

Forty

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 1 March, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Lent 1 A

Matthew 4: 1-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Forty is the title I gave to today's reflection. Forty! Can you imagine how many times the word forty, or the term, or the number forty is used in the Bible? I don't expect somebody would have actually counted them – though Strong did in the 1800s. 146 times I've been told. No I didn't count them, but I have a good record that says that a hundred and forty-six times, forty is used. Now you might think that's okay. Lots of others are used too, but only certain ones - and very carefully used.

Forty. You can think of forty in flood, forty in the wilderness, forty in a New Testament wilderness that we've just read about today. Lots of forties. Forty days of Lent is not coincidental any more than those other forties were either.

Forty is considered to be, in the ancient understanding, a time of challenge, change, and transformation. At the beginning of the wandering in the desert, the Israelites were leaving a life of slavery and moving into becoming a people of a nation. However we might understand that telling of that story, it is an informative story that says: *out of slavery into new life*. This is the story we tell.

And that story is informative of the people of Israel who became from 'abiru', the Hebrew Wanderers. That's basically what it means in ancient texts to Israel the people. They had to learn not to be slaves and dependent, but become a people who could take their own way and make their own way in the world.

It wasn't an easy journey for them. It's not surprising that the actual reading today might reflect some of that. Jesus in the wilderness for another forty days this time, not years, and trying to make sense of what was happening to him. He'd just been baptized. That was the beginning of his life in, if you like, ministry.

His life, leaving the old life behind and taking on the new. Whenever you've started anything new it's always a little daunting - or at least it is for me. A little daunting - you think yes I'm ready - although am I? Can I fulfil all the requirements? Do I have all it needs? Sometimes you just have to step out and take the risk and say I'm ready.

The time of forty days for Jesus in the wilderness, I believe, is a preparation time. A getting ready time. A time where he faced some of those things that might get in the way. The sorts of things we all carry with us. Our own burdens, our own egos, our own ways of doing things and keep focused on the purpose of the journey.

He lived on, we talked about earlier, locusts and wild honey - which is akin to another story we hear about John. I was reading just recently that - I remember when I was a child being told that he lived like a wild animal in the in the scrub eating locusts and wild honey. I read another text today that said that was considered pretty good high fare in the days. Honey was pretty special. Remember the land of milk and honey?

Jesus lifestyle, from then on, was not one at home with the family. It was one that protested against all the things that would box us in and make us into a people who were not free and not grown up and not adult. He protested against, the typical ways and norms of doing things. He abandoned home and possessions - and invited others to follow him.

This is the life of a prophet. A prophet will - and all the ancient prophets and all the prophets of all times - will be people who kind of stand out to be counted. And they're exemplary and they are also outrageous - because that's how they get people's attention. So this is almost the life of a prophet. Is it sustainable that we all should live on the road, have no homes, nowhere to place our head? No families to worry about, just the wider community family that we have.

Is that sustainable? Of course it's not! And it wasn't intended to be. But it was intended to be an example of the old ways changing, the new ways are coming and they can be based on community and love. Not on the old systems that might keep people in their places and unloved and not build community. And there was and still remains plenty of that.

So Jesus was living a prophetic life and this was the beginning of it. He's tempted in three ways. Now it's really interesting who led Jesus to the wilderness? We are told *the Spirit*. The good and life-giving and wonderful Spirit.

This was a necessary move. This is not a time of evil. This is the time of great things happening. And he was tempted to just look after himself, just to think of himself, put himself forward, show everybody how wonderful he could really be, what his relationship with the Great Spirit really was - and also about being the centre of all attention. They were the temptations that Matthew brings to us in this time of forty in the wilderness.

Matthew's, unlike Luke and Mark, Matthew's focus here is on Jesus' vocation or call to ministry. Jesus vocation or call to being that prophet that comes to the people. He focuses on the bigger picture not the personal little things that might be happening to us all. Oh, I shouldn't eat so much. Oh, I shouldn't drink so much, or I should sleep more, I should be kinder to my friends.

They might be all the things that we struggle with all the time and they're not silly little things, but this was a bigger picture that Matthew was painting for us. A bigger picture with the focus on the big things that were ahead of Jesus. And he needed to make sure that all of that stuff was out of the way. The Christ was now going to be among the people and couldn't be burdened by the things that would get in the way. So the challenges were there and they were there for good.

Matthew's focus, as I've mentioned in a couple of other sermons, was that the bigger picture meant following God, being the old term of obedient to God. Now that comes with all sorts of, I don't know, burdens these days. The word obedience comes with problems and baggage. So being *focused on God's purpose* is a better way of saying it. Focused on God's purpose. And that's what these forty days help Jesus define. Being focused on God's purposes and not on the purposes of the world or the things that might get in the way.

To do God's will. Not his own, not somebody else's, not what is the norm, not what tradition expects, not what everybody else says is good but actually isn't because it actually hurts other people. Not to follow the ways of the rulers necessarily, if those ways are not the ways of God. So we needed to know what God's will is.

