

Sermon for Sunday, February 21, 2021 - "Forty Weeks (or More!) for New Life"

First Sunday in Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus

Jesus was in the wilderness forty days. Usually that sounds like a long time. This year, I'm hearing that a little differently.

I remember when we first moved worship online last Lent. Our COVID Task Force determined we should follow CDC guidelines and refrain from gathering for eight weeks, for more than forty days, well past Easter. We thought we would need to be online until mid-May. It seemed like an eternity then.

It has now been well over forty weeks since we last gathered in the sanctuary. We've been in the wilderness a long time. During COVID time, sometimes each week feels like forty days. Which is part of what the number forty means in scripture. It doesn't necessarily mean a literal forty days. It's a symbolic number used to indicate a significant period of time.

There wasn't just a little shower when Noah was in the ark, it rained for forty days and forty nights. The people of Israel didn't have a short retreat in the wilderness after slavery in Egypt, they wandered there for forty years. Moses didn't just spend a few peaceful hours on Mount Sinai talking with God. Three different times he spent forty days and forty nights up there. The number forty appears again and again to describe key periods in the Old Testament.

It makes me wonder if Jesus knew he would be in the wilderness for forty days, if he found himself there and thought yeah, I'm going to be here awhile. I'm going to be here long enough for something new to emerge. Because that's the other meaning of the number forty in scripture. It doesn't just symbolize a long time. It also represents the time it takes for something new to be born. There's a strong connection to the forty weeks of full-term human pregnancy here. In the womb of a mother, in the womb of God's love, the number forty is significant.

Forty days of rain for Noah meant one world was over and God was starting afresh. Forty days brought the end of the old and the start of a new covenant with all creation. For Moses on Mt. Sinai, the periods of forty days and forty nights meant a new relationship between God and the people of Israel. God entered into a covenant with the people through the ten commandments. Forty years of wilderness wandering meant a whole generation of faithless people would pass away and a whole new set of God's people would enter the promised land. The old would die, and a new generation would be raised up.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness mark the biggest turning point of all. After those forty days, Jesus begins his public ministry. He announces the time is fulfilled. God's kingdom is here. God is doing a whole new thing. Everything that follows - from Jesus' healing and teaching to the cross and resurrection - shows that God's realm of mercy and justice is now here, is among us. New life for us all flows out of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

Big things happen in forty days.

So, for however long we are in this pandemic, I suggest we think of it as a forty-day time. A long time and a significant time, a time in which God will bring about something new. This is what God does. God works in these difficult periods in our lives to birth hope and change, even when we can't see the new life unfolding. As we think about how we can move through this long, significant time that we are in, it helps to consider Jesus' forty-day time.

Matthew and Mark tell us more about how Satan tempted Jesus to escape the challenges of the wilderness. Mark leaves more to our imagination. I wonder if Jesus felt the cold deep in his bones as we did when marking Ash Wednesday outside, as the people of Texas have this whole week. I wonder if he longed to embrace his mother and his brothers. Did he sit alone with a fire yearning for human company? Did he sing Psalms and get tired of hearing his own voice? I wonder if the hours felt like days and if the landscape of each day felt oppressively similar to the one before. I wonder about the wild beasts. Mark says Jesus was *with* them. Did they lurk in the shadows always? Did Jesus befriend them somehow? How will we live with the things that make us afraid, that wake us in the night?

I'm also struck that Mark says there were angels in the wilderness tending to Jesus. Author Debie Thomas points out, "Even in the land of shadow and starvation, even in the place where the wild beasts roamed, God's agents of love and care lingered. This ... is a startling and comforting truth — one we can recognize if we open our eyes and take a good look around. Even in the grimmest places, God abides and somehow, without reason or explanation, help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we prefer, but they come."¹

Ultimately, I wonder if the time in the wilderness helped Jesus to know who he was. Did the voice, the voice that had just claimed him as beloved child, echo in his ears? Did time in the wilderness help that promise to sink deep into his bones? Did it help him to know what it meant to be God's child in this world? Will it do that for us? Thomas says, "Sometimes we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God's children. Because the unnerving truth is this: We can be loved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be loved and vulnerable at the same time ... Learning to trust [this] takes time. A long time."²

Since wilderness time is so important, the season of Lent is intended to give us forty days in the wilderness every year. This year's Lent, we're already there and it's starting to feel a bit like forty years. Yet the forty days of this season can help us to reflect more deeply on what we are learning in the COVID wilderness. It can help us to identify what God is doing for us and through us. It can assure us that we are not alone in the wilderness. Jesus has gone before us, angels tend to us, God is with us.

Jesus emerges from the wilderness clear in his identity as God's beloved, able to announce the good news that God's realm of mercy and justice has come near, able to make that good news known in word and deed. May that same thing happen for us, for the whole church.

¹ Thomas, Debie. (2021, February 14) Beasts and Angels. www.journeywithjesus.net

² Ibid.