

40 days in the wilderness. The number forty pops up quite a bit in our Old Testament. In Hebrew culture, the number 40 doesn't have any hidden meaning, it simply means "a lot." The Israelites wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years, as I'm sure you know, which is to say a long time. And so when we hear that Jesus is in the wilderness for this length of time, we are to understand that he's gone for quite a long while, seeking to spend time with God. Like Noah on the ark,¹ and Moses on Mt. Sinai,² [*Elijah walking to Mt. Horeb,*³ *and the Ninevites who have heard Jonah's prophecy,*⁴] Jesus spends a period of 40 days and 40 nights reflecting on and coming to terms with who he is in relationship with God.

These Old Testament stories set a context for Jesus's time set apart, as they are each stories of judgement and grace, of wandering and suffering, of longing and learning. Students of the Bible will see that Noah and Moses, [*Elijah and Jonah*] are instruments of God's grace in response to the rebellion of God's people, and we recognize a larger prophetic arc culminating in the person of Jesus. Jesus is, of course, the embodiment of God's grace for all who rebel against God, transforming well-deserved judgement into undeserved redemption ~ for all of *us* who find ourselves wandering and suffering, longing (and perhaps?) choosing to learn.

Supposedly it all started back in the Garden of Eden. As it is told in Genesis, God created *Adam* (the first of humankind) who is given the divine purpose of tilling and keeping the garden.⁵ (Side note: a better

¹ Genesis 7:4

² Exodus 24:18

³ 1 Kings 19:8

⁴ Jonah 3:4

⁵ Genesis 2:15

translation of the words used as ‘*till* and *keep*’ are ‘*cultivate* and *serve*.’⁶ Adam and Eve are to cultivate and serve all that God has created.) At any rate, Adam and Eve got distracted by the allure of power and control, their curiosity got the better of them, and they succumb to temptation and defy God’s decree that they not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And so it began: with humankind’s God-given purpose to cultivate and serve creation, followed humankind’s own self-centered purposes being cultivated and served.

Which of course is why Jesus came among us – to live and die as one of us, to cultivate and serve those whom God created, to reconcile us to God and restore the created order.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Jesus came and balanced the scales on our behalf, and yet we still disorder God’s purposes.

In the first years after the resurrection, Jesus’ followers believed that his return was imminent. The early Christians knowingly risked their lives by being bold in proclaiming their faith, were determined to assist the poor and marginalized, and courageously engaged in illegal groups who resisted the political forces in power; that is, they lived as the body of Christ ~ evangelizing and spreading the Good News of salvation, forming communities we call ‘church,’ (the work of **cultivation**) and **servicing** the world in Christ’s name. Of course, many died for doing so.

As the years went by, as the culture shifted, and being a Christian was no longer a risky endeavor, complacency about boldly following Jesus’ teachings set in. And so the Church encouraged the practice of a Holy Lent to set aside time for Christians to intentionally reflect on how we disorder God’s desire for us.

⁶ וְלִישָׁמְרָהּ or *ū·lō·šā·mō·rāh* (cultivate); לְעַבְדָּהּ or *‘ā·bad* (serve)

This is of course modeled after Jesus' time in the wilderness just after his baptism ~ when he goes off to fast and pray and focus on his relationship with God. The proverbial snake of temptation, up to his old tricks, sets out to disorder Jesus' purposes. However Jesus, sometimes called the Second Adam,⁷ is self-differentiated enough to not be lured into doing anything other than living into his role as the Holy Cultivator and Servant of Creation. For those 40 days and 40 nights, and for the rest of his life, Jesus' loyalty to God's purposes never wavers.

Paul connects these dots for us in this morning's reading from Romans. He points out that the great arc of salvation begins at one tree and ends at another: from the tree of knowledge of good and evil to the tree upon which our Lord died. Between one tree and the other, we receive justification, redemption, salvation, and sanctification.

Listen again to Paul's words of Good News: "Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."⁸

Sin is an inescapable reality, but thanks to Jesus on that cross, God's unmerited grace is likewise an inescapable reality.

No different than Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and Jesus in the wilderness, we in our own time and place have *free will* to make our own choices. We can choose to follow God's moral guidance, or not. Even for the most faithful among us, even at the times when we are completely in line with fulfilling God's purposes, there will be circumstances that we encounter on our faith journey that are riddled with temptation. We are human: we are lazy and seek convenience; we are apathic and forego compassion; we are cynical and greedy and

⁷ ...or Last Adam, or Final Adam ...

⁸ Romans 5:18-19

jealous and resentful. Which is to say, the temptations we experience (whatever form they may take for us) are about us, not about God.

God chose us. God chose us at the dawn of creation, God continued to choose us by giving up himself on the cross, and we will forever be the beneficiary of God's inescapable love and grace because God has inexplicably decided to always choose us.

But the real question is whether or not we choose God.

I was at a school event yesterday when another parent that I don't know all that well sat down next to me and initiated a conversation by saying he'd heard I was an Episcopal minister, and asked if my faith tradition recognized the season of Lent. I said yes. He said like no fish on Fridays? I said yes and no ~ the idea is to be intentionally introspective and prayerful about how we can be more faithful to God. He said, "Shouldn't Christians always be seeking ways to live more faithfully with God – year round?" I said yes ~ but we give things up and take things on during these 40 days with the intention of keeping these practices year round so that we may live in more complete union with God. I then said that we sometimes give up certain things temporarily as a way to hunger, not for those things, but for God. We fast from certain things we enjoy so that we can be more keenly aware of how fully we allow God to function in our lives. I explained that (for example) we give up saying the word 'Alleluia' for the 40 days of Lent, as a way of humbling ourselves in corporate worship, and often find ourselves hungry to proclaim God's glory with the joy of that one word once Easter arrives. He got a mischievous glint in his eye, and said if he took that argument to its extreme, perhaps he should give up church for Lent. I countered that probably that wasn't the best take-away from our conversation ~ that smacks more of temptation than spiritual discipline.

There are 40 days and 40 nights of the season of Lent. It's a long time to prayerfully consider the trees we've cultivated and served in the gardens of our lives. Will we choose to eat of those fruits we know are

not beneficial for us? Or will we choose to till the soil of our spiritual garden: to cultivate and serve God's creation by nurturing seeds like humility and curiosity,⁹ creativity and gratitude, peace and love?

Join with me as I pray the Collect for Purity:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

⁹ Unrelated to this theme of sin/redemption ... there is great video pieced together of Mr. Rogers singing about curiosity that is worth your while: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFzXaFbxDcM> (or search for Mr. Rogers Remixed / Garden of Your Mind)