

40 Days & 40 Nights
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Reading

“The Temptation of Jesus,” from the Gospel of Luke (4:1-13, NRSV)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”,

and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon

How many of you noticed the smudge on Vice President Joe Biden’s forehead as he went about the business of government last Wednesday; that smudge was from the ashes that are placed on the foreheads of those who, like Biden, attend Roman Catholic Mass on Ash Wednesday. The ashes, a public recognition of the repentant heart of a sinner, is traditionally left on for the day and washed off after sundown.

Though I am certainly familiar with the practice--and though I should have been even more alert to the day as I was preparing for this service, for goodness’ sake--it took me a minute to realize *what that* was

on the Vice President's forehead. (That moment of ignorance paid off in that it got me to clean the dust off the television screen.)

But I'll bet that I'm not the only one who was briefly puzzled; I'll bet a few other folks cleaned their TV screens prior to the news commentators chiming in with helpful context or moved their eyes a little closer to the newspaper or computer screen before reading the caption under the news photo. And let's face it: the whole celebration of Lent—which begins with Ash Wednesday—the whole celebration of Lent can be a little puzzling.

First of all, it's one of those moving targets on the calendar. Lent—as I mentioned—begins with Ash Wednesday and culminates with the celebration of Easter, and we can only decide on which date Ash Wednesday will fall based on when Easter is, and we find out when Easter is by...do you know? Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Once we know when Easter is, we count back 46 days to Ash Wednesday. "46? Isn't this sermon called 40 Days & 40 Nights?" Yes, the count of 40 days excludes Sundays...I don't know why. The Eastern Orthodox Church counts this a little differently, with a different starting point (Clean Monday) and *includes* Sundays, but I'm not going to go into that right now. Suffice to say that there are many levels of intricacy to explore on your calendar if you're interested.

Another puzzling thing about Lent is that, though it is *celebrated*, it is not *celebrated* in what this culture has come to imagine is *the usual way*. Namely: there are no presents. Ok, yes, in spiritual or philosophical terms people do speak of what they *receive* from their observance of Lent, but in the most practical terms, it is dissimilar to many other holidays in that it doesn't *focus* on what we *get* or *give*; it doesn't require *an exchange*. Christmas, Birthdays, Mothers Day, Fathers Day, Hanukkah, all of these have a gift-giving expectation of some type, even if it's only a card. On Easter, that trusty bunny is bound to bring some chocolate eggs for all those baskets, and Thanksgiving, though not gift-driven, sets up the expectation of a meal to end all meals (at least until next year). "For these gifts which we are about to receive, we give thanks..." These other holidays, to a greater or lesser degree, come with built-in marketing strategies because they operate, at least in part, on the concept of humans as *consumers*; they have expectations of *stuff* attached to them. It would be difficult—and you can tell how difficult because it hasn't been done yet—to commercialize and commodify Lent. Why? Simple...it can be summed up in two questions:

What are you *getting* for Christmas?

What are you *giving up* for Lent?

Lent is not about getting more stuff; it is about choosing stuff you can do without. Outside of McDonalds having Friday sales on fish sandwiches (because some Catholics have traditionally given up the eating of other meats on Fridays during Lent), I have not seen a marketing strategy that can capitalize on that.

But if we are beginning to get a very general picture of *how* some people celebrate Lent, it is also important to try and figure out *what* is being celebrated, and *why*. How did *giving something up* become a part of the observance of Lent?

Lent is often portrayed as simply a preamble to Good Friday (commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus) and Easter Sunday (commemorating the resurrection of Jesus). It is like the prequel to *The Passion of*

the Christ. One would expect, then, that it is mainly focused on the portion of Jesus' ministry that comes just before his arrest, but that is not the case. The forty days and forty night of Lent come from an event that is said to have occurred before Jesus even began his ministry, the story that you heard Virginia read from the Gospel of Luke. This story also appears in the Gospel of Matthew, with the temptations in a different order, and it takes up a mere two verses in the Gospel of Mark (1:12-13):

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist. Maybe he is wondering about where his life will go next. Maybe he is questioning his purpose in this life. Maybe he just needs to get away, to be alone with himself and the God that he believes in. So he spends forty days in the wilderness fasting.

Understand, I'm not treating this as an historical event. Those who look for historical accuracy will be questioning how, if Jesus was alone in the wilderness and wrote no account of what happened that we know of, how the Gospel writers, who scholars believe came along considerably later, would be able to accurately recount what happened. It is not meant to be history, but rather revelation. It could be that some kernel of the story existed from early on in the oral tradition and that this was expanded over time to communicate a growing understanding of Jesus and his message. It employs symbols and references to other stories that would have been well-known. Forty—like seven; like twelve--holds symbolic significance for the Gospel writers: Moses and the Israelites spent forty years wandering through the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land; Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai in the presence of God.

