



Obituary + Mark 1:9-15

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024

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Temptation is in the air. As people in some traditions begin their Lenten fast today, they may already be wrestling with temptation as they try to abstain from certain foods or practices. Pastors wrestle as well. When our liturgical and secular calendars collide, as they are doing today, we pastors may be tempted to make something of that.

Let's think for a moment of similar collisions. Transfiguration and Super Bowl Sunday? Unlikely, although Travis Kelcey did momentarily seem to be transfigured in that final push to the goal. And although there is such a thing as Touchdown Jesus, the mural at Notre Dame whose real title is Word of Life.

What about St. Patrick's Day and the Fifth Sunday of Lent, which we'll have next month? I suppose someone could connect the dying grain of wheat in John 12 with bad-tasting green beer. Because for the food coloring to work properly, the beer must be very light.

What about Easter and April Fool's Day, as we had in 2018? Scant possibilities there, unless you go with Paul about how God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. But you'd have your hands full explaining that, especially to your Easter crowd.

And today we have Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. I will admit that I was tempted. I even prepared a set of Lenten candy hearts for you. I was tempted to talk about love and how Lent can help us to learn more about loving God and loving each other.

Then I thought, wait a minute. This is Lent we are talking about. If our Lenten experience is going to be anything like Jesus' in the wilderness, we will need more in the way of sustenance than candy hearts and aphorisms about love.

First, think about what Jesus did during those 40 days. Scripture tells us nothing other than that the angels waited on him. I'm thinking that Jesus did not just sit in one place all that time. He got up. Walked. Explored. Maybe hiked. He observed flora and fauna, how the light at different times of the day struck the hillsides, how the sky changed with the weather, where the birds were heading in their patterns of migration.

And as Jesus sat, or walked, or hiked, he *thought*. He thought deeply, he prayed, he talked with his Father. He revisited the past and imagined the future. With the Spirit guiding him, he journeyed into himself to uncover the qualities and character and conviction that he would need to fulfill all that his Father was asking of him. It took 40 days, because as Dag Hammarskjöld said, "The longest journey is the journey inward."

Jesus' wilderness experience tells us three things about the inner journey of Lent: It must be intentional. It takes time. And the Holy Spirit is in charge.

What if you were to think of your pilgrimage through these 40 days in a different way – not as forward movement through the calendar or even to the cross, but as an inward circling into the deepest recesses of your identity? One in which you spend whatever time you can dedicate to sitting and praying as Jesus did, to walking and hiking, to developing deeper connections with the elements of the earth? Journaling, if that is your thing?

A process in which you invite the Spirit to open cracks and crevices in the hardened sculpture of who thought you were, as a way of equipping you for who you might become? A process of opening yourself more fully to create that sacred space in which God longs to dwell?

Because none of us is a finished product. We are all evolving, changing. And God is always calling us to that deeper awareness of our true selves, the self that God created. We are just too preoccupied most of the time to listen.

Here is a way to help you envision who you might become. Think about your obituary. How do you want yours to read?

Before you can say, “That’s so morbid,” remember that death is a part of life. And because you have friends and relatives who love you, they *will* want to put something in paper (or online) about you just for that reason. You don’t have to write your own obituary. In fact, that’s usually not a good idea. You just need to give people something to work with. Perhaps that something can be the fruit of this Lenten experience.

Most death notices give only the barest hint of who the deceased really was. Often they read like a resume, concluding with the list of survivors. After all, who was not a devoted mother and loving wife? Who was not a caring father and good provider? We are left wondering what made this person distinctive in a world in which there are 8 billion distinct personalities?

If you are imagining right now that what other people might write up for you would not do you justice, I just want to say: Whose fault is that? Could it be that maybe no one knew the REAL you? And if this is so, what can you do about it during this 40-day journey into the heart of your soul?

A good example is the obituary for a homebound member who I used to visit in Wisconsin. Mona was a hoot, the salt of the earth, fearless in her opinions and observations. As I was first reading through her obituary last month my heart sank a little, as the notice seemed to contain only standard information. But at the very end came this zinger:

“Mona will be missed for her sassy, ranch-chugging, strong and spicy ways, and her infectious laughter.” I don’t have the faintest idea what ranch-chugging is, but whatever it is, it sounds just like Mona.

The idea of the obituary reminds us that this interior journey is not only for ourselves. Its larger purpose is to forge stronger relationships, so that we can more fully be community with others. As we discover Christ in ourselves, we are more able to find Christ in others, from the gallant to

the goofy. In her autobiography Agatha Christie said, "It is a curious thought, but it is only when you see people looking ridiculous that you realize just how much you love them."

So in these 40 days, seek that person. Be that person. And if you are then fortunate enough to end up with a phrase like "ranch-chugging" in your obituary, I would say: "Mission accomplished."

Amen.