"Do we know what God's will is" has to be the next question. If we can say *I'm ready to shed all of that other stuff and get ready to follow God and do God's will in my life* what will that be? It probably isn't *sell everything and go out onto the streets*. Certainly not for all of us. It might be to help people in the streets find a home.

So what is God about? I'm asking these questions as rhetorical ones right now, because we're at the beginning of Lent not the end of it. We're on the beginning of a journey and in the beginning of that journey, maybe a good question is to ask is: *so what are we about personally and as a community and as a city? What are we about? What is our purpose? What is our calling?*

I remember sometimes working with some congregations in mission planning - those wonderful days of mission planning - don't you love them? Yes, I do get a reaction now. I knew I would. Those wonderful days of mission planning - and yes there's good purpose in all of that, but the questions that were asked first seemed sometimes to be: *so what are the needs out there that we have to fulfil?*

It's actually starting from the wrong place. Can you see why? We're trying to fill gaps in the wider community and be all things to all people to make sure that they get everything they possibly need. Whereas, maybe, the first question will be better: what is God's will for us and for this community and for the wider city and for the wider people? What is God's will? What is God's will for our living and our being and our relating?

We talk about, we often think of, the golden rule. You know, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. And then I remember working with some Union people once and the iron rule. Do you know the iron rule? Some of you will: *don't do for others what they can do for themselves*. Now that's not about just, you know, brushing people aside. But it is about equipping them.

It's the same as the forty years in the desert for Israel. Help them to learn to be strong and capable. Don't do it all for them all the time. They'll never grow up and be a people if they are dependent forever. That's the iron rule. But it needs to be hand in hand with the Golden Rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. So helping people become stronger and capable and respected and loved is a big part of God's purpose. Not keeping people dependent forever.

And that, you know, we have to take that all into consideration of context and people's abilities and we work together and that's what communities about. Community is always about everybody bringing their best. My best will never be to jump high jumps. Right? Or jump long jumps. I was told to try that once. I didn't even make the board. You know it's how far beyond the board you go; I didn't even get to the board when I did long jumps. So there are some things some people can do and some things other people can do. Being in community means together we can do all we need. We have all we need.

So on that journey that was counter to many of the norms of the day - and still many of the norms of today - Jesus called people together to be community - ones that would not normally have mixed. Certainly not in society. Certainly not in business; and certainly not as equals. But that's the community he formed.

But he never cloned them. He never made them all the same. He allowed them to be who they were and to express themselves as they were - and together they were that community.

So what is God's will? What is God about? What are we – personally, together, and in this city – about?

I want to leave you with these little rhetorical questions to begin Lent. I want to leave you with one little other thought. There's going to be some Lenten studies. There's some papers, I believe, to hand out today for any who would like them. You take them home and do them for yourselves. But after church, as of next Sunday, we'll spend about half an hour after morning tea to just sit and discuss anything that you'd like to. It's not a teaching lesson, it's a sharing time. Anything that we might be discovering on the journey. However you take them is up to you. But they'll be available at the front. And if you'd like an eCopy just let us know and we'll make sure you get some by email.

So, the bottom line question - there's all the usual questions you might get on the readings each day for that Lenten study - but the bottom line question I have asked - and will continue to ask is: if God is love (you know, at the earliest age we learned that God is love); so I have to ask the question: *what is love?* I think sometimes we just assume we know what love is. I think the Greeks have at least (for somebody who's a better Greek student than me) I think they have at least four different words for love. In Hebrew I think they have a few. In English we have one!

So you can say: *I love ice cream.* And the same word is *I love my life partner.* I think the relationships are bit different, don't you? So when we say *God is love* what do we actually mean? That's going to be some of the focus as we go through.

So, if God loves us, how are we to love others in the way that God loves us? What does that mean? What is that love? When God loves the creation, the earth, how is God's relationship with the earth when it gets crusted and dry and we have a dry creek bed? And where do we fit in that?

You will have noticed in your worship sheets this week that it that's the same one you're going to get through all of Lent. One of the things we've tried to do for this Lent is be a little leaner on our printing paper. Just cut back a little bit. So most of the singing will be out of the hymn books. Anything we need to have on in a particular morning will be an insert. That reminds me, if you don't have an insert for communion, let somebody know or share one between you. There's enough to go around. It seemed just some didn't quite slip into the orders of service.

So we'll be using these same orders of service every week. To leave them in a nice little pile at the end of the service would be really good. If you want to take it home, remember to bring it next week. And we will have something new and fresh to add to that every week. the opening part of the service will always contain the same songs as well as the same chant, the same opening hymn and a couple more, because as we journey on we have something familiar to take with us - and then something new to discover toward the end of the service. So I'm just giving a little feeling about that.

So what is God's will? What is God about? What are we about? And if God is love, what is God? What is love?

God bless you on your journey. You will not be alone.