

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Year C
February, 25, 2007
Fr. Jim Cook

Awaiting Lent.

Our opening hymn this morning was that great Lenten hymn *Forty Days and Forty Nights*. We also sang it on Ash Wednesday. While singing it, I remembered that there was a film by the same name released in 2002. One of the promo spots described the film in these words:

Matt Sullivan's last big relationship ended in disaster, and ever since his heart's been aching, and his commitment's been lacking. Then came Lent, that time of year when everybody gives something up. That's when Matt, a guy who's never been able to finish anything, decides to go where no man's gone before, and make a vow: No sex, whatsoever. For 40 straight days. And nights.

I'm fairly confident that Vicki, our excellent music director, was unaware of the interesting coincidence when she chose that hymn for this week.

Last evening, Peggy and I were at something of a "coming out" party, to meet the fiancé of one of our parishioners. At some point during the evening, Ed Perkins told me this joke, which I adapted for Lent. (Actually, I think Bob Wrede told me the same joke several years ago, but Ed did his part to remind me.) It goes something like this:

A man walks into a bar and asks the bartender to set up three pints of ale. When the bartender asked why the man wanted all three all at the same time, rather than simply one after another, the man explained. "I have two brothers and we're very close, but live quite far apart. The three of us agreed that, on this very day each year, each would go into a bar, order three pints of ale, and salute the others with a pint of ale." Alright, the bartender thought, whatever. This practice continued for several years until, one year, the man came into the bar and asked the bartender to set up only two pints of ale. Not being a dummy, the bartender immediately understood the implications of this change in practice. Placing the two pints in front of the man, the bartender began to offer his condolences on the loss of one of the man's brothers. "Ah, no," the man explained, "my brothers are fine. It's just that Ash Wednesday was last week, and, unlike my brothers, I've decided to give up drinking for Lent."

So, there it is: It's the first Sunday in Lent, I'm still on the first page of my sermon, and I've already mentioned sex and liquor. Is there anyone here not yet offended? However, I do have a reason for these two anecdotes: the movie, *40 Days and 40 Nights*, and the joke capture the heart of what many of us feel when it comes to Lent: It's a season of deprivation. No chocolate, for some, no red meat for others. No fun for anyone.

And it all begins on Ash Wednesday, with ashes smeared on our heads, and continues through Good Friday, when we sit and hear about a man dying on the cross. And if you want to make yourself feel really bad, really guilty, you can rent Mel Gibson's epic film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which recreates in horrifying detail, the crucifixion of Jesus. (I understand it's been recently re-released, with an additional eighteen minutes of never-before-seen footage. I can hardly wait!)

But that's the story of Good Friday, the end of Jesus's life and ministry on earth. Today, we are still at the beginning of Lent, still at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. And the work that Jesus has come to do, begins with him spending forty days and nights in the wilderness. He hasn't preached a sermon yet, or performed a miracle; he hasn't even assembled his core group of disciples. He's simply alone in the wilderness, getting ready to do the work of God. And as much as anything, it's a time of waiting. And like a pregnancy – that inevitable and almost painful watching and waiting for something to be born – it's a mixture of anticipation and struggle. But what will be born here is the kingdom of God, and what happens during that time of waiting, will determine what sort of kingdom it will be.

Like all who have to wait, there's a temptation to rush things. To take a short cut. To get things over and done with early. To begin already what we perceive to be the real business of life. And that was probably as much a temptation for Jesus, as it is for us.

Three times, during his sojourn in the wilderness, the temptations came. They were not so much personal things, that would bring him glory, as much as they were quick and easy ways to achieve what he had been sent to do. Three times he struggled with a short cut to complete his work. Three times he was forced to question what it meant to be going about God's business, as he waited there in the desert wilderness.

The first temptation sounded so practical. Look around you, Jesus. There's nothing but bare earth and stones; nothing good for anyone or anything. But just imagine if those stones were loaves of bread. There would be lots of bread, and free for the taking. There would be no hunger anymore. People would be fed. And they would hail you as the great provider. Imagine it: bread for the world. Just turn these stones into bread.

“But,” Jesus says, “we do not live by bread alone.”

And then there was the second temptation. The Judean desert wilderness is wild, full of high cliffs and deep gullies. The view from the heights can be astounding. Stand up high, Jesus, and imagine that all this is yours. There would be no more battles. No more wars. Just one ruler. And with you on top, it would be a benevolent empire. All you have to do is simply acknowledge the power of evil ruling over all. It's an attractive offer, isn't it? Take political control, free the oppressed. As long as the end is good, it doesn't matter how you get there, does it? It's just a little compromise; surely a peace like that is worth any price. Imagine it: freedom and peace. All you need do is just give in to evil for a moment.

