

“Compassion: Entering Wilderness”
Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau
March 10, 2019
First Sunday in Lent
Higganum Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Haddam

Luke 4:1-13

1Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” 4Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

9Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ 11and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 12Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I am a rehabilitated criminal. When I was maybe six or seven years old, I stole candy from the Brach’s Pick-a-mix display in the Safeway grocery store.



<http://www.jenx67.com/2012/09/brachs-pick-a-mix-candies.html>

I did it because I was hungry. On most days when my mother and I stopped at that store or another on the way home from work and school, my mom would let me choose a piece of fruit or a bread roll to eat during the rest of the car ride to our house. That day she said no. So I slipped two pieces of chewy candy into my pocket before we checked out.

I was not a criminal mastermind. Back then children still sat in the front seat. When we got back in the car, I snuck my candy out of my pocket with my hands awkwardly stretched into the space

between my seat and the passenger door, real subtle. Then I started to try to unwrap the cellophane. Do you know how loud a stolen candy wrapper is?

My mom asked me what did I have there. Candy... Had I paid for it? No.... Go put it back. I did. I imagine my look of humiliated terror seemed like lesson enough, or she too was embarrassed, because she didn't make me actually confess to the store manager. Instead I returned to the scene of my crime and replaced the candy, desperately hoping no one would see me.

I have not stolen Brach's Pick-a-mix since. Which is not that surprising, since I haven't seen those displays for several decades, and, here's the odd thing, I don't even particularly like chewy candy- never did.

So why did I join the criminal class? I said I took those candies because I was hungry, but it was more complicated than that, right? I was hungry, but I was heading home to dinner. I wasn't desperate, except in my own mind. I felt entitled to my usual snack, and therefore deprived, and therefore angry. I absolutely knew stealing was wrong, and I did it to protest my mother's authority and out of resentment about having to adjust to a change in my expectations for the day.

I was, and continue to be, proof of the Bible verse I already had memorized by that age at the church I attended with my babysitter's family: *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

This past week at the Ash Wednesday service at the Higganum United Methodist Church, Rev. Ahn spoke about this season of Lent as a journey with a destination. He talked about shedding our encumbrances during this time, the sins that creep into our lives and weight us down in our travel with and toward God. He encouraged us to keep our minds fixed on the Cross and Resurrection ahead.

That's a good summary of how we can use this season to help us grow in holiness and joy. Lent is our Mother God saying, "What have you got there?" "Are you paying a price for it?" And "Put it back."

Of course, we don't have to track the forty days of Lent to allow God to help us get back to our best selves. For me as a Baptist, and for you too as Congregationalists, there's no requirement we observe this season. There are no designated fasts. Those of us who take on some Lenten discipline are free to figure out between God and ourselves what it might be.

But taking time in our lives for self-reflection has value. We will benefit if we schedule a pause in the ceaseless pretense that everything is alright with us.

We need some quiet space for our spirits. We need to remember what matters to us, and to see if our lives are oriented toward those things. Lent is such an opportunity.

This Lenten season I have planned a sermon series for the upcoming Gospel readings around the theme of "compassion." It may be easier in future weeks to see where compassion, "feeling

with,” comes into play. We’ll hear Jesus express a mother hen’s compassion for Jerusalem and its people, scold the disciples for blaming folks for their misfortunes, and acknowledge the suffering of the poor we always have with us.

But today we begin by recognizing that these specific expressions of the compassion of Jesus are rooted, all of them, in what Christ took on when he took on mortal flesh, when he said “yes” to being one of us. To be tempted as we are “yet without sin,” as it says in the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, went into the wilderness. Jesus chose to experience temptation as we do, in order to deepen his compassion for us.

However literally, or not, we take the story of the devil taunting Jesus and Jesus answering back with scripture, the temptation in the wilderness is a living parable of God’s self-emptying to know life from our point of view. This story takes our full humanity into account even as it shows Jesus’ divine strength. And in so doing it challenges us also to offer compassion to others who struggle.

Because we don’t really know what others carry, do we?

This past Tuesday personal finance writer and Washington Post columnist Michelle Singletary was featured on a Where We Live episode on the radio (<http://www.wnpr.org/post/taking-charge-your-personal-finances>). She was talking about the challenge it is to be disciplined and save money, especially for young people when they aren’t making much, and how they will say to her, “You don’t understand.” This national authority I’ve heard and read before then surprised me by saying, “I say to them, let me tell you- I completely understand. I was abandoned by my parents and went to live with my grandmother. Before my grandmother took us in, I knew hunger. I don’t mean there weren’t choices in the refrigerator. I mean there was nothing in the refrigerator. So I understand poverty at a level that some experts don’t.”

That same day All Things Considered ran a story about two families who lost their homes in the Houston flooding (<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/688786177/how-federal-disaster-money-favors-the-rich>).

Microsoft employee John Papadopoulos owned his home. When the floods came, he and his family went to stay with neighbors, then moved into a hotel. His employer gave him paid time off to deal with his housing situation, and FEMA and other federal programs provided tens of thousands of dollars in aid. Eighteen months later, John and his wife Heather are living in a rental house and looking for a new home to buy. Eventually, they expect a federal buy out of their flooded property. Financially, their situation actually may have improved.

Postal carrier Janice Perry-Evans rented. After walking out of the flood zone in chest-high water, she sought refuge with her children in the Convention Center, and then in cramped quarters with extended family. She received a FEMA grant that would have paid for first and last and a deposit on a new rental, but she spent it instead on a replacement car so she could get her son to school and sports practice and herself to work. She took unpaid time off to complete paperwork recommended to her, but it ended up being for programs for which she was ineligible. Eighteen months after the flood took her home, Janice is looking at bankruptcy.

To have compassion, we must understand the context of people's lives and decisions as God in Christ did for us. In her book *Turning to One Another*, one of my favorite authors Margaret Wheatly poses the question: "What am I willing to notice in my world?"

In past years I've taken on Lenten disciplines like eating less of foods that are bad for me, or exercising more- all things that benefitted me, developed better habits, etc. I'm thinking this year about what I might take on that is on behalf of understanding others better, of growing in compassion. As I said, as a Baptist I feel like I have some flexibility. If I didn't start something for Lent on Ash Wednesday, well today is the first Sunday in Lent. If it's something worth doing I could begin two weeks from the end, and it would still be of value. I have time. We have time.

In the wilderness, Jesus was hungry and thirsty, lonely, and contemplating a difficult journey that would end with carrying a cross.

Later, I wonder if perhaps Jesus remembered his own hunger and thirst when he saw the tax collector and thief Zacchaeus up in that sycamore tree, and greeted him as a friend.

Perhaps Jesus remembered his time alone when he wept at the death of Lazarus, then raised him.

Perhaps Jesus remembered the difficulty of choosing the hard path when he heard Peter deny him, saw his friends desert him, witnessed Thomas' doubt.

And perhaps this Lenten season we will choose to fast from judgment, ignorance, and disconnection and to take on more of the compassion of God.

Each in our own way, full of Holy Spirit in us, may we keep a holy Lent. Amen.