

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we read from the gospel about Jesus going into the wilderness where he fasts and prays for 40 days and nights and is tempted by devil. Always before I've preached about the wilderness as a metaphor and a real place. I've talked about temptations - as things that vie for our attention and lure our hearts away from God. I've talked about these three temptations before Jesus and how Jesus relies on scripture to say no, to turn away. That's how it reads in Mark and Luke - that Jesus is tempted the whole 40 days. But this isn't what Matthew says and here is the part I've missed. Or glossed over. Or collapsed into the temptations. According to Matthew, before the temptations, Jesus spends 40 days fasting. In the Bible, the word 40 means a really long time. Noah, family, and animals were on the ark 40 days. The Israelites trudged through the wilderness 40 years. Moses was up on Mt. Sinai 40 days. The spies took 40 days to scope out the promised land. Goliath menaced the Israelites 40 days before David threw that first stone. The number 40 isn't literal, or it could be but that's not the point. The point is that in each circumstance, it takes a long time to get ready to face whatever is going to happen next. Jesus is in the wilderness where he fasts for a long time. Remember what's happened up to this point. Jesus has accepted his call to ministry. Through his baptism, Jesus publicly steps forward as God's beloved. Then the next thing Jesus does is go away for a long time to fast.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline. It means to discipline our spirit. To focus, strengthen, deepen our spirit. Disciplines seeks to mature a person. Earlier this week a friend who is a weight lifter asked another minister who is a cyclist, what could I do to knock a minute off my mile? Without hesitation the cyclist said, "Intervals. They hurt and they work." Fasting is like intervals. It's denying ourselves of something we like and even enjoy so that we can give attention and time to discipline our spirit. Fasting from entertainment and social media gives us time to read, pray, study. Fasting from certain kinds of food and drink reminds us that our true hunger is spiritual and it is for God. Fasting from something doesn't mean that the entertainment or social media or food is bad. It only means that we are doing something extra - a set of intervals - to take a giant step forward, to strengthen our spirit. It takes intention, hard work, focus. It takes community we trust who will hold us accountable. To mature as a Christian, to be able to face the temptations and stay faithful to God, our neighbor, and ourselves, we have to fast and pray.

The important part about fasting or any spiritual discipline - prayer, study, Holy Communion, service to name only a few - the important part about fasting is to remember that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual change. We fast to strengthen our spirit. If our spirit isn't getting stronger, then we need guidance in our fast. Back to the bicycle example. If you're doing intervals and time isn't coming off your mile, you need a coach or a friend to help you figure out what's going on. The point of giving up something for Lent is so that our inner spirit will strengthen. I love what Pope Francis said a couple years ago on Ash Wednesday. When explaining Lent and spiritual disciplines, the Pope said, "fasting must never become superficial." Quoting the 4th c mystic John Chrysostom, "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others." According to the Pope, "No matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great." The Pope isn't down playing the importance of sacrifice during Lent. Instead he is reminding us that outward spiritual practices are intended to change our inner heart. Another Pope Francis saying. "I distrust charity that costs nothing and does not hurt." In his message, the Pope asks Christians to give up indifference for Lent. "Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians." The Pope calls this, "the globalization of indifference." Here is what is so incredible. The Pope wrote this for Ash Wednesday in 2015. His words are even more important this Lent. The Pope cautions that "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."

(Pope Francis' Guide to lent; What you should give up this year. Time Feb. 18, 2015 by Christopher J. Hale)

Jesus claims his public ministry, then goes into the wilderness where he fasts for a long time. Then, when Jesus' spirit is strong and his body is famished, temptation assails him. Each time the tempter makes an offer, Jesus quotes a scripture and says, "no." His spirit was strong.

This morning, as we prayer the litany of penance and also during the Eucharist, you are given times of silence to reflect and choose. What is your Lenten fast? What is your outward and visible action to strengthen your inner spiritual heart?

Temptations don't stop coming. Jesus is tempted throughout his ministry. It's the same for us. What we can do is prepare our spirits, allow our spirits to be strengthened. The pope says that "when we fast from indifference we can feast on love."

This morning, as you receive the bread and the cup, may you be nourished by God's unconditional love for you. May you be nourished for the journey ahead.