

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2023

Lectionary Year A: Matthew 4:1-11

Many Christians across the United States who observe Ash Wednesday didn't exactly have the smoothest beginning to the season of Lent; indeed, many stayed at home (clergy included) instead of observing the traditional rituals of confession of sin and imposition of ashes. According to a story released by the Episcopal News Service, the recent Ash Wednesday blizzard brought back memories -- for some -- of the cessation of public worship services in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Fortunately, the after-effects of a blizzard have a considerably smaller impact on the Church's life together, by comparison.

Instead of a blizzard, many of us in Indiana got what seemed to be, at times, a February monsoon, and, if I heard correctly, there were a few rumbles of thunder. Strange, yes, but not something that would lead me to cancel church!

Regardless of whether or not Ash Wednesday was formally observed in 2023, the signs and themes of that day -- remembering our mortality, confessing our sin, and beginning the Lenten walk to the cross -- are here among us today. The story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness from the Gospel of Matthew is most appropriately included in today's readings; Lent is a period of forty days in which we "go into the wilderness" to examine our weaknesses, temptations, faults, and shortcomings. But, unlike Jesus, who resists temptation with every instance, we're not always quite as good!

The wilderness experience of Jesus echoes, too, the concept of Lenten sacrifice

among Christians. Jesus didn't spend forty days at a luxury resort, and neither should we! (A weekend sometime around Spring Break might be acceptable if we behave ourselves...) But in all seriousness, the way in which Lent seeks to be a discipline -- if you're comfortable with that word -- is an effective reminder of what it means to be a Christian, particularly as sacrificing of ourselves brings us closer to the sacrifice of Christ. And surely, Christ's pattern of sacrifice begins with his forty days in the wilderness and concludes on the cross.

Remember, though, that it is possible to be drawn nearer to his sacrifice (which is a good thing), but it is never possible to duplicate his sacrifice!

As I hinted at earlier -- and as I stated explicitly on Ash Wednesday -- Lenten sacrifice among Christians, in the form of "giving something up for Lent," is a popular practice in both the Catholic and Protestant worlds, although those who aren't Catholic are usually newer to this discipline. I have known people who cease eating solid food altogether, thus practicing a genuine Lenten fast, while others have given up things that may have, perhaps, given them some trouble -- cursing, drinking, and, more recently, social media (although social media has become increasingly harder to do without). And then there are those who famously give up things that aren't much of a sacrifice for them...like someone who doesn't like brussels sprouts giving up brussels sprouts.

Probably not sufficient to capture the spirit of Lenten sacrifice!

As we look to the things with which Jesus was tempted -- food, invincibility, omnipotence -- we might look to our own temptations during these next forty days; it may be one of our bad habits, one of our indulgences, or something that frustrates or angers us. Speaking personally, I am becoming increasingly intrigued

by some of the behavioral and psychological approaches one can apply to a Lenten sacrifice. So, instead of giving up social media, how about giving up anger? That may be more challenging, for sure, but it also could be more worthwhile, especially as social media intersects so much with our professional lives...and can't be jettisoned quite so easily for some. And, when looking at what to blame for society's deterioration, how much responsibility are we willing to accept for how we behave when we're at the keyboard, and how much are we going to say "it's because of Facebook's algorithms"?

We know that, when Jesus overcame the devil's temptation in the wilderness, he gave us hope for overcoming some of our temptations. And temptations are almost always any number of classic shams -- instant gratification, immediate results, schemes that promise more than they can deliver, or junk food pastimes at the all-you-can-eat buffet of unfulfilling activities. (Yes, social media may, at times, fall into that category.) But I'd like to offer hope that it is possible to avoid falling into the same traps over and over again; look to Jesus and see someone who was able to put the devil in his place! Most certainly, we are not Jesus, but, by virtue of his example and inspiration, we will hear him urging us to carry on in the knowledge that he is on our side.

And even if we are not able to overcome temptation entirely, may we at least learn, with Jesus' help, to endure through it...

Let us, therefore, see Lent as a time of hope as well as a time of sacrifice, as hope is the one thing that Jesus offers us as we spend a few weeks in the wilderness. Those who criticize Christianity for burdening its believers with sacrifice (and sacrifice only) are missing a big chunk of our story. As a philosophy major in college, I studied Friedrich Nietzsche, whose criticisms of Christianity

are both numerous and famous. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche wrote: "The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice: the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at the same time subjection, a self-derision, and self-mutilation."

Certainly, there are Christians for whom life isn't too far from Nietzsche's description of Christianity; some monastic groups and austere sects of Protestantism spring to mind! But when we take into account the big picture -- of the whole Christian message and story -- we find its beautiful promise of freedom from the things that trouble us, and we find that Jesus is the sacrifice that brings us this freedom...even to the point that sacrifice of ourselves is not necessary for salvation. The only reason we offer any sort of sacrifice is because Jesus loves us and we find it right and salutary to give something back to him. Indeed, we don't literally crucify ourselves, because Jesus was already crucified for us. We know freedom because God saw our bondage to instant gratification, immediate results, schemes that promised more than they could deliver, and junk food pastimes at the all-you-can-eat buffet of unfulfilling activities.

And God wanted to do something about it!

So he gave us Jesus, who was the perfect sacrifice that we could never duplicate, and the conqueror of temptation who gives us hope in the midst of our own temptations. During this Lenten season, if we could be drawn a little closer to Jesus, we might find that, through his temptations, trials, and horrific death, he gives us a life that can be free of those things -- if not always in this life, for sure in the next...

Amen.