



University Christian Church – Austin

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Kick Over the Traces
Lent 1, a, February 10, 2007
Matthew 4:1-11

He came originally from a small town in northern Illinois, and grew up in a Disciples of Christ church there. So it was out of this background that he asked me one early February evening about 5 years ago, “What’s all this about Lent? I don’t think I ever heard of it until I grew up. Is it new? We always had a Christmas Eve service in our home church, and Easter, but we never paid any attention to Lent. Where did it come from, and what’s the point of it?”

On this first Sunday of Lent, that's a good question get answered. We might start by saying that the observance of Lent certainly isn't new. It's older than Christmas, in fact, starting back in the third century of the church's history. The word *lent* is first cousin to our word "lengthen," and bears the family resemblance. In the spring of the year, when days begin to lengthen, a period was set aside that lead up to Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection. Over a period of many years, the church settled on forty days as the length of that period. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday..

Why forty days? Moses was forty days on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Law. As our Matthew lesson today teaches, Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness. There were forty days between the resurrection of Christ and his Ascension. So 40 seemed a propitious span. For over 1000 years the Roman Catholic church dutifully and faithfully honored that season of

Lent, but after the Protestant Reformation, many Protestants identified Lent not with the whole church of Jesus Christ, but rather with Roman Catholicism against which they had been struggling, so along with many other practices, many Protestants abandoned the observance of Lent. In recent years, however, the value of Lent has been remembered, and these days it is receiving more attention among Protestants than ever before.

This morning's scripture lesson wherein immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to undergo 40 days of fasting and testing, this passage is a central focus of the season of Lent because here at the beginning of his ministry, Temptation is a key theme.

And because we had a bit of parking fiasco here on Thursday, I'm reminded of a minister who parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. 'Forgive us our trespasses.'"

When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note: "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. 'Lead us not into temptation.'"

When we hear the word "temptation," at a deep spiritual level we all understand what is at stake. There's a tug between what we want to do in meeting the desires of some lower level of our being, a tension between that and a higher level of calling that we also sense at the same time.

It's something that works on each of us almost every waking moment, though, thank God we aren't always aware of it. In fact, what keeps us from being constantly torn between all the various desires that are working within

us at any moment is what we might call the blessing of habit, of routine. We all have established patterns of our activities that help us move through the day without being bombarded by dozens of decisions every few minutes. We order our days and order our lives in ways that may be generally good, but as we enter the season of Lent and the challenge of the preparation for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is incumbent upon us to admit our shortcomings, to repent -- as the Scriptures tell us-- of those things that are keeping us from reaching our full, spiritual potential.

And in that striving, in that reaching, I remember my grandmother who lived on a farm in western Arkansas using a phrase that I had never heard before. She was recounting a story in which she told of a horse that “kicked over the traces”, which she later explained to meant - got out of its proper harness in pulling the wagon forward. In the story this was a problem for my great-grandfather that had to be remedied, but as a youngster I had considerable sympathy with the horse. The horse was designed by God for a freedom that we in our human organizing of life have frequently stolen from horses and donkeys. Now, I'm not against using farm animals in the way that I might have been as a youngster, but then I was keenly aware that to “kick over the traces” was the equivalent of an innocently imprisoned one making a jailbreak, or at least an attempt at one.

And the image seems to be relevant to this season of the year. As good, as fine, as orderly, as our lives may be, as productive as we are, as well received as we are by our peers, my bet is that none of us would say we are living up to our godly spiritual potential. Not only do we know we are meant to be more, but for most of us we could actually name the ways -- or at least some of the ways, in which we could become more.

We have identified some of the bad habits that need to change:

our eating habits, our sleeping patterns, or certain relationships that need to be altered or attended to better.

Perhaps we have identified certain priorities in our life that are skewed in ways that we know are not wholesome.

Perhaps there has been a calling that we have successfully ignored to this point, a calling to reach out into the community in some particular form of service to others.

For others the changes needed is picking up an educational goal that we have long carried as a possibility but never carved out the time and the energy for it to materialize.

For many of the Christians that I know, spending more time on one spiritual development is often on this list.

How many of us know we could benefit from a more regular and more significant time of prayer or meditation each day?

More study of our Christian heritage is lacking?

More time spent studying the Scriptures, or a more intentional helping to undergird the ministries of our congregation.

For many Christians these are some of those elements of our spiritual life that we could readily address if we are willing and ready.

But at every turn if we are going to make a change of any substance, we are going to have to kick over the traces. We are going to have to let go of, to break free from the orderly way things are now in our lives in order to reach that more faithful possibility that we can see on the horizon.

The season of Lent is our special call to attend to these matters in a fresh and bold way. It is a time to be drawn towards, forward, upward, making those big strides forward!

And when we are need of the godly power to make those changes, or when we are need of the spiritual vision to discern what they are, we would do well to follow the example of Jesus in leaving our routines, finding our desert spaces and times, and kicking over the traces, long enough for God to begin making within us the great transformations.