

In the name of God
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The word Lent comes from an Old English word for “lengthen” and refers to the gradually lengthening days of late winter and early spring. Over the centuries, Lent evolved into a 40 day period of reflection, repentance, and preparing not only for Holy Week, but also for the subsequent 50 day celebration of Eastertide.¹

In the ancient scriptural imagination 40 was both a shorthand way of saying “for a long time,” and a way of resonating with other key 40’s in Israel’s sacred memory: the flood’s 40 days of rain, Moses’ 40 days without food on Mount Sinai, Elijah’s 40 days without food as he journeyed to Mount Horeb, Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wandering.²

Jesus’ 40 days of wilderness temptation continued this line, continuing the idea that God is like a master poet – or choreographer – or composer – working through time and space, and in Lent we are invited to step into our own 40 day pilgrimage of preparation.³

The journey before us is one of trust.

Lent began on Ash Wednesday with the reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return – a literal reminder of our mortality. It will end during the Easter Vigil when celebrate the first Eucharist of Easter and the promise of the resurrection.

¹ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for Lent 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

And so, this yearly pilgrimage we take from death to resurrection is all about trust – trusting that God’s love is so strong and so complete that nothing, not even death, can keep us from it. In this way Lent is a season for soulful spring cleaning – examining our trust and mistrust.

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The reading from Genesis is the story of sin’s emergence in the Garden of Delight (the ancient Hebrew word for Eden most likely meant “delight”). It’s often pictured as a story about disobedience, but at its heart it’s really a story about mistrust.⁴

Everything the serpent did was to contend that God is untrustworthy: first, that God would dream of denying humans food (*Did God say, “You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?”*), and second, that God has lied (*You will not die*) and is actually humanity’s rival (*for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God*).⁵

In N.K. Jemisin’s book *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* there is an amazing quote that sums this all up for me: “We can never be gods, after all – but we can become something less than human with frightening ease.”

All it took for the first couple was the seed of mistrust – and from that bloomed anxiety, fear, shame, pride, and greed – which led to their separation from God and their banishment from the garden of Delight.

Mistrust continues to be peddled to us today, and its fruits are just as toxic. We would be mindful to pay attention in this Lenten season to what seeds we water, what fruit we consume, and what it is that we share – for our choices will either draw us nearer to God and one another and to becoming the people God hopes we will be, or will further our separation from God and others and our best selves.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

This isn't easy, and none of us are perfect, but the thing to remember is that we're not alone – God is always with us and provides for us. That's what our Gospel reading from Matthew today drives home.

The key to understanding this story is to focus on Jesus' responses, each of which is a quotation from Deuteronomy's account of Moses presenting the divine law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai.⁶

In a speech that began with the Ten Commandments. Far from being a list of holy “do's and don'ts,” Moses explained that it was a gift meant to help order and sustain human life – boundaries or norms, if you will. What's more, Moses also said that their 40 years of manna in the wilderness was designed to prepare them to receive the law by teaching them day in and day out to rely on God's sustaining presence in their lives.

In other words, living on manna all those years was a course of preparation for living in the Promised Land. How so? According to Moses, if they had immediately entered that land of “milk and honey” they would have misinterpreted the abundance as the result of their own efforts, rather than the grace-filled gift of God.⁷ They would have believed the myth of self-reliance as salvific.

It was in this context that Moses delivered the story's iconic line: God fed you daily with manna *“in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”*

With all of this in view, we can see what Jesus is up to in the Gospel. Newly baptized, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Matthew casts the devil here as a kind of sparring partner, there to test Jesus' trust.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

On the surface, the first temptation seems to be about comfort – you have great power and you’re hungry, why not make some bread and eat? But on a deeper level the temptation boils down to this: Why not sustain yourself?⁸

By quoting Deuteronomy in response, Jesus signals that he understands the stakes. This is his wilderness time, and just like his ancestors in faith he has learned the lesson that God is the true source of sustenance.

The second temptation seems to be about security – prove that you’re God’s beloved – and the third about glory – worship me and all this can be yours! – but again Jesus exposed the true stakes by quoting from Moses’ presentation of the law.

If living on manna in the wilderness was meant to cultivate a stance of reliance on God, the divine law has a similar purpose.⁹ It’s meant to form us toward worshipping and serving God, not an idol, and loving and trusting God means not purposely testing the limits of that love (as if there were any at all).

Unable to sow the seeds of mistrust, the devil left Jesus and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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From our readings three questions emerge: Whom do you trust for your nourishment? Whom do you trust to love and care for you? And whom do you trust with your service?

As we make our Lenten journey from death to resurrection, this 40 day pilgrimage of trust, let us reflect on how God is present in our lives, sustaining, loving, and trusting us to respond with faithfulness.

~ Amen ~

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.