

Do we have any students here this morning with midterms coming up? How do you prepare for a big test like that? What's your routine? Of course you study, and probably have someone telling you that it's important to get a good night's rest the night before, maybe eat a good breakfast that morning. You do your best to make yourself strong and healthy, so you can do your best on the big day.

Same thing with work – if you have a big project coming up, you get ready for it, clear your schedule if you can, maybe even take a day off so that you're prepared for the big grind when it comes.

Or with a race – you train, you eat properly, you take care of your body so that you'll be in top shape for the main event. Or so I hear. 😊

When we're starting off on a new adventure, we take time to properly prepare. So it's more than a little bit unusual that when Jesus is about to embark on his big ministry moment, he heads off into the wilderness. We know the story: for the first 30 years of his life, Jesus was living a quiet life in Nazareth, following in his father's footsteps as a carpenter. And when he turns 30, he leaves his home and career to become a traveling teacher, miracle worker, and leader of a radical messianic movement beginning in his home region of Galilee before moving south to Jerusalem.

But before he starts his ministry, Jesus finds his cousin John so that he can be baptized, and then he heads off into the wilderness. For over a month. With no food, no provisions, just Jesus and the wilderness. Mark's gospel describes the ordeal in very bleak terms: *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

The gospels of Matthew and Luke go into details about what that encounter with the devil looked like, and there's a lot to explore about the meaning of the temptations, the symbolism of Jesus echoing Israel's Exodus journey into the wilderness, and more.

But for today, Mark's abbreviated account seems to focus on the direct effects that this forty day wilderness experience would have had on Jesus. For one, where Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was *led* by the Spirit, Mark describes the Spirit *driving him out* into the wilderness. The Greek literally means cast out, ejected. It doesn't sound like Jesus had much choice in the matter.

Now, don't get your Trinitarian theology tied into knots trying to figure out how one person of the Trinity can force another to do something against his will. Mark's point is just that this was a really ominous venture. It wasn't a weekend prayer and meditation retreat at Shekinah, this was serious wilderness. With the devil. Among the wild animals. No wonder the Spirit had to drive him out there. This was dangerous stuff.

The fasting alone would have left him physically quite weak. I don't know if you've ever been around someone doing an extended fast from solid food, but it's a real ordeal. One time in my Christian elementary school, people started to notice that our school principal was starting to lose a lot of weight, to the point where he looked quite weak. It turned out that he had been fasting, privately, for an extended period of time, I don't remember exactly how long it went on for. But he really looked sick and weak, and people were very concerned about his physical and mental wellbeing and how his fast was affecting his ability to function and to do his job.

You may remember a couple of years ago Chief Theresa Spence of Attiwapiskat First Nation went on a nationally publicized hunger strike. Her fast lasted about six weeks, 40 days, and people were seriously concerned about her health at that point.

A forty day fast has serious health implications. It's not a recommended training regimen, yet this was how Jesus prepared for the biggest years of his life.

During the season of Lent, we often talk about the practice of fasting. Often that's a dietary fast of some kind, giving up sweets or coffee or meat or whatever. Or maybe we give up something else that gives us pleasure, like TV or facebook or something. During Lent usually talk about fasting as self-discipline. We talk about sacrifice, about showing our dedication to God and developing our spiritual lives. And so Lent is for many of us a spiritual exercise, where we build up our will power, we strengthen our spiritual muscles, we train our minds and hearts and wills to do what God wants instead of what I want.

And that's all well and good. That's definitely part of what Lent is all about. But there's another side of fasting, too, particularly at the level of Jesus' wilderness experience.

Jesus wasn't just giving up a chocolate, he fasted from food entirely. He didn't just give up a hobby, he physically disappeared into the wilderness for 40 days. This wasn't about self-discipline; he wasn't just training his body and his will to be more efficient and healthy. Fasting can be those things, but there's a point at which fasting doesn't make you stronger or more healthy. Jesus would have come out of the wilderness significantly weaker, physically and mentally and spiritually exhausted. He chose, influenced by the Spirit of God, to begin his ministry, from this weakened, vulnerable state.

I think that this kind of beginning was intentional, an example to set the tone for the rest of Jesus ministry.

The overall theme for this year's season of Lent is "Upside Down and Inside Out." As Anabaptists, this is familiar language. Many of you know the book "The Upside Down Kingdom" by Donald Kraybill. Kraybill describes Jesus' ministry as unveiling the Kingdom of God that is genuinely turned on its head compared to the kingdoms of this world. Instead of a powerful ruler at the top, Jesus says that those who serve others are the greatest in God's Kingdom. It's not the religious leaders who are first in God's Kingdom, it's the poor in spirit, those who really struggle with their faith, those are the ones who will inherit God's Kingdom. It's those who mourn, those who are timid, those who hunger and thirst for God without finding God, those who are looked down on and pushed aside, those are the people that God chooses.

Jesus turns our world upside down and inside out, invites us to reverse our thinking and see things from an entirely new perspective.

