

## Lead Us Not into Temptation

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

Some of you will recognize the names of Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie. Pete Seeger was a folk musician and political activist, who wrote such songs as “Turn, Turn, Turn” and “Where Have all the Flowers Gone.” Arlo Guthrie, a generation younger than Seeger, was known not only as Woody Guthrie’s son, Woody who wrote “This Land Is Your Land,” but on his own for “Alice’s restaurant” and popularizing the great railroad ballad “City of New Orleans.” From time to time they would tour together, before Seeger’s death.

I remember long ago hearing them at the Ohio State Fair. They sang all of their well-known songs, including a song I had never heard before that has stuck with me ever since. With a buoyant banjo and guitar, they sang – and encouraged the crowd to sing along – “You Must Walk That Lonesome Valley.” “You must walk that lonesome valley; you have to walk it by yourself. Oh, nobody else can walk it for you; you have to walk it by yourself.” A second verse was similar... “You must go and stand your trial,” and so forth.

As I said, the song stuck with me, until I heard a hymn, a hymn I hadn’t heard before, a hymn we all will sing in a few moments. Same tune. Same words, except a different first verse: “Jesus walked that lonesome valley.” Jesus first, then our own journey and trial. It was certainly Pete and Arlo’s right as artists to truncate the song by eliminating the first verse. But it made a song about rugged individualism and our need to struggle alone out of one that says that we can do all of those things because Jesus did them first. And he did.

That is what this forty-day season, Lent, is about, our journey yes, but never ours first and never ours alone. He is baptized, in Matthew’s gospel, and then the Spirit leads him to the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil. He fasted – abstained from nourishment – for forty days and forty nights. He endures three temptations – three opportunities to exhibit God-like powers in order to extract himself from that situation. Three times he refuses. Three times.

This is the Lenten narrative and the Lenten rhythm, whereby the church has placed itself in Jesus' shoes – to some extent – for centuries, forty days of observance that carries with it an equal measure of helpful insight and harmful baggage. I drove by a church yesterday with a sign out front that said “Lent is a season to repent.” I felt instantly guilty. Well yes, I thought, though I am not sure I would lead with that, either as a theological principle or a marketing strategy. But yes, a season to repent, to consider our behavior, to engage in course correction. And because Jesus fasted, the church has fasted, if not total abstinence from food, then some form of “giving up.” That can be helpful, as we will affirm in a moment, but there have been too many moments in the church's history when fasting has taken on the patina of self-deprivation and self-denial and self-punishment that has not been faithful, doing more harm than good, turning faith into a burden or even a punishment. More and more, fasting is taking on creative forms – giving up plastic, giving up social media – which are certainly more meaningful than giving up chocolate or alcohol, both for the individual and the community. Rather than punish or deprive, they lift us up as we clear away things that get in the way and embrace things that draw us closer to God and to our best spirits.

As I mentioned at our Ash Wednesday service, I do not eat meat during Lent, become annually a forty-day vegetarian. My daughter and I began this practice a decade ago, it was a meaningful experience for us – she maintains it now year-round. I do not really feel like I am giving something up at all. I still have plenty of good choices to make. I am reminded, though, whenever I do make a choice, of how privileged I am, and how others do not have those same choices. Mindfulness is always a good practice, Lent and otherwise.

Others in Lent, rather than “giving something up,” will “take something up,” a practice – daily prayer, writing in a journal, anonymous acts of kindness. That's why we do things like a book study about racism and mass incarceration, or a Lenten retreat. That is a kind of reverse fast with the same impact, clearing away, focusing, drawing us closer to God and ourselves, so that our wilderness journey, in whatever form, provides meaning deeper than deprivation and temptation.

And one thing more about fasting. Again, on Ash Wednesday, we read from the prophet Isaiah and heard Jesus' words, first, that fasting was not about fancy piety, about showing off how religious we were based on how much we were struggling and suffering. No, true piety is practiced humbly, and more so, it is practiced by doing acts of kindness and justice, sharing our daily bread in all forms, fighting oppression and injustice.

Charles Camosy and Sherif Moussa (Lent's countercultural call is as old as the church—and more necessary than ever,” February 20, 2020) write that “For centuries...the church has taken Lent as not only a *restorative time out*, but a chance to reassess how we, in our ‘normal’ lives, contribute to the inequities of our culture...During this sacred time, we are called to quiet our hearts made so anxious by the ‘more, more, more’ our culture incites us to. We are called to focus on the glorious simplicity and generosity to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us.” That may mean giving something up. But it could also look like yesterday, when some of you chopped vegetables at Face-to-Face and some of you worked on a Habitat for Humanity project. Those activities – and others like them – are good 365, but they are especially pertinent during Lent, not as a form of punishment, but as a mindful act of focus and clarity.

Anne Kennedy (Don't Use Lent For Self-Improvement, Use It For “Self-Care,” February 26, 2020) writes that “Like many people approaching...Lent, I often examine my life and my conscience, trying to think about what parts of myself are out of order, and what discipline I might undertake in order to remedy the trouble.” This is more than self-improvement, Kennedy says, though I would contend that some self-improvement allows us to re-order in a way that strengthens our spirits to serve. At a deeper level, though, Kennedy calls for practices, she says that allow her to “deal... with the truth about myself, which is that I am utterly bound to sin and death, that I cannot break free on my own, that I need help that comes from outside of my own person...”

Which leads us to the other component of Jesus’ wilderness narrative, and ours. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. And he was tempted. Tempted. Again, religious tradition does not always help us. We have made temptation about personal vice – drinking, smoking, dancing or its many variations. When we visited my grandparents’ house on a Sunday, we did not play baseball, we did not go to movies and we did not play cards. And perhaps refraining or reducing some personal behaviors is wise.

But as Anne Kennedy says, this is not about self-improvement. Jesus was tempted in that lonesome valley, and we are tempted in ours. In our Wednesday Bible study, we read the Old Testament lectionary passage assigned for today, from Genesis, Adam and Eve in the garden. The crafty serpent appears. The temptation is not the apple. The temptation is thinking we are

as smart as God, or smarter. “You will be like God,” the temptation offers. And the humans succumbed.

“Be like God,” Jesus is offered. Three times. And three times he says no. Jesus has all the powers he needs to remove himself from his wilderness, from hunger and thirst. And three times he says no, because he understands the real temptation, in this moment, to be like God. The first step of AA is to admit you are powerless over alcohol – Jesus doubles down and affirms to the tempter that he is powerless, period, that he is not God, that his full humanity prevents him from taking the easy way out by ending the all-too-human wilderness journey. We are not Jesus, and we are certainly not God. Yet the hymn is right. Like Jesus, we will walk our lonesome valleys and we will stand our trials. Some we will share and some will be our own private wildernesses. Illness – mental and physical and spiritual, estrangement, addiction, grief. Yet we face them knowing that Jesus faced his, and persevered. And we face them knowing that as his wilderness journey ended, angels tended to him. Like the wilderness itself, our angels will be unique, but they will at least be this place, with prayers and other acts of compassion and kindness that allow us to move through, one step at a time. Lent matters because its rhythm is true – a call to practice that focuses and a season to face the deep temptations of our lives and make the wilderness journey with hope, and with fellow travelers. To be reminded that we are not God, but that God goes with us, beside us, ahead of us, in our wilderness journey, in our lonesome valley.

And we know the destination – we are not there yet, but even now, its promise leads us ever forward, in faith. Amen.