Facebook either. Lent finds its genesis in the story you just heard from Matthew's gospel. I've come to understand this story of Jesus' sojourn in the Palestinian wilderness and subsequent temptation by the devil is a metaphor for human life – all human life. By telling it as they did, I believe the authors of our gospels hallow that humanness, writing Jesus into the hunger we all experience, the self-doubt and uncertainty we all experience, the voices we all wrestle with. By memorializing it in the season of Lent, the church hallows the very human, every-day realities of living and dying, being hungry and thirsty, lost or lonely, uncertain or afraid. Lent is a celebration of the physical, psychological, and spiritual certainties of the ordinary, mortal, human life.

Lent begins with an honest admission of that mortality and finitude on Ash Wednesday and it continues with a forty-day journey to the wilderness within. It doesn't need to be a sad and somber time – grieving for a life that will end all-to-soon, mourning our failings, lamenting our physical or spiritual shortcomings. While, in a culture that is terrified of death and seeks to avoid any authentic conversation about mortality, Lent may smack of pessimism or defeatism, it actually provides an honest and invaluable time to reflect on what really matters and to ask ourselves whether or not we're *doing* what really matters, *thinking* about what really

matters, *living* what really matters. Life is short. Lent doesn't just remind us of that – it invites us to make the very most of every single minute; to *Carpe* the hell out of each and every *diem*.

And that's why I love Lent. It's an intentional time to take stock, to admit the transient character of our existence, to lay down things that just don't nurture us, and to take up things that do. And it's anchored to this wonderful, relatable, and oh-so-human story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is hungry, so the devil tempts him to use his power to turn stones into bread. Jesus isn't sure of himself, so the devil tempts him to put his fate in divine hands. Jesus wonders about his path, so the devil offers him a shortcut to success. How many of us have felt these same things? All of us. All of us have experienced hunger, lacked confidence, felt rudderless and unsure how to move forward. All of us have wrestled with ourselves, considered shortcuts, hoped for signs. Lent is about being honest. It's about asking the tough questions, taking stock of our lives, owning our mortality, and committing to live fully and well. What a gift Lent truly is.

It's no accident, I think, that the gospel authors place this episode just after Jesus' baptism – after his identity and purpose are affirmed. Today we celebrated the baptism of little Kelsey Katherine and, in so doing, affirmed her identity and her membership in the universal human family and in the particular family of New England Church. We committed our love, support, and care to her and we know that, just like all of us, she will need it. She will need to be reminded that she's not alone in the world. We're all with her.

We need to be reminded of that sometimes, don't we? Whether it's at the beginning of our Lenten 40-day journey to the wilderness within, or it's at a particular crisis point in our lives, or it's because we've got something momentous to celebrate and we want to share it with others. We all need

to be reminded that we're not alone – even Jesus has been there and done that. We'll make it through.

And so, if perhaps you, like a younger me, have never given Lent much thought, I hope you will. If Lent has always been a part of your life, I hope it will be the season of reflection and renewal you need it to be at this particular point in your life. And, if you're struggling to know if or how this season fits into your life, know that you're not alone. We're all in it together and even Jesus had to figure out what to make of his time in the wilderness. May it be so with us. Amen.