

Rev. Sharon A. Benton

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Plymouth Congregational UCC

Lent 2008  
Matthew 4:1-11

[SUNG} Shepherd me, O God,  
beyond my wants, beyond my fears,  
from death into life.

I haven't been able to get that out of my head all week.

I found myself singing it everywhere:

in my office at odd moments,

in the car when I needed to relax a bit,

to Jamie at home just for the heck of it,

and as I was leaving a coffee shop on Friday,

when I felt anxious that this sermon just wouldn't come.

And so, with our singing it as a hymn this morning – and continuing it as a response throughout Lent 2008 – I lay it as an offering before you, so maybe it'll get stuck in your head too. ☺

As I left that coffee shop Friday, singing aloud across the parking lot,

I first gave thanks that nobody was near to hear me;

and then I stopped to consider:

What was the "want" that I needed to move beyond?

What was the "fear", in that moment,

that was holding me back from following God "from death into life"?

That was easy: I was afraid of not having a sermon.

The words of this response have held me so deeply this week – even before all this sermon business – that it seems they are the text from which I heard the Gospel speak for this beginning Sunday of Lent.

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You very likely know that Plymouth is a congregation made up of people from many faith traditions.

We have people who grew up Catholic and Lutheran and Episcopalian.

We have folks who started their faith journeys as

Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, and Christian Science.

Our members have been members of the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,

of the Southern Baptist churches and the Churches of Christ.

We even have members who grew up in the UCC and its forerunners,

the Evangelical & Reformed and the Congregational Christian Churches.

And a number of you come to Plymouth from other faiths or with no prior religious history.

What that says to me this morning is that each of us in these pews comes to this new season of the church year – Lent – with different ideas about what it entails...if any, because some among us have never before entered this period of reflection and preparation.

Those of us who *have* hold varying thoughts on how it should or shouldn't  
look

or sound

or feel.

For many of us, there are rituals that are simply a part of the season,  
and for others of us, those same traditions don't seem to make meaningful sense.

For example, some of you know that, in these 40 days of Lent,  
we who prepare and lead services try our hardest to remember  
NOT to use that wonderful word that begins with A ...

If you don't know which word I mean,  
please turn to the Easter section in your hymnal,  
and it'll be in almost every song.

We don't use it during Lent because it is a word celebrating Christ's resurrection,  
and in this time we are intentional about remembering his earthly ministry  
and preparing for his death.

You may also have noticed that the Deacons have changed the paraments –  
the cloths on the Communion Table, pulpit & lectern –  
to purple, “the ancient royal color...a symbol of the sovereignty of Christ”.

Another aspect of Lent is that, from Ash Wednesday forward, we traditionally hold before  
ourselves the knowledge of the ways we fall short as Christ's followers.

We don't beat ourselves up about it.

The acknowledgement of our failings is *not* for chastising;  
but for our awareness and the opportunity to change.

And sometimes, yes, we even use that word that discomforts many liberal Christians: sin.  
In Lent we talk about sin and repentance,  
turning away from the parts of our lives that aren't whole.

During this time, we hear again the stories that led Jesus to his final days on earth:  
his conversation with Nicodemus about being born from above  
and with the woman at the well to whom he offered living water;  
his teachings on how to follow if we're to be called his disciples;  
his compassionate endeavors that managed to tick off the people in power –  
leading to his eventual death on the cross.

And we celebrate the Holy Days – Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday –  
all a part of this season,  
all full of ritual and remembrance,  
all very visceral, earthy,  
making us come face to face with the realities of sin and death.

I know a lot of people don't like Lent.

But these are parts of Jesus' story, and therefore significant in our own Lenten journeys.

