

Lent 1A (3/1/2020)
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

In Lent, some of us practice wilderness by subtraction, making space in our lives to encounter grace in fresh ways. Some of us practice wilderness by addition, taking up a new discipline to heighten our exposure to God. Some of us cannot afford to practice wilderness at all because we're already there, forced into difficult circumstances of one kind or another. But, we don't go out into the desert alone; we go together, abiding in the faithfulness and love of the one who goes ahead of us.

The famous story in our Gospel from Matthew today is the origin of the age-old tradition of giving something up for Lent. Jesus' forty-day fast and temptation in the wilderness is the inspiration for our own Lenten discipline, an annual experiment in voluntary deprivation and perseverance. It's not just a religious excuse to go on a diet; it's not just a Jesusy New Year's resolution that you're likely to abandon anyway. The holy Lenten fast, should you choose to take it up, aims to sharpen your spiritual awareness, to make you more conscious of the difference between needs and wants, and to remind you of your total dependence on God. Call it "spirituality by subtraction,"¹ the deliberate removal of obstacles from your path. **Giving something up creates space in your internal life to receive whatever it is that you need this season. To fast, in other words, means to practice wilderness, to follow Jesus out into the desert in order to learn how God's grace is sufficient for you.**²

¹ Kris Rocke, Preaching Peace Table, Tacoma, 2/25/20.

² 2 Corinthians 12:9.

If some of us practice wilderness by subtraction in Lent, others practice wilderness by addition. Maybe removing something from your life doesn't appeal to you, but taking up something new does. It could be a form of prayer you haven't tried before: pausing at a specified point in your day to observe a long silence and breathe deeply, reading a devotional book, or making a commitment to attend Holden Evening Prayer every Wednesday. It could be a renewed effort for the sake of your physical or mental health: exercising regularly, getting more sleep, or finally making an appointment to see a therapist. It could be an ecological discipline: walking, biking, or using public transit on a regular basis, investing in reusable goods, or making sustainable choices about food. No matter what practice you choose, **spirituality by addition intends to make you more fully human, all the while increasing your opportunities to encounter God. And in this way, taking up a new discipline puts you in the wilderness with Jesus, too.**

But, let me also affirm that some of us are not in a position to give anything up or take anything on during Lent. **Maybe you can't afford to practice wilderness at all this year because you're already there.** You can't bring yourself to try spirituality by subtraction because you've already endured too much loss – the death of loved ones, the end of relationships, the crumbling of financial security, or the collapse of dreams. You can't bring yourself to try spirituality by addition because you've already got too much on your plate – too much grief, too much pain, too much dysfunction, too much fear. Maybe this

season for you isn't so much about engaging in voluntary deprivation or new commitments, but rather naming and dwelling with God in circumstances you didn't choose. One interpreter puts it this way:

These days of Lent are a holy gift and an acknowledgement of the reality of our lives. Life is not nonstop joy, wonder, and excitement. There are times of quiet, times of difficulty, and times of suffering. The somber tones of Lent, the focus on confession, repentance, and renewal, all open holy space for the truth of unpleasant feelings and experiences in life. This season is an invitation to make space within [our] worship for those realities.³

To join Jesus in the desert, in other words, is to abide in the promise of God's accompaniment even in the harshest conditions.

Regardless of your reasons for finding yourself in the wilderness in Lent, the prevailing myth is that you're out here alone. But, you're not. "There's good company... in the desert," writes Father Matt Holland of St. Leo Parish in Tacoma.

Just over yonder lies Moses, fasting and praying that we'll stop settling for the molten calf and awaken to [the] presence of the living God....

Elijah's here too.... He's heading toward a real encounter [with God] that won't disappoint. Not in heavy wind, or an earthquake, or fire. It'll be in the tiny whispering sound. Can you hear it?

We're out here together, all God's people. This desert wilderness is schooling us how to be free after years in bondage, how to dream bigger dreams and claim hearts that are ready to hold more. We're slow learners, but God is patient. God leads the beloved son out here to teach us, to show us the way.⁴

Can the season of Lent be for you a time to "dream bigger dreams"? Can it be a time to open your heart to the "more" that God has to offer you? Maybe it's more health – physical, emotional, and spiritual. Maybe it's more appreciation for

³ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

⁴ *The Human Becoming: A Lenten Devotional*, 11-12.

simplicity, the essential goodness of being alive. Maybe it's more commitment to the way of God's kingdom – the way of justice, mercy, and humility. Maybe it's more compassion for yourself and for your neighbors, friends and strangers alike. In any case, **it's the Beloved Son who models life in the wilderness for you, summoning all the courage and trust he can in the face of hunger and exhaustion and temptation. Deep down, he knows who he is and whose he is, no matter the test. You can, too.**

So, what are you giving up for Lent? Are you practicing wilderness by subtraction, and making space in your life to encounter grace in fresh ways? Are you practicing wilderness by addition, and taking up a new discipline to heighten your exposure to God? Or, are you simply surviving in the wilderness, making do in the meantime with the promise of God's mercy? Whatever the case may be, go out with all your kindred in faith, and abide in the faithfulness and love of the one who goes ahead of you.