

Deal or No Deal
Sermon delivered 2-21-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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LENT

Five days ago, on Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten Journey to Easter morning. This ancient ritual of 40 days of fasting and prayer prepared candidates for baptism at the Easter Vigil Service. We no longer follow such a rite or practice. Lent is not in Holy Scripture. However, these 40 days can be a time for recovery and rediscovery; recovery of who we are as a people of God, and rediscovery of our life in God. Is there any value in the practice of fasting and prayer for us in the modern world? What difference does it make to “give up” chocolate, television, or the things we enjoy? Many of us probably don’t even think of giving something up. These 40 days can turn your life around if you want to be turned.

SPRING CLEANING

The word Lent, the name of the season for these 40 days, comes from the Kings English meaning “spring”. Forty days of spring-cleaning for the soul. This can be a time to defrag our cluttered lives with a discipline of mindfulness and intentionality. Many of us will soon be doing spring-cleaning in our yards, homes, and garages. We know the value of getting rid of the old weeds, dirt, and clutter. Lent is the time of year we return to recovery and rediscovery.

CHOICE

What are we recovering and rediscovering? We become mindful of who we are as Christians and the Body of Christ. We become so acclimated to the systems we live in, our everyday routine, that they seem normal. Your baptism sets you apart, you are different. The systems of the world continue to practice an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth, but you are called to love your enemies. If you choose these 40 days to pray and fast, know this isn’t for the purpose of making God love you more. This isn’t a form of penance, but a way of creating space for God in your lives. If you choose to pass, that is okay, maybe next year.

THE WILDERNESS

Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tested. We know what the wilderness is like in our own experiences. I am not talking about going up to Bogus or McCall skiing and hiking. I am speaking of the wilderness where chaos, disorder and confusion exist in your life. Waiting for the test results to come back, wondering if there is going to be enough money this month, confused by what is expected of you, or wondering if your life and living makes any difference. Most of us try to avoid the wilderness of our lives. Most of us fail at the avoidance. Sooner or later we find ourselves in the middle of the wilderness of our lives with a cell phone but no signal, a GPS but no bars, and wondering what to do. Moments like these can be transformational.

DEAL OR NO DEAL

Jesus found himself in such a place. No food, power, or protection and the evil one playing “Deal or No Deal”. Jesus said “No Deal” to turning a single stone into “Wonder bread”. He said “No Deal” to power or protection. But, wait, STOP! Can you relate to this drama? As Culpepper (*New Interpreters Bible*) says, “The devil does not appear to us and transport us from place to place. The temptations most of us experience are not between good and bad, but often between bad and worse” (the lesser of two evils). Are we only tempted when we are at the bottom and have lost it all? Temptations seem to be universal whether you are in the pew, on the golf course with Tiger, or playing Let’s Make a Deal with Madoff. Why the test? Why is God testing Jesus? Why is God testing us? What is the purpose of all of this?

TESTING 1,2,3

Testing is prevalent through Holy Scripture. God tested Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice his son. God tested the children of Israel when they took the forty-year journey to the promised land of milk and honey. Why? The Old Testament says, “to humble... and to do you good” *Deut. 8*, and, to “know if you love the Lord” or the goodies he provides more. *Deut 13*. I may not like this love test, but this is the reason given for the test/temptation.

A CHOICE

The devil cannot force Jesus to choose “Deal”. He can only ask, “Deal or No Deal?” The serpent couldn’t make Eve take a bite of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. The temptation happens not by force, but by making the argument convincing, rationalizing, and justifying. We may know this, but our knowledge does not protect us, or immunize us from the evil that is present in our hearts. We usually cannot see it in ourselves. Often, we can see it clearly in others, like the Crusaders saw it in the Jews and the Muslims. Lent is a time to look at the “Deals” we have made, and decide if this is the time to repent and change course and the direction in our lives. As Dr. Phil would ask “So, how is that working for you?”

YOUR MISSION...

Lent is a time, like the old Mission Impossible shows used to open, “Your mission, should you choose to accept it.” Lent is your mission. The next Forty Days of prayer and fasting, should you choose to accept it. First of all, what is the value of doing something like this? Would it be a fair assumption to say we all want to be whole, complete, fulfilled, loved and loving, at one with God? We all try different paths to make this happen. Some of us may be here this morning with an unconscious agenda, believing that coming here will help take away all the problems we are facing; being here this morning will make our health better, job secure, or at least some bargaining chips with the Holy. These Forty Days of Lent invite us into a healthy way of facing our demons and dragons by taking something out our lives, it doesn’t matter what it is... Fasting is disconnecting from the tube, food, and painkillers, things we use to fill the voids in our lives. The moment you fast you enter into the land of temptations.

A GOOD IDEA

This may sound like a good idea, and easy to do today, but next Wednesday a little voice, sound familiar, will say, "What does Collins know about your life?" It is easy for him to stand up there and talk. Talk is cheap". For the next Forty Days, if you choose to "accept this mission" you will learn surprising things about yourself, the power of the habits in your life. You may say, it is just a habit. Most of what we do comes out of habits, good or bad. Now for a moment, imagine you have chosen to accept this mission, just take a guess, what you are going to do for the next 40 Days? Barbara Brown Taylor helped me to understand what happens when we accept such a mission. Next Wednesday, the voices in your head are going to start speaking to you saying, "I warned you what would happen when you give up your pacifier." Are you hungry? Does the Lord really want you to do this stupid test? If the Lord loves you, why would he put you to the test? You are going to go nuts if you don't get some candy, cookies, booze in this body?

FILLING THE HOLE

Some people take on the big test, like giving up their cell phones for Lent, others avoid the malls, others television. It takes Forty Days. If you could put down your cell phone and then hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Someone said, "Churches would be full and ATT would be broke." Lent is not about creating a black hole in your life for Forty Days. When you take something out of your life, something else will come in to fill the void. What would that be for your life? What creative and new thing would God put into your life, bringing you to wholeness? Might it be difficult? Probably. Addiction is filling the hole in soul that only God can fill. This is why prayer is added to fasting. This is not about will-power, but about the power of God in your life. So, what could one do for Forty Days? Read the Psalms. *Psalms for Praying*, translated by Nan Merrill, is written in our language and experience. Read the Bible as a Novel over Forty Days. Take walks as a time to talk to God. Turn the cell, the Internet, and the computer off at different times in the day to be in the silence with God by "being still and knowing" that he is present.

REPLACING

Okay, so you want me to put my money where my mouth is... I am an addict. Unlike you, I am addicted to the computer in the morning. Even before making the first cup of coffee I flip on the computer, master of the universe. What did I miss last night after I turned it off? (not much). However, without the advent of the computer and Internet in my life, I would do my office morning prayer. Now, I do it afterwards and noticed over the years how it has become shorter and shorter because of my time on the Internet in the morning. Forty Days focused not on giving up the internet in the morning, but going back to morning prayer as the first thing in the day.

AN INVITATION

I invite you to consider these Forty Days as a time of transformation, a time in your life where the Spirit can lead you into the wilderness, as a place where God can do a new thing. May these next Forty Days, this ancient ritual, transform to the point of knowing some parts of your life can only be filled by the presence of God.