

“Forty Days in the Midst of All Our Days”
Mark 1:9-15 – March 1, 2009

INTRO: Today’s Gospel reading of the temptation of Jesus is also found in Matthew and Luke, which both tell the story in about 6 times as many verses. Mark’s sparse account takes just two verses. This little episode is wedged in between the story of Jesus baptism and the beginning of his ministry in this Gospel, perhaps causing us to think about how all three of these stories are connected. As we are beginning the 40 day Lenten season, it’s appropriate to reflect on Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness.

This is the time of the year for solo and ensemble contests. Band and choir directors and parents are encouraging students to practice. And either willingly or unwillingly, students will be displaying their musical talents under the scrutiny of a judge. Perhaps because I’m a musician, as an adult, I’ve long thought the discipline of working on a piece of music and spending the needed time and effort, is a skill that can serve a person well on into adulthood whenever we face a new challenge or an ordinary job that needs to be done.

Whether it’s playing a musical instrument, or learning a language other than our mother tongue, or learning to swim or mastering the game of chess—we don’t reach any level of accomplishment unless we’re willing to accept the discipline of practice, that goes with the mastery.

“Every year in the springtime a familiar ritual is repeated. Hundreds of grown men who have played baseball, (many of them for most of their lives), head to warmer climates in Florida and Arizona to practice the fundamentals of baseball for about six weeks. Day after day these guys who get paid millions of dollars to play baseball, go back to the basics. Hitting, fielding, running the bases—all the things that would seem like they would be second nature to this crew. So why spring training every year? It’s not because they have totally forgotten what to do, but it’s so they’ll get better at what baseball players do. It’s a return to the basics to get them ready for the long season ahead. In the church every year, as spring approaches, we begin the Lenten journey. And for us, it may be a time to return to the basics that can sustain us during all the rest of the seasons.”

(Preacher’s Magazine 3/5/06)

“Lent originated in the fourth century. It was designed especially for the group of persons preparing to join the church. The length of the season gave them time to consider their decision and prepare them-selves for committed involvement in a new community. In a way, the Lenten season was long in order to give them the freedom to choose, to reconsider, or to back out if they wanted. Lent offers us that same gift—a time to examine where we’ve been and where we want to go in our spiritual lives. We don’t have to make any quick decisions, we’re free to think about options in the privacy of our own relationship with God” and make choices for ourselves. *(A Clearing Season-Sarah Parsons)*

As we begin this 40 day season, we hear the account of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. He is affirmed by God in his baptism, “You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you,” and then he is sent out for a time in the wilderness—a time of preparation, before his ministry actually begins. In the Bible, this 40 day time suggests many other periods of trial and testing. The Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years. Moses was on Mt. Sinai, trying to communicate with God, for 40 days and nights. Elijah was on the run for 40 days and nights.

And even though the wilderness can seem to us, “a place where forces hostile to God may reside, God is still present there. And often the discovery of this presence, grows out of the struggle and testing.” *(Lamar Williamson)*

So, we have our 40 days, and we certainly have our testings. We are tempted to overextend ourselves and to become overwhelmed with life’s demands. We’re tempted to believe we’re in control of things. And sometimes we’re tempted to let the distractions become the main event.

Frederick Buechner says: “Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he maybe asked himself what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another, what it means to be ourselves.”

Lent is the spring training time for people of faith. “We act as if living a Christian life will come to us without any effort, as if there’s no preparation, practice, training or discipline involved in following Christ.” *(Clergy Journal May/June 2005)*

Unfortunately, that’s not the case. If we are trying to live as Christ’s disciples, perhaps we need to think about the word disciple and come to understand that it comes from the same roots as the

word discipline. Discipline is part of how a disciple learns and grows. I believe spiritual disciplines are some of the ways God's spirit works in & on us.

