Slow Down

February 26, 2023, Lent I

Matthew 4: 1-11 Russell Mitchell-Walker

A few years ago, as we were in the season of Lent during the beginning of the pandemic, many church leaders talked about it being the Lentiest Lent ever. I think they meant by this that as Lent reflects the time of Jesus in the desert, a wilderness experience, that we had a pretty strong wilderness experience that year. As we move through the third year of the pandemic, while things are not as bad as the first two years, we also just marked the one year anniversary of the horrible Russian war against Ukraine; we continue to see and hear about the devastation from the earthquake in Turkey and Syria; locally, a city council seems to have no interest in ending houselessness and we continue to be in a climate emergency that has yet to be seen as an emergency by our leaders. So life this Lent, is still pretty Lenty! There is much to be concerned about, which can create much anxiety about the unknowns, and make life difficult as we also navigate the rising costs due to supply chain challenges.

Lent can provide us with an opportunity slow down, to take time to reflect on our lives, pray and learn, to deepen our relationship with God, as we seek to follow Jesus more faithfully, and make sense of the world. Jesus was in the desert for 40 days, discerning the future of his ministry and mission. While there he was tempted in three areas that his ministry could be about: power and control - ruling over all; security – keeping himself safe; and sustenance – providing for his own needs. He refused all these because he knew his ministry needed to be about serving God and serving others. Each of these other things can turn us away from God. These three elements can be seen as reflecting three elements of Lent – Prayer, fasting and almsgiving (giving to charity). Prayer can help us let go of the desire to have power or control over our lives or help us through the fact that we don’t have control over much of what can happen in our lives. Fasting can help us appreciate what we have, that too many others don’t have, and lead us to more healthy living. Almsgiving, recognizes that while we may be comfortable and secure, it is important to work toward and give so others can be comfortable and secure. Lent, is an opportunity for self reflection, self examination, for deepening our faith and relationship with God, to ground ourselves in that Essence of love and compassion. It is a time of being open to God and what God wants for us in our lives. It traditionally is a time of giving up something (that is the fasting element). It can also be a time of taking on something. It can be a time of learning, reflection and challenge.

This year we have more opportunities for gathering together to reflect and experience God. We return to offering our weekly Lenten services on Wednesday, this year shared with Immanuel Anglican and Our Saviours Lutheran, as well as Bread of Life and the Anglican Diocese. This will begin with a soup and bun fellowship before each service at the host church. The Anglican Diocese, through priest Michael Bruce, is offering an All ages Lenten Service on Sunday evenings, that will engage the senses. Stewart Miller of Bread of Life, and myself will each be participating in one of these services as well. On Sunday March 12, we will have a shared service with Bread of Life at 10am that will be a healing service with prayers and anointing of oil for those who wish. I hope you will support and attend some of these extra services to help you engage in this season.

As we move into this Lenten Season, I wish to close with this story, called *Somewhat Faster,* from Nenshu and the Tiger, Parables of Life and Death, by Martin Bell.

“I’m going to fast”, he said.

“Have you tried to slow down?” I inquired kindly.

He looked at me deliberately. There was an attitude of charitable disbelief in his glance. “I’m going to *fast*.” He repeated, pronouncing each word carefully, “not *too* fast.”

“Oh”. I managed a nervous smile. My nose itched.

He hadn’t stopped staring at me.

“Listen, clucky, you know, *fast*, like in not eating.

“Holy cow!” I said with genuine admiration. “Boy that’s great. How long do you think you can keep it up?” His remark had brought me to the edge of my chair. I became highly animated.

“Forty days,” was his matter of fact reply.

“You’re putting me on.”

“No, hell no.”

A sense of awe came over me. My eyes filled with tears

“You’ll starve.” He was going to starve himself. I had never respected a man so much.

“Well,” he blushed modestly, “it won’t kill me, you know”

I didn’t know. I wondered if I would have that kind of composure with death so near.
“Grapefruit juice,” he whispered.

With alarm, I realized it had begun already. He was hallucinating.

“Grapefruit juice,” he said again. “That’s what I’m giving up. It won’t kill me to go for forty days without grapefruit juice, for heaven’s sake!”

My disappointment was keen—almost unbearable.

“What the hell’s the matter with you, clucky?”

“O, nothing,” I mumbled. My shoulders slumped. I sat back and shoved both hands into my pockets.

“How about you? Aren’t you going to fast?”

“I suppose so,” I nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I am going too fast.”