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Moses, Jesus, and Lent

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, so let's talk about Lent.

The name Lent comes from an Old English word for Spring. (Just look outside!) Well, it may be spring in Old England, but in Northern Michigan, Lent always begins in the dead of winter. But it leads to Easter, which is April the Ninth this year, so spring is just around the corner.

That is to say, Easter is April the Ninth for Catholics and Protestants; it is April the Sixteenth for Orthodox churches this year. And Lent has even more variations across denominations than Easter: most churches start Lent on Ash Wednesday; some end Lent on Maundy Thursday, some on Easter; some skip Sundays in counting the days of Lent, and so on. What doesn't change is this: Lent is the season in a Christian calendar that in the span of six weeks provides an opportunity deepen our spirituality, leads us through Holy Week, and culminates in the joy of Easter Sunday. And also, Lent is always considered to be forty days.

In Latin, the name for Lent is "ad tempora cuaresma:" the time of forty days. If you think tempora sounds a lot like the Japanese dish, "tempura," you are correct: in the 16th Century Shogun days in Japanese history, the islands were visited by Portuguese sailors; when Lent arrived, the sailors refrained from meat by cooking batter-fried vegetables and seafood. The Japanese named this new dish "tempura" after the Latin name for Lent.

This forty-day Lenten season is intended to mirror the forty days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert right after his baptism, a testing he undertook as a preparation for his ministry. This necessary rite of passage, this "vision quest," steeled Jesus for the work ahead.

But let's go back even further: the forty days Jesus spent in the desert, in turn, mirror the forty years that Moses and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, escaped slaves on a long journey to the Promised Land.

So we'll start with Moses, just at the moment when the weary group finally arrived on the banks of the Jordan, in sight of the Land they yearned for; here the great leader gave an eloquent farewell address to the people, for his work was complete. He was speaking in large part to a new generation, young men and women born and raised in the Wilderness, most of whose parents had passed away over the decades since leaving Egypt. Moses recalled the years of wandering, and reiterated the Ten Commandments and the other laws to be carried to the New Land; he sang a song of praise, gave a blessing, and passed his authority on to Joshua—because Moses was forbidden to enter the New Land, Joshua would now be the one to lead the people on the final phase of the journey to the Land of Milk and Honey.

Just as the forty days Jesus spent in the Wilderness was a time of testing, so were the forty years Moses led the Israelites to the Promised Land. In his farewell address, Moses reflected on the trials that they had undergone. He said, "Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the

wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you”—and here’s the important conclusion—“that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

The great prophet made clear that the point of the forty years of preparation was to focus in completely on God’s will, to listen and obey. In return, as part of the Covenant, God would always provide for the people he had chosen.

Fifteen hundred years later, angels instructed a young Hebrew couple to name their forthcoming child “Joshua” (or “Jesus,” as in time the name became translated into English), evoking the name of the man who led the people across the Jordan into the Promised land, to now mark one who might lead all of us to a New Promised Land.

And this Jesus, who was baptized in the same river that the Wanderers had crossed years before—he would undergo the required initiation, his forty days of testing. Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, describes the sequence from baptism to testing in rapid-fire precision, recounting: “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”

Matthew and Luke go into more detail about the forty days, including the fact that it was indeed a trial by fasting. In one of the great understatement in the Bible, Matthew shares the condition of Jesus: “After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” At that point of physical weakness but spiritual focus, the temptations ensue: first comes the promise of food—which Jesus rebuffs by quoting the key line from Moses—“Man shall not live on bread alone...”. The message that forty years of testing had taught the Israelites was not lost on Jesus.

Then Jesus is proffered the temptations of earthly powers and splendor, which he also overcomes, again quoting Moses: “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only.”

The devil continues to tempt Jesus, this time quoting Scripture—here the Bible itself records how its own sacred words can be used to justify and manipulate: the devil can quote Scripture as eloquently as the holiest preacher! But though the devil tries to use words from Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus, the young man is once again ready with a rejoinder from Moses: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Once his forty-day “vision quest” is over, Jesus immediately begins his ministry: “ ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ ” Walking by the Sea of Galilee, he begins to choose his Disciples: “Come, follow me.” And so the journey begins that ends a few years later with the crucifixion and resurrection.

By placing our Lenten season right before Easter, we encapsulate the whole of Jesus's ministry: the preparation following his baptism which led directly into his mission of healing, teaching and spreading the Good News; then his final days when he emphasized his message of Love to the Disciples, instituted the ritual of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, stressed the importance of servanthood, forgave those "who know not what they do;" until, ultimately, on Easter Sunday, the message of Eternal Life was revealed through the Glory of the Risen Jesus.

Since the early days of Christianity, Lent has been practiced as a period of austerity and grief, an occasion for reflection and renewed spiritual efforts; fasting, prayer, and "almsgiving" are emphasized. Many choose to make a "Lenten sacrifice," temporarily giving up a luxury, such as eating meat or enjoying desserts or going to the movies—simple yet meaningful imitations of Jesus's days of sacrifice in the desert. Some read a daily devotional or pray following a Lenten calendar. And the old-fashioned word, "almsgiving," means more than giving money, but also the sharing of our time and talents—these Lenten practices are all designed to strengthen self-discipline and to help us draw closer to God.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate Easter, the most joyous day in the Christian year. The forty days of Lent leading up to this holiday can be a somber time of reflection and a season to deepen our spiritual understanding. Let it be a time when the words of Moses, words shared by Jesus, ring true in our hearts: "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Amen