*How we interpret them can make us feel  
miserable about our all-too-human lives,*

*or it can drive us completely away from Christianity*

*if we leave no room for hope,*

*or, if we're open,*

*our interpretations can give us*

*strength to continue to follow Jesus to Jerusalem*

*...and beyond.*

One source offers this bit of historical perspective:

“The traditions of Lent are derived from the season's origin as a time when the church prepared candidates, or "catechumens," for their baptism into the Body of Christ. It eventually became a season of preparation not only for catechumens but also for the whole congregation. Self-examination, study, fasting, prayer and works of love are disciplines historically associated with Lent. Conversion—literally, the "turning around" or reorientation of our lives towards God—is the theme of Lent. Both as individuals and as a community, we look inward and reflect on our readiness to follow Jesus in his journey towards the cross. The forty days of Lent correspond to the forty-day temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and the forty-year journey of Israel from slavery to a new community.

On Ash Wednesday, ashes are placed on the foreheads of the congregation as a symbol that we have come from dust and one day will return to dust. It is one of many Lenten and Easter customs that remind us of our historical connection with Jewish tradition. With this sobering reminder of life's fragility, we begin a spiritual quest that continues until the Easter Vigil....”<sup>i</sup>.

And so we begin *our* Lenten spiritual quest for this year –  
a quest based on Jesus’ own as told in today’s reading from Matthew.

A quest alone into our spiritual wildernesses;  
and yet a quest as part of *this* community,  
where together we are the interpreters...

Today, my framework for interpretation is found in the refrain:

“Shepherd me, O God,  
beyond my wants,  
beyond my fears,  
from death into life”.

So let us enter into the story with Jesus once more...

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He was led into the wilderness to be tested.

Over desert earth.

Away from support of friends and family.

Far from the familiar structures of his community, his life to this point.

What did he take with him?

Was he allowed a water skin? Was there a well in this wilderness? Did he thirst as he hungered?

What did he wear? Did he have protection from the elements?

What about desert creatures? Did he hold a staff for self-defense?

He was hungry. Famished.

And then the temptations began – when he was at his weakest.

They seem so easy in hindsight.

So simple that no Son of God could have really struggled with answering.

Bread. Food. Have you ever fasted for 40 days?

And the sweet voice of persuasion.

*You're hungry. It makes sense to take care of your body's needs.*

*Why, once the basic needs of life are met, you can go on.*

*Once life's foundational requirements are fulfilled,*

*then you can serve – you can minister – you can follow God's call for you.*

So basic. Bread.  
 A "want" in the true sense of the word.  
 Jesus' body in want of sustenance.

But no. He passed that test.  
 He went beyond his wants, beyond his fears.

And then a second temptation...

*God will command angels concerning you – let God prove such intervening love.*

*Once you have assurance that you really are beloved,*

*once you see it acted out in this little instance, then you can have true confidence in your mission!*

*You can feel good about the challenges you face because God acts – gets involved in your life.*

*And then you can minister in true faith,*

*without fear of God ever being far from you.*

Did he struggle with that?

Did he, even after 40 days of physical trial, KNOW without a doubt how much God loved him?

Did he want proof? Do you?

He passed that test too.

Moved beyond want, beyond fear.

And though it again seems simple, as Matthew tells it, what about the last? Could he have been tempted?

To me it seems the most enticing of all to one such as Jesus.

*Look at the kingdoms of the world.*

*With the power of each of these behind you,*

*you could lead all people in the path of your teachings –*

*not just a few disciples and a couple of crowds, but the world!*

*Your ministry would meet no obstacles.*

*No crucifixion would wait at the hands of the powerful.*

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We're not Jesus. But we are his followers.

And if we are to be true to our faith, we must periodically choose to come face to face with our own demons – desires and fears – confront them.

And when they seem so strong as to make us succumb,

when it seems there's no way to deny the comfort of an easier path,

maybe this song from our communal Lenten journey of 2008 will get stuck in your head.

He was famished. He was tempted. He moved beyond his needs, beyond his fears.

We're called to do the same.

[SUNG]

Shepherd me, O God,  
 beyond my wants,  
 beyond my fears,  
 from death into life.

Amen.

<sup>i</sup> (<http://www.ucc.org/worship/liturgies/liturgical-colors.html>)