That's what Lent is about. And it begins in the wilderness, where Jesus makes the surprising choice to begin his ministry not by training or resting up but by weakening and exhausting himself.

His ministry begins with vulnerability. Jesus embraced his physical limitations, intentionally made himself weak so that he would have to fully rely on God.

Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul describes his "thorn in the flesh," some kind of physical weakness that he believes God gave to him to keep him humble.

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power<sup>□</sup> is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

That is upside down and inside out.

I wonder, what would Lent look like if we took that seriously? What if we took Lent this year as an opportunity to embrace our vulnerability?

For some of us, vulnerability is simply a reality of life. A little while ago, I was talking with someone from our church about aging. Which surprised me a little bit, because she's just barely into her 60s, and, well, 60 isn't nearly as old as it used to be. ☺ But even at 60, she is keenly aware of her vulnerability. She's vulnerable in her work, perhaps viewed as on the way out, replaceable. She's increasingly dependent financially on others, her highest earning potential is behind her. She's vulnerable in her health, her personal life, her place in a society that devalues seniors. The rest of her life is going to be a season of decline, a series of losses of energy, health, relationships, and independence.

I don't mean to overlay the bleakness of aging, there's certainly goodness and joy and hope throughout. But vulnerability and dependence and loss are keenly felt realities as we grow older.

And of course it's not just aging that brings vulnerability. There are many other reasons for feeling vulnerable; to be human is at least in part to be weak and exposed.

For those of you who know this all too well, the promise of Lent is that Jesus walks with you. Not in exactly the same steps, but on Jesus' journey to the cross he was all kinds of vulnerable. And yet, Jesus embraced his weakness and again and again pointed to God's presence with those who struggle.

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

What does it mean to trust in God's faithfulness even and especially when we are vulnerable?

For others, vulnerability is not something we feel that often. It doesn't mean that we're not vulnerable, just that we've built up all kinds of defenses and coping mechanisms to limit our vulnerability and hide our weaknesses from others and from ourselves.

If that's you, what might it look like to take the six weeks of Lent as an opportunity to embrace our vulnerability? What might happen if you were to set aside one of your security blankets for a time, give up something that you truly rely on?

For example, most of you know that I when I preach, I have a full script in front of me. I don't read every word, but it's pretty close to that, and when I get nervous, it's really comforting to know that I can just put my head down and read my carefully prepared words. This script is my protection, it keeps me from saying stupid things, most of all it helps me feel confident and in control.

So what would happen if I did *this*?

*(At this point, Joe threw his script over the pulpit and onto the floor... the rest of this manuscript is what Joe intended to say, but without his notes he may have forgotten most of it...)*

*Now what's going to happen? My anxiety level just jumped six notches. And I can tell some of you are feeling very anxious for me...thanks for your empathy. We're all at risk now, who knows what I might say from this point on?*

*This is a step towards vulnerability, trusting that when I stumble over my words and don't say exactly what I wanted to say, it will be okay. It's putting trust in your grace and forgiveness if I should say something stupid. And since I'm supposed to be speaking to the words of God from up here, it's trusting that God will speak to you all even if I forget what I have written, even I say the wrong things.*

*Which is all true anyway, I suppose. Turns out my piece of paper isn't really a shield from any of that, it's just a prop that makes me feel better about my vulnerability. Even with my script in front of me, I'm still trusting in relationship: in your good grace, and most of all in our relationship with the God who speaks in us and through us and in spite of us.*

*So the rest of this sermon is one small example of intentional vulnerability and trust. (and I don't know yet if I'm going to be able to keep it up throughout Lent. I'm pretty attached to my written words...)*

*What about you? What are your security blankets? What would it mean to set one of those aside for a time? Maybe it's a physical thing, like your stylish clothing or your makeup. If your confidence comes from looking good and wearing the right things, what would happen if you gave that up for a while?*

*Or maybe it's your privacy, your "home is your castle" kind of thing? For all of you introverts, what if you practiced intentional hospitality and invited some people over for dinner, especially people that you don't know very well? And you extroverts, you're not off the hook either, what if you eased back on your social calendar to spend some serious time alone with your thoughts?*

*Or we could go bigger. For many of us, our finances are our security. What if I took the money I usually put into my retirement savings and during Lent instead gave that money away? Or if your security comes through your work, what if you took time off and volunteered doing something that makes you uncomfortable for a few weeks?*

*Do we dare embrace that level of vulnerability? I'm just throwing that out there to think about.*

*"His strength is made perfect in weakness."*

*Jesus consistently lived into that reality throughout his ministry. His vision of the Kingdom of God was all about a completely upside-down view of power. Jesus really meant that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. He really did embrace that himself, laying down the glory of heaven to embrace the mortality of human flesh. He really did take on the form of a servant, obedient unto death, even death on a cross.*

*That's where this journey of vulnerability will take us, to the cross. Jesus embraced this path. Lent is an opportunity for us to follow, even in small, shaky steps. Do we dare?*