

“Forty Days of Seeking”**Luke 4.1–13****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 25 February 2007**

The observation of Lent in the United Church would make an interesting sociological study. We have some pretty broad suppositions about Lent, many of which carry over from childhood faith. Personally, I always used to wonder why Friday’s hot lunch offering in school was always fish sticks, which frankly were not my favorite. In my church, we didn’t really observe liturgical seasons, except for Advent, and I think that was basically because we liked the candles and balsam wreaths. We certainly didn’t use liturgical colors. (You may have noticed the switch to violet.)

I never knew what Lent was about when I was a kid. My Catholic friends seemed to have to go to church more at this time of year, and they had to give something up for Lent. From a kid’s point of view, Lent was a bad deal, unlike Christmas and Hanukkah. And I imagine that a lot of us still think about giving something up for Lent. It seems to fall into the same category as making New Year’s resolutions.

The idea of giving something up for Lent is one form of spiritual discipline, which is another term that I never heard growing up. The idea is that it is like going to the gym and exercising a spiritual muscle. I’m certain that all of us could use a good workout to keep from getting spiritually flabby. And consciously giving up something for Lent is one way to approach it.

But, what is Lent really about? Is Lent a time of fasting and penitence in the forty days that precede Easter? Or is it more of a re-enactment of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness? The answer will depend upon the person responding. There is no evidence that the apostles observed Lent, and the church didn’t do so for at least its first four centuries. The origins of Lent are sketchy at best. It certainly was not something Jesus or the disciples observed, unless you go for the “vision quest” explanation.

My own tendency is to see Matthew’s and Luke’s story of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness as paradigmatic for our Lenten journey. For Jesus, this was a time of spiritual awakening. And for us, it can be a time of blossoming spiritual awareness.



We don’t get a very clear picture of Jesus’ forty days from the gospels. It isn’t as though we have six weeks worth of video tape to go through, examining his every movement and thought.

But, imagine yourself for a moment on a vision quest. The Spirit leads you out into the wilderness: a place where there are no distractions: no television, no email, no cell phone reception. Just you and the Holy Spirit...and temptation.

I think we encounter a lot more temptation than most of us are willing to admit. More often than not, our temptations involve making something that isn’t God the object of our worship, whether that is economic security or power and influence.

It may not be that we set up an altar to economic security, and it may not be that we build a golden calf to serve as an emblem of power and influence. We are not quite that obvious, and temptation is more subtle than that. One way to think about it is what you give power and attention to. Do you allow fear to predominate your thinking? Does your career take hold of your thoughts more than anything else?

If we allow God to lead us, and if we put our trust in God, then the other stuff can take a back seat. Sounds simple enough. But, if it took Jesus forty days of internal struggle to work through the temptations of having bread (what we might call fear about our economic security) and authority (the things we refer to as power and influence, often in

our careers), how long will it take you and me to work through these issues? A lifetime? Fortunately, God has given us more than forty days. But these forty days can be a good place to start.



Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion, has called Baby Boomers “a generation of seekers,” meaning that they aren’t necessarily satisfied following in their parents’ religious footsteps. A lot of them dabbled with other religious traditions as they sought something more than the mainline church of the 1960s was offering...some became Hare Krishnas and others became Jesus Freaks, and a lot left religion behind altogether. But what united them was a quest for deeper meaning in their spiritual lives.

Personally, I have a lot of resonance with that kind of journey, having started out in a UCC family, leaving the church in college, practicing Zen Buddhism, becoming a Unitarian, and finally making it back home to the United Church. All of us have faith journeys; some of us have just taken a more circuitous route to find our way. But even if your trajectory was straighter and you’ve never left the church of your upbringing, you’ve probably done some seeking along the way, asking questions about the meaning of life, how religious practice fits in with everyday living, what comes next, and where we find truth. You’ve probably struggled with the tenets of the church and your own sense of doubt, all of which is very healthy.

A month after the 9/11 attacks, I was talking with Robin Meyers, a UCC colleague from Oklahoma City, who of course had been through a different terrorist attack. It was a time when people were flocking to churches and synagogues looking for something. Meyers said that they were *seeking* for something that we have: *not comfort, but faith*.

The New Testament also has a lot to say about seeking and finding...looking for lost sheep...searching for a lost coin...seeking The Way. The Greek word *hodos* is translated into English in a lot of different ways: *road, path, journey, way*. The Gospel of Mark uses *hodos* frequently, though you may not know it because it is translated into so many different English words. Listen to how it sounds if *hodos* is always translated as *the Way*: “He ordered them to take nothing with them as they went on *the Way*.”¹ “As he was starting on *the Way*, a man ran up and knelt before him as asked, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to secure eternal life.’”² He asked the disciples, “What were you arguing about on *the Way*? They were silent, because on *the Way*, they had been discussing which of them was the greatest.”³ Mark talks about the Christian journey as being “The Way.”

Those who traveled the path of discipleship, whose journey was with Jesus, were said to be part of “The Way.” Mark’s gospel was the first of the four canonical gospels to be written, and the final one is the Gospel of John. In the fourth gospel, no longer are Jesus’ followers said to be “on the way,” but John quotes Jesus as saying, “*I am the Way*.”⁴



Our journeys lead us on the way. We travel as followers of the Christ. We accompany Jesus into the wilderness during these forty days. Our journeys may be fraught with temptation and difficult discernment, but we don’t need to fear, for God is with us..

And our these forty days of our journey together present us with an opportunity to be intentional about connecting with God, getting back on the Way, and deepening our

¹ Mark 6.8

² Mark 10.17

³ Mark 9.33

⁴ John 14.6

spiritual journeys through a time of prayer, of spiritual discipline, of doing and seeing things differently; of seeking. May we – all of us – journey together as God's people.

Amen.