

Emerging from the Desert

Lent Bible Study 2021

It is common to associate Lent with sacrifice. Since March of 2020, we have all been living through a period of living without. As a people, as a nation, and as a church, we have been deprived of some of the essential parts of human connection for almost a full year. Many people feel more isolated and many in our community suffer from increased insecurity because of the pandemic.

Perhaps this Lent is not a time to consider what other things we can go without. Even though there may be many months to go, let us gather to look toward a time when we will be able to come together, to worship in-person, and to live in communion in one another's presence. And let us use this Lent to help us strengthen the ways that we live together in community and in Christ.

Using the story of Jesus' journey into the wilderness and his temptation by Satan, we will focus with fresh eyes on topics such as:

- How Jesus' example can help us cope with temptation.
- How Jesus prepared himself for the mission after the desert.
- How we might look at fasting and sacrifice from a different perspective.

Schedule:

- Each week we will gather on Wednesday evening at 6:30 pm to share a meal virtually.
- At 7:00 pm there will be a short discussion of that week's study material followed by open conversation. This conversation will prepare us for a time of prayer and worship led by Pastor Steve.

A word of prayer before we get started:

I pray that anyone participating in this Bible study hear the Gospel of the Lord, that it take hold in their hearts, and that it help them to embrace the stranger, the marginalized, their neighbors, their families, and their church with renewed love and strength.

Grace and Peace.

Kevin Compton

Week 1. Gospel of Justice

Welcome to the first week of our Lent Bible Study for 2021, "Emerging from the Desert." This week let's take some time to discuss fasting. What is fasting? What is its purpose?

After watching the video from The Bible Project, please proceed with the study material. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A14THPoc4-4&t=68s>

You can find fasting all throughout the Bible. This prolonged period of going without food or water is very common for penance or as trial of faith. Moses and Elijah both fasted for 40 days, just like Jesus. For instance, Moses did so on top of Mount Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments from God.

He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Exodus 34:28, NRSV)

But there are many voices in the Bible. Here are some beautiful words from the prophet Isaiah:

*Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
(Isaiah 58:3-9, NRSV)*

And here is the prophet Micah's very famous answer to fasting and sacrifice. After listing several impossibly large sacrifices (like ten thousand rivers of oil) that might satisfy God, he says:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*
(Micah 6:8, NRSV)

And here is what one of the important early Christian church pastors had to say:

No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, 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.
(John Chrysostom, 5th century church Father)

Pope Francis offered these as ideas for fasting:

Do you want to fast this Lent?

- *Fast from hurting words and say kind words.*
- *Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.*
- *Fast from anger and be filled with patience.*
- *Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.*
- *Fast from worries and trust in God.*
- *Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.*
- *Fast from pressures and be prayerful.*
- *Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.*
- *Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.*
- *Fast from grudges and be reconciled.*
- *Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.*

Discussion Questions:

- What is the purpose of a fast?
- When you are being intentional about denying yourself bitterness or pessimism, is that a fast? In what way?
- What about this idea of treating people differently or reconciling with someone? Are they different than the examples in the previous question? Can they have similar effects?
- Is a fast a temporary thing? Consider Micah 6:8 in your answer.

Week 2: Exile

There is a part of everyone that can understand this feeling of exile, of being isolated or apart from home. While you watch this video, please think about the ways that Christ works in your life to create unity with other people and a connection to the greater story of God's people.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSua9_WhQFE

Verses for consideration:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
(Deuteronomy 10:19, NRSV)

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:13-17, NRSV)

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

*'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.'*

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children." (Luke 7:31-35, NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:1-7, NRSV)

Discussion Questions:

- Are there parts of your life that feel like exile? You do not have to name them, only consider them and share as you feel comfortable.
- Are there parts of our society and our culture that feel like exile?
- What feelings did Jesus express about people exiled from normal society?
- What actions did Jesus take regarding people who had no home? What about people who do not feel rejected by society?
- What did Jesus do about people who were shunned by society?
- In the video we hear that, "As Jesus' followers committed themselves to him, they discovered this new way of being human." What is this new way?
- How can believing and living differently from the world around us bring people closer to one another and closer to Jesus?

Week 3: Gospel of the Beloved

This week, we will look at a sermon from Henri Nouwen. Kevin will read the sermon aloud with a slide presentation.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic Monk. He was a prolific writer, professor, and public theologian. He passed away in 1996, having written over 30 books about social justice, pastoral care, death and dying, and living a meaningful life.

If you would like to listen to the sermon in advance, the best place is on the Henri Nouwen Society's "Now & Then" podcast, June 25, 2020; "Being the Beloved" Part One, available on iTunes or your favorite podcast server.

The sermon is also available on YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trG7Oh_PopM&t=867s

We are not using the video or the podcast due to the quality of the recordings available (They do not play well with ZOOM).

