

Lent 1 2024
Rev. Dr. Les Martin
Mark 1:9-13

*Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing.
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he and he must win the battle.*

This year marks my 37th Lent since I became a practicing Christian. And if I've learned one thing in those 37 years, it's that having a holy Lent can be really tricky. For those of you who are new to liturgical Christianity, it does well to remit for us to remember that Lent is that season of 40 days prior to Easter, in which we commemorate Jesus time in the wilderness, and his endurance of the temptations that came from Satan. Lent later came to be seen as a time of preparation of the believer for Easter, and for Christian life, via prayer discipling our flesh, almsgiving, simple living, and self-denial.

Now, I would say that in my lifetime, as a practicing Christian, it's that second meaning of Lent that has always received more attention than the first. It's been about the disciplines, the work, the struggle, specifically our struggle. In my life as a practicing Christian, I'd say sadly, Lent isn't so much about Jesus as it is about me. I mean, let's be honest, Lent has become new year's resolutions for Christians. And like New Year's resolutions, Lent has had two bad outcomes.

One is we fail. We give up. We feel bad about ourselves or worse. The second bad outcome is that we succeed. And when we succeed, we start feeling like I'm all that I'm holy, I'm righteous. I've paid Jesus back for saving me.

At least until I eventually slip. In my third year of college, I was doing pretty well on my Lenten devotions. They were very important to me back then. And without thinking about it, one Thursday afternoon, I walked into Baskin Robbins bought a milkshake and drank it right in the middle of my fast. I was worse off, than if I'd never tried the level of condemnation that I placed upon myself. When land is just New Year's resolutions for Christians, whether we're a success or a failure, the problem is the focus is on us on what we're giving up. Or if we're really spiritually elite on what we're taking on, or on how we're doing with our walk. And the problem with this is, it means that inevitably, by the end of the six weeks lift is not holy. It's frustrating, and defeating.

Why, because his Father Robert Capon reminds us, grace and forgiveness is a gift. And we are forever trying to turn it into a deal. The problem is, we can't keep up our end of the bargain. If our expectation about length is that it is about us and our disciplines and our performance. Today's readings are surprising. And if like me, you already feel like you failed in your Lenten desert observance a mere four days after Ash Wednesday. Well, today's readings can be surprisingly refreshing. Look at the temptation of Jesus in Mark, and his battle to resist it. It doesn't even rate a whole story. Instead, we get only the briefest of mentions two sentences, framed on the one side by the more important affirmation of his identity as the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased. And on the other side, by the Ministry of proclamation that begins in verse four, the temptation, blink, and you'll miss it.

In Genesis, today, we have the end of Noah's story, the flood is over. And God promises that never again will the judgment of our wickedness utterly destroy us. And in first, Peter, we hear that it's even better than that. For those of us in the ark of the church, the flood of God's judgment is actually a flood of mercy, a flood of preserving baptismal grace. In short, what we hear today on the first Sunday of Lent, challenges us to see our Lenten observance, focus not so much on spiritual disciplines, but on matters of identity, on who Jesus is, and on who we are in Him.

Identity I think, is what Lent is really about. Many of you know that in my day job, I work with the dying at Methodist Medical Center in Oak Ridge. At any given point, I have 20 patients in some stage of passing away. It is a rare day, that I don't say goodbye to at least one person. And it's a gift, a hard gift. But such a gift. I wanted to share something I've become aware of in working with the dying: they never ask me for a new spiritual book to read. The dying never take up fasting, or journaling, or suddenly want to start a practice of contemplative prayer. What the dying want is to tell their story. And for those who have the courage to face it, after a visit or two, inevitably, their story is a sad one. It's a story of loss of betrayal, the betrayal of others, and yes, their own betrayal. It's a story of compromised principles and values. And the shame and guilt that goes with it. In short, most people even if they wouldn't use the word when they're dying, want to confess their sin.

Sometimes the Focus starts out on others. Well, my Great Aunt Tilly never loved me and I was never her favorite. And that just set me on a bad path. But eventually, slowly, inevitably, the story eventually becomes I did that. I did that. I did. And when they are finally done when the anguish and the pain and the shame has all come out when the tears have been shared and there is nothing more to be said. That's when in the silence so often they finally make eye contact with me. And the unspoken question always seems to be, "Does God still accept me? Do you?" Why do I share this because we are dying to beloved, some with disease but all of us with the passage of time and the heavy, heavy weight of our sins.

Now let me be clear, there's nothing wrong with spiritual practices per se. If some pattern of prayer or devotional reading or fasting helps you live your life better go for it. You wouldn't join a gym. Unless you wanted to exercise. You wouldn't go to Neyland Stadium without wearing some orange. Christianity is a way of life. But let me be clear, the fact that Christianity is a way of life does not mean that we take on spiritual disciplines for some kind of sin management program. Our problem is not that we need to manage our sins, we don't need management, we are dying. We need resurrection. Good news is that's the business Jesus is in. And so we can't let our spiritual disciplines our performance distract us from our fundamental Lenten observance. As sinners saved by grace, spiritual practices are not the main thing. The main thing is the question of our identity for fallen and redeemed in the flesh, and in Christ.

The Orthodox theologian for Fredrica Matthews-Green reminds us that at the heart of repentance, repentance is this repentance is insight. John Calvin reminds us that true and solid wisdom consists almost entirely of two parts, knowledge of God, and knowledge of ourselves. What my dying patients demonstrate is what the Lenten liturgy is designed to invite us to. We came into church today, full of sin and brokenness, exhausted, full of shame and guilt. We are villains and victims simultaneously. And if we are willing, if we're willing to feel the weight of sin and death in our very being, if we're tired and

sick and scared, if we're given space to tell our story of grief and wickedness and pains caused and received, what we have the opportunity to do that, not in the narrative. But through confession. Looking up, we hear the words of absolution looking further still we see his body and his blood given for us, given in place of us. The answer to the question is clear. Does God still accept you? Yes. Unconditionally, yes. That is the promise of our baptismal identity. In the words of our Collect today, each one of us can find here, a God who is mighty to save a God who's about the business of resurrection.

In her book, *Impossible Creatures*, children's author Catherine Rundell, writes the following. "Some sentences have the power to change everything. Now there are the usual suspects. I love you. I hate you. I'm pregnant. I'm done. I, I regret to tell you that this country is at war. But the words with the greatest power to create both havoc and marvels are these. I need help." Beloved, if you're like me this morning, and you just can't, you just can't today, you just can't this week, you just can't this lifetime. If your best efforts are insufficient, and you sell them even give your best efforts. If you have the insight, to recognize that fundamentally and I say this in all love, fundamentally you yourself are your own greatest problem, your own greatest obstacle. Well, then I invite you in the name of the church, to the observance of a holy Lent in the confession of five honest words. She hits us. I need your help. And I invite you as well. To hear our prodigal embracing savior. Say what you most need to hear your sins are forgiven.