

Lent 1; February 21, 2021

I'm turning 40 in just a few weeks. I mention it not because I'm looking for presents, though my mom did teach me never to look a gift horse in the mouth.

But I mention it because 40 is a significant biblical number.

Noah and his family spent 40 long days trapped together on the ark with thousands of animals before the rains finally ceased and the ship came to rest on dry land. Maybe those of you who have spent much of the last year stuck at home with family members, both fleshy and furry can sympathize with them!

The Hebrews spent 40 years following Moses through the desert, anxiously waiting to arrive at the land God promised. And Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, during which time he was tempted by Satan and ministered to by animals and angels.

So, it is not lost on me that I will complete my 40th year of life in the midst of the 40 days of Lent.

40 is the number that signifies the in-between time. The time between where we once were and where we will be. Not necessarily a literal 40 days, or months, or years that can be hash-marked on the calendar. But it is symbolic of a time of extended preparation, and testing, and waiting for what God has in store for us next. A time of feeling at sea. Of wandering in wilderness. Of grappling with the forces in our life that defy God.

Each year we set aside a predictable and intentional 40 days as a period of in-between time. A time of spiritual preparation that opens us to receive the promised gift of new life at Easter. That invites us to move from what we were to what we will be as we are changed by God. But it might feel to some of us that we never left the in-between time of last year's Lenten journey. The pandemic and sheltering in place began in Lent

last year. So it understandable to feel that way. But still, we are invited into this intentional time again. A time to tend to our relationship with the Divine and all Creation. Of wondering about what comes after destruction. After our enslavement. After the temptation to follow all that is not God. What comes after this time of trial?

For Noah it was the covenant God makes after utter destruction.

For Moses and the people, it was true freedom that came after over 400 years of enslavement.

For Jesus it was purpose and direction in his mission.

What will this 40 days lead you to?

The gospel of Mark's remembrance of the stories of Jesus' life are often short and to the point, leaving us longing for more details. We get two lines here about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke by comparison give at least 11 verses and include a whole dialog between Jesus and Satan. But here the whole period from Jesus' baptism to his ministry of proclaiming the good news, is summed up in just 7 verses. It feels almost like an outline to me that may help us in our own journey with Christ this Lenten season.

Claimed by God

Driven by the Spirit

Tempted by forces opposed to God

Sent to Proclaim the good news

When I was a mission developer in Brooklyn, there were times when I could not see past my own hopelessness. The small community I was scraping and pushing to help come together in a meaningful way, seemed so fragile and untenable. The relationship

with my supervisor at the synod was not good. I knew that there was a limited timeframe we were working with. And it never felt like we were doing enough. There were days when I woke up and could barely bring myself to walk the block to church. It was painful in a way that is hard to describe. The weight of my own failure and the fear of letting people and God down, was almost too much. I felt trapped and uncertain of how to move past the wilderness time.

Wilderness wandering can be disconcerting. It can leave us yearning for direction and a clear path forward. We feel alone and lost. We are anxious about where our life is heading. And what difference our faith makes in all of it.

In some ways, it's all about perspective. At the moment we are going through whatever we are going through, we can only focus on that. It is part of the limitations of being human. We have a limited scope of time that spans the past we remember, the present we are experiencing and the future we can only imagine. By nature that future is unknown to us, no matter how many plans and provisions we make.

But God has a broader view that encompasses all time. It's hard for us to imagine what that really means. But it is right there is the covenant God makes with Noah and all Creation: "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations..." God's perspective is not confined by our span of life or any sense of human time. And God promises that after the in-between time, however long that might be, we will be able to see what God sees too.

As I look back on my time in Brooklyn, it held a multitude of blessings. Including all that I learned about myself -- both my failings and my resilience in the midst of

challenge and strain. What kept me moving through the in-between were the relationships I had with other faithful people. Who reminded me over and over of the roadmap God gives to us, even as we wander through wilderness.

That we are claimed as beloved by God, driven by the Spirit to wilderness sometimes, tempted by forces that defy God, but ultimately sent to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom come near in our own lives.

This Lent we will enter as a church into an intentional time of Wonder amidst the wandering. Knowing that this time of separation has been like a wilderness in many ways. We feel driven by God's Spirit toward deeper listening to one another, as a symbol of our we are bound together by bond in God's covenant promises. Most powerfully the covenant fulfilled by Christ at the cross. So, we will be reaching out to as many of you as we can over a period of six weeks. To hear where you are in your life of faith and how we can be more deeply connected to one another and all God has made.

In this season of in-between, these 40 days, we are invited to move through wilderness. And we have the choice whether to wander aimlessly, giving into fear and confusion. Or whether we accept the gift of Wonder in the midst of it. To be curious and open to the questions of our hearts. To ask in each moment where God is in all of this, even in our suffering. And to ponder more deeply the words of promise offered to us as a beacon, calling us to a more vibrant future.

Remember your road map through it:

Claimed, Driven, Tested, and Sent to Proclaim Christ and God's Kingdom come near.