I approach it as a religious story, a myth if you will, that may tell us something about who we are and how life is. And from that standpoint, I find this an interesting story to celebrate.

The famous poet, John Milton, who wrote the towering poem *Paradise Lost* regarding the story of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, also wrote a poem entitled *Paradise Regained*. Now I expected that this poem would be about the Resurrection of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament, the assurance of Paradise Regained to believing Christians, but it deals with another event in Jesus' life entirely: you guessed it, the very same story as the one commemorated during Lent--Jesus' temptation by Satan during his forty-day fast in the wilderness.

Now, in a way this makes sense. *Paradise Lost* was about Satan successfully tempting Eve to disobey God's commands and *Paradise Regained* is about Satan's failure to tempt Jesus. Jesus rescues Paradise for humanity.

But I find it interesting in another way, a *Unitarian* way, one might say. Milton was sometimes accused of being a Unitarian, a disciple of Michael Servetus, because of his rejection of the Trinity and his focus on the *humanity* of Jesus. The poem, *Paradise Regained*, is a prime example. Though the story has its fantastical elements, of course, Jesus does not employ any miracles here in the struggle against temptation. Biographer Anna Beer writes of Milton's depiction of the temptation that, "to make the contest more real, the Son [Jesus] is fully human. He undergoes his temptations as a man, without any divine powers, experiencing hunger and cold, unaware at first even that the temptations are going to happen" ([*Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer, and Patriot*](#), pg. 367) In other words, this is a person, not unlike us: vulnerable to the elements, as well as to the doubt and uncertainty that comes with this existence.

And I wonder if that doesn't allow us to enter the story in a different way.

Ok, fasting for forty days is a little hard for some of us to get a grip on, but fasting plays an important part in many religious traditions. It may be employed as proof that one is willing to sacrifice creature comforts to worship God. As self-discipline. As a symbol of repentance, self-imposed punishment for sin. As a reminder that one can rise above one's animal nature. But it may also be a way to simply re-focus oneself on what is important. It may also be a way to see—or see again—the wonder of what *is*. It may be a way open our ears to that still, small voice. It may be a way to notice the stillness within, even amidst the hectic activity of every day. It may reacquaint us with the essence that has sustained us but that we have neglected for so long. Though it is common, especially in Western religion, to hear talk of “filling” our spirits, there is something to be said for “emptiness” in religious terms.

Giving something up, in the popular Lenten vernacular, may be a way to reacquaint oneself with the profundity, beauty, or simple enjoyment of everyday activities. By willingly giving something up, we may open ourselves to a deeper appreciation of it when it returns to our lives. Or, depending on what it is, we may find we can do without it, that we are better or stronger in its absence. By shaking up our normal routine, by being willing to question some of our well-established habits, by resisting temptations to take the easy, unreflective way, we may discover something about ourselves, something about life that we did not know before, that we would not have known if we hadn't created an empty space for that realization to appear.

What are you giving up for Lent? There's 36 days left (not counting Sundays)....

What are you giving up for Lent?

As a bratty kid, I used to answer this question with things like, “Lima beans...yes, don't try and talk me out of it, I will do without lima beans for the full 40 days.” Or “Homework...I'll give up homework. Or making my bed; much as I love it, I will give it up for Lent.”

But think about it. What are you giving up for Lent? What are you giving up?

We can't help but notice the particular relevance of this question for our own place and time. An organization called [Tearfund](#) invites people to go on a carbon fast for Lent, beginning new routines that will help to reduce their carbon footprint and carry over into their everyday lives when Lent is over. Climate change; a free-falling economy; dwindling natural resources; “what are you giving up?” is no longer a question for otherworldly spiritual seekers, it is now inspired by practical necessity and it is increasingly recognized as a moral imperative.

Before I close, I will point out that not all Christians celebrate Lent. Catholics do. Lutherans do (I know from my own childhood). But the Rev. Brian Carpenter for instance, a Presbyterian Church in America pastor, [has some rather strong objections](#). He points out that John Calvin called Lent a “superstitious observance,” and says there is no biblical foundation for it.

“The fact that Jesus fasted for 40 days from all food is not a commandment for us to have some sort of halfway fast for 40 days. Jesus walked on water, too. That doesn't imply that we should all be commanded to splash around in some lake at a prescribed time of the year.”

Objection duly noted.

I also fully understand that not all those who celebrate Lent would endorse my particular take on it.

I don't mean to suggest that we should re-interpret or appropriate Lent for Unitarian Universalism. It has a particular history and context within the liturgical year of many Christian congregations that deserves recognition and preservation. I am not saying that we can make Lent *ours*.

I *am* saying that we can join in solidarity with the spirit of Lent and harness the power of willing sacrifice, of letting go, of choosing *not* to. We may find that our ethical obligation to the interdependent web of all life, as well as our individual spiritual growth, is served not only by that which we compassionately *give*, but also by that which we wisely *give up*.