Once when the noted pianist Paderewski played before Queen Victoria, the queen responded enthusiastically, "Oh, Mr. Paderewski, you are a genius!" Paderewski replied, "That may well be, madame, but before that I was a drudge." (365 Simple Gifts from God-John Killinger)

"It is in the faithful attention to a routine program that we build the muscle and sinew of the spiritual life. When we discipline ourselves to a simple routine, we clear a place among our conflicting habits and emotions (all that tempts us) for the arrival of God's Spirit. And the Spirit seldom disappoints us when we have spent our time expecting and preparing for it." (365 Simple Gifts from God-John Killinger)

"If you set out to seek freedom, then learn above all things to govern your soul and your senses, for fear that your passions and longing may lead you away from the path that you should follow. Only through a discipline may a person learn to be free." (Dietrich Bonhoefer)

"Having spiritual disciplines in our lives, can help keep us close to God. It's a way of 'staying in love with God,'" the third of the Three Simple Rules. (Reuben Job) The primary requirement for choosing a discipline, is simply a longing for God. So, what might be some of those practices or disciplines, that could make up our spring training this year? Sarah Parsons created a list of seven of them: 1. Daily prayer/meditation time—making space for God each day, perhaps at a regular time and place. Bonhoefer used to say: "We are silent in the early hours of each day because God is supposed to have the first word, and silent before going to sleep, because to God also belongs the last word." 2. Media fast – abstaining from watching TV, listening to music, or even reading. Perhaps lessening the number of hours spent. 3. Meditative walks – mindfully walking, clearing out everything else that seeks your attention. 4. Art – set aside some time to engage in creative activity. By understanding creativity as a channel for God's creative action in the world, this is then, time spent with God. 5. Journaling – getting your thoughts written down, and another way of communicating with God. 6. Community activities – if you lack community involvement, you might choose to intentionally be a part of community functions and explore how God speaks through others to us. 7. Service – by practicing some form of service to others, we can encounter the presence of Christ in those we serve. (A Clearing Season-Sarah Parsons)

It's interesting to note that 5 of the 7 practices are those that can be done in silence. "Solitude is recognized and honored and practiced by followers of virtually every major faith. Jesus sojourned in the wilderness. Buddha wandered for years and eventually found enlightenment through his solitary experience under the bodhi tree. Mohammed found his vocation in solitude, in the cave near Mecca. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses all had experiences with God in solitary places. For all those folks, and for us, solitude is one of the keys for devotion and spiritual growth. It's an ideal context for an encounter with the authentic self" (Spirituality and Health Jan/Feb. 06)

And if we want to grow as disciples we need to come to an understanding of who we are and who God is for us. Like everything else, solitude isn't usually something we just take up one day and find we're particularly adept at it. We live in a society that is constantly connected with each other, with our cell phones ringing while people are at stores, at appointments, walking along the street. Text messaging has become a way of life for many. And I wonder if our need to be connected may say something about our discomfort with being alone, or our discomfort at being silent. Silence takes practice. All of these disciplines, take practice, and they also involve a balance between law and grace. For instance, "suppose a person wants to clear time to improve her physical health during Lent, and she commits to a discipline of walking thirty minutes each morning. At first, getting out of bed a half hour early seems like pure drudgery, but she forces herself to stick to the routine. At the same time, if grace doesn't come into play, the discipline won't serve its purpose. If a love for walking doesn't begin to grow in the woman's heart through faithfulness to her discipline, eventually she will abandon it, and it won't serve its true purpose of improving her health." (S. Parsons)

That has been my experience with Bible study. When I headed off to seminary, it was like a foreign language to me—I had been a music major in my undergrad years—I didn't understand much. But by now, if I'm not involved in a disciplined Bible study, I miss it. I am never more actively learning and growing than when I am preparing a Sunday School lesson or sermon, or reading for my own meditation. It's not drudgery or a requirement, but it has become something I love.

I believe many of us could say that about some talent or skill we keep practicing. It has evolved into something that we love. We seem to be willing to practice whatever it is that keeps us mentally or physically fit. Why would we not do the same to keep spiritually fit? During the upcoming 40 days, let us also explore practicing whatever it is that will grow our spirits, for these 40 days and hopefully for the rest of our days too.

--Sue Burwell