“But,” Jesus says, “worship God, and serve him only.”

Jerusalem is closer to the desert than you might think. Satellite photographs will show you the city, and then the mount of Olives, and just beyond is the wilderness of the desert. The great temple in Jerusalem rises high above the desolation; it’s a sign of hope for exhausted travelers. Stand up there, Jesus, high above the city. Take a step too far, lean forward a little, let the dizziness take hold. And fall. But don’t worry, God won’t desert you. And if you’re really the one who is to come, there will be no broken body, just a swoop of angels catching you up at the last moment. And, there’ll be proof positive that God really does do miracles. There will be no doubts in anyone’s mind. Every one will believe. Imagine it: undisputable religious proof. It’s just a small step away. Just one.

“But,” Jesus says, “do not put God to the test.”

And they were over. Three temptations. But they were not temptations to do wrong, like we normally think of temptations. They weren’t even temptations to be self-indulgent. Rather, they were temptations to do good, to make the world a simpler, more straightforward, and better place. Really, they were only temptations to rush things a bit. To take some short cuts. To get things over and done with early, and begin with the real business of life.

Except for the cost. Except for the small print, at the bottom of all these temptations. Even though each was a temptation to do good, and each one was doable, but to give in to any of them, would mean that Jesus had to abandon the way that had been set before him. Taking the easy way, instead of the way of suffering, instead of the way of death, would mean turning his back on God, even while he was trying to do the work of God. But it doesn’t work. Jesus knew it as well as we do. Sometimes there is no easy way.

The Cook family recently came into possession of a second dog, a Welsh Terrier we call Jack. And because he’s still a puppy, he’s all over the place and he loves getting into your face. Literally. Now, during the evenings, when we’d all rather be relaxing, Jack wants just the opposite. And we are always presented with two options, with regard his untoward behavior. We could simply return Jack to his crate. That would certainly keep him out from underfoot, but what’s the point in having a dog, if you keep him locked away all the time? The second option is to take the time to train him to behave appropriately. And it does take time. And patience. The temptation is the crate. But the work set before us, as dog owners, is to take the time, and put forth the effort, to making Jack another member of our family. And we’re all trusting that, in the end, it will prove to be time well-spent, and we will have gained a delightful addition to our family.

If Jesus had taken the easy way, the way of the temptations, there might have been bread for everyone to eat; there might have been peace on the earth; there might even have been

unassailable and irrefutable proof for faith. But we'd still be stuck with our own inherent tendency to do things that are not in our best interests. We'd still be stuck with the certainty of death, but with no promise of anything beyond it. And we'd be stuck with God up there in his heaven, and us here on earth with no way of bridging the gap.

Fortunately, we're not in that state, because Jesus turned his back on easy bread, on easy power, and on easy faith, and instead walked back into the desert to wait, and to prepare for the work that God had set for him to do.

And that decision would eventually lead him on a journey through Israel. It was a journey of preaching and healing and loving. It was a journey of friendship and opposition. It was a journey that would eventually lead him to Jerusalem one Passover week, to an upper room where he shared a meal with his friends, to a cross on which he would die, and then to a tomb where his body would lie. And then, against every expectation, it led him out of that very same tomb, to life. It was a long journey for Jesus. And we have a journey ahead of us, too. Lent is just the beginning. And for the next six weeks, we will join Jesus in his desert waiting.

A lot of people would like to skip Lent, and go straight to Easter. Back to chocolate and red meat, and back to a life of fun and self-indulgence. But, you know, if we do that, it's very likely that we'll get stuck. Stuck in the habits that keep sneaking up on us, and dragging us down. Stuck in the ever-present craziness that demands we fill every second of our day with busyness. Stuck in a life that has no room for the things that are most important. Stuck, in other words, in a life that leaves no room for God.

Lent is a gift, my friends. It might not seem like it, because we don't like waiting. But Lent is a time when we are reminded that we need to pay attention not just to our lives, but also to our souls. It's a time when we can reasonably make excuses to not over-indulge, to listen to our bodies, and eat more simply. It's a time when we can look at our habits, and question whether they really reflect who we are and what we really value. It's a time when we can think carefully about our priorities, and choose what we want, what we need to do. It's a season when we can take a little extra time to pray, and listen to God. Lent is a gift, a gift of time.

And so, in this Lenten time we sit with Jesus out in the wilderness, preparing, and waiting. Waiting to see God at work in the world. Waiting to see where God will lead us. Waiting, and not rushing into doing things the easy way. And waiting, especially, for resurrection.

But for now, there is just the waiting.