Verses for consideration:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV)

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24, NRSV)

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. (John 15:4, NRSV)

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
(Psalm 139: 13-15)*

*Thus says the Lord:
The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*
(Jeremiah 31:1-3, NRSV)

Discussion Questions:

- Are you the beloved child of God? Can you pinpoint evidence in the above verses or in the creation story?
- Does being beloved create a different perspective on your relationship with God?
- What can you do to foster “belovedness” in your own heart?
- What can living as the beloved child of God do for the people around you?
- Does being the beloved child of God come with responsibility?

Week 4: The Test

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR4AT0LMJ5c>

Let's discuss the temptations that Satan put to Jesus during his time in the desert.

Matthew 4:1-17

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Things to consider:

Jesus was just baptized by John the Baptist. In the verses we will see all three parts of the trinity present at the same time, in unity, and affirmed him.

Jesus was then led into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tested.

Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights before Satan approaches him.

The Temptation of Jesus and His Responses:

1) When tempting Jesus, Satan uses scriptural passages, but uses them selectively. For instance, when he tries to convince Jesus to throw himself from the top of the temple, he quotes Psalm 91:11-12:

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*

But he takes the quote out of context. In Psalm 91:1, we see that this verse is intended for:

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty*

In reality, they were on top of the Temple already, standing above the *Holy of Holies*, the “place where God dwells”. This is the place where traditionally the Ark of the Covenant would have been kept.

Now, we know that Jesus would not have tested God, but we can see the kind of veiled manipulation Satan is trying here.

2) Each of Jesus’s responses come from Deuteronomy within a couple of chapters of each another. So why not use passages from all over the Old Testament?

- All of Jesus’ answers are coming from the Torah, or the “The Law”, which is an essential part of the Jewish cultural identity. Two of the verses quoted by Jesus are within three verses of one another.
- This is also an essential part of the Torah, located very near the Ten Commandments and the Shema Prayer. The Shema is crucial to Jewish life. It is prayed every morning and night: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The Jewish people would have heard these scriptures many, many times over the course of their lives and perhaps even memorized them.
- All three quotes are references to the 40 years in the desert endured by the Israelites after Moses led them out of Egypt. For instance, “One does not live by bread alone” is specifically referring to God providing “manna” (bread, or more broadly: nourishment) while the Israelites were wandering in the desert.

So, these verses are not randomly selected specifically to counter Satans arguments. They are coming from the scriptural life blood of the Jewish people. They would have been instantly recognizable to anyone hearing them in Jesus’ time and they would have instantly connected Jesus’ 40 days in the desert to the Israelites’ 40 years in the desert.

In Jesus' time, the Jewish person hearing this battle with Satan would have immediately understood that Jesus had faced a trial like the Israelites and, in succeeding, would be a righteous person who is capable of great things. They would hear that there is something very, very special about this person Jesus.

3) Jesus' facing these tests successfully speak to what we can call the values of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is depleted, exhausted, and literally starving. When presented with the opportunity to satisfy his needs, or to have access to wealth and power, even in a drastically weakened state he remains resolute and refuses. The things that Satan offered are worldly. They are temporary and perishable. The things that Jesus values are eternal and imperishable. What he loves are things that cannot be destroyed.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you recognize the strategy that Satan is using? Have you seen this kind of tactic used before?
- When Jesus is responding to Satan's temptation, do you notice anything else helpful about his responses, aside from what was discussed? Do the responses have anything in common? Who or what is the focus of Jesus' responses?
- We can all understand the idea of a "time in the desert", maybe a difficult time in our lives, or being separated from family or friends. For many of us, the time during this pandemic has been something like a time in the desert. What does Jesus' example show us? What can we take away from this story and apply in our own lives? Can we focus on what Jesus focused on?

Week 5: The Story Thus Far

This week we are looking at the larger narrative of Jesus' life in the Bible up to this point in the church year. As we watch the next video, think about the fact that we are approaching Easter and the celebration of the good news of Jesus conquering death to give eternal life to each of us. As we approach Easter, we also approach Holy Week and Jesus' harshest trial: his suffering, indignation, and death. Think also about the rebirth that we have in Jesus. Jesus connects the story of God's people, the story of humanity, and the story of God's eternity. He restores and expands our bond to God, offering us a rebirth with his ultimate act of selflessness.

While there is a lot more to this story, this video brings us through the exciting start of Jesus' ministry and all the way up to Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem where Jesus is arrested and crucified, only to return in three days.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k4GbvZUPuo>

Discussion Questions:

- We have spent some time together working through these ideas about Lent and about Jesus' time in the desert. What are some of your take-aways about fasting? About justice? About being the beloved child of God? About temptation and facing struggles?
- Any final thoughts?