

Lent is one of those insider words - that you may not be familiar with if you didn't grow up in a Church that practiced Lent. So if you are not familiar with it. Lent is a holy season of 40 days (plus 6 Sundays) before Easter. Now some Christians observe lent to make their diet sound a little more holy, or to have another shot at a new years resolution - But lent came about in response to what was happening in early Christianity.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:¹

“Little by little Christians decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not cause unrest championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy.”

So the early church announced a season.

Forty days to cleanse the system.

Forty days to examine what is forming them.

And the timing is not accidental.....

Like the natural rhythm of the seasons, this is the time of year when the days get just a little longer.

¹ <https://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=cd87a42a-80fe-456e-94c7-28988abb7720%40sessionmgr102>. Barbara Brown Taylor “Settling for Less”

The edge of winter begins to soften.

The ground isn't quite ready yet — but you start thinking about it.

Maybe some of you — Andrew certainly was — have already been walking around your yard, imagining what you want to plant this spring.

Maybe you've even started clearing beds.

Pulling back dead branches.

Turning over soil.

You don't plant yet.

But you prepare.

And Lent is like that - it is a season of cultivating and letting go.

Of tending to our inner soil.

Cultivating and letting go are not opposites.

They belong to each other.

If you try to cultivate without letting go, the weeds choke what you're trying to grow.

If you let go without cultivating, the soil lies empty.

And I don't know about y'all, but I find that things are often always growing in our yard. It may or may not be what I actually WANT to grow.

And both in an agricultural sense and a inner soul kind of way
To Cultivate something life-giving,

That takes attention.

And it takes time.

In my soccer days, my coach use to always tell us. You've probably heard Practice makes perfect, but I'm here to tell you Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent. In other words, what you practice over and over again is what will be your reflex when it matters. What you practice is what you will do when you are under pressure.

Which is why little things we do matter. At the end of practice when we'd be running laps, and sometimes when the coach wasn't paying attention, people would stop to cut corners a little.

Our coach would tell us not to even come close to the corners, " Don't even put your foot on the line"

They would say: Don't make cutting corners a character trait. How you practice when no one is watching says the most about you.

If you learn to shave effort when no one's watching, that instinct grows roots.

And that's what cultivation is about.

It's about the small patterns that shape who you become.

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The scripture we read today, is a quintessential lenten passage. It is the story of Jesus who began his ministry in the wilderness for 40 days, who faced temptations and the testing of his character and identity...so that he was ready for what was ahead.

If you look it up in the dictionary, wilderness is defined as an uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable region.

Most of us prefer to avoid wilderness.

In the wilderness, you are exposed — to the elements, to danger, to your own limits.

But even if we avoid the literal wilderness, we cannot avoid all wildernesses.

Eventually, life lands you there.

Loss.

Uncertainty.

A global pandemic

Political upheaval.

Moments when you don't know what the future holds.

So For 40 days Jesus was

Hungry.

Alone.

Exposed.

And then the story goes, the devil came and tested him.

Now I think if present-day churchy people were designing these temptations

Jesus would encounter: what do you think they'd be?

I think we think of temptations to be drugs, sex or whatever cultural threat we're most anxious about at the moment.

We tend to imagine temptation as obvious moral failure.

But if you notice that's not what Jesus faces.

First - Jesus is asked to Turn Stones to Bread

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus is hungry in a way most of us have never experienced. Not mildly uncomfortable. Not distracted by a skipped meal. His body would have been weak. His thinking slowed. Hunger has a way of shrinking the world until it is all you can see. And the wilderness is full of stones — flat stones, round stones, stones the color of crusted bread. It would not be hard, in that moment, to imagine them becoming loaves.

If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.”

It is a completely reasonable suggestion. He is starving. He has power. There is no one else around to benefit or be harmed. He would not be stealing. He would not be hoarding. He would simply be feeding himself.

So what would actually be wrong with that?

The problem is not bread. The problem is what that first act would establish. If the first thing Jesus does with power is secure his own comfort. His power would be self serving.

Perhaps I wonder - If he learns to quiet discomfort by grabbing control, that reflex will follow him.

But if he learns to endure hunger without taking short cuts, he becomes someone different.

And that difference matters.

But the wilderness isn't finished with him.

The hunger was about his body. The next temptation is about something much larger.

If the first question was, “Will you secure yourself?” the next question is, “What kind of power will you build your life on?”

—Authority Over the Kingdoms

The text says he is shown all the kingdoms of the world.

In the second test the devil says you can have power over all these earthly kingdoms if you worship me. In other words Jesus has the opportunity to be emperor or king - I mean he could have called the shots, he could have changed all the policies to be just and fair, he could have used his opportunity to be in charge to change the whole system from the top down.

But The problem isn't influence.

It's the means.

The offer carries an assumption: you gain power the way empire gains power. Through coercion. Through alignment with domination logic.

And if he accepts, the kingdom he builds may even accomplish good things.

But it will be shaped by force.

And once you take power through domination, you keep it through domination.

Shortcuts don't just change the outcome.

They shape the person.

They shape the movement.

- The way you gain power trains you in how you will use it.

□

If the first temptation was about hunger, and the second about power, the third moves even deeper.

Now it is not his body that is at stake.

Not even political authority.

Now it is identity.

The text says he is taken to the pinnacle of the temple — the center of religious life, the visible heart of Jerusalem. High above the city.

And again the voice speaks: "If you are the Son of God..." throw yourself down from this mountain.

It is not just about jumping.

It is about proving.

Throw yourself down.

Let God catch you.

Let the angels appear.

Let everyone see who you really are.

End the ambiguity.

End the whispers.

End the waiting.

It would be dramatic. Convincing. Irrefutable.

Secure credibility.

Establish his identity beyond question.

But this temptation is about something even more fragile.

If Jesus throws himself down and forces a miracle, then trust becomes spectacle.

Faith becomes performance. Relationship becomes transaction.

Instead of living in trust, he demands proof.

Instead of walking the long road of obedience, he manufactures certainty.

And once you train yourself to eliminate ambiguity that way, it reshapes everything.

Because real faith grows in uncertainty.

And once you train yourself to demand proof instead of living in trust, it reshapes everything.

Again — nothing obviously evil.

Just a shortcut.

And shortcuts do not just change what happens.

They change who you become.

So he refuses.

He refuses to force God's hand.

He refuses to secure his identity through performance.

He chooses instead to walk forward without spectacle.

Without proof.

Without scrambling to eliminate doubt.

And that choice — quiet, almost invisible — is shaping the kind of Messiah he will be.

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In every case, the problem isn't this evil outcome - this obvious moral failure.

It's what it trains him to become.

Shortcuts don't just change the method.

They reshape the self.

They form you into someone who:

Uses power for insulation.

Justifies coercion for good ends.

Demands certainty instead of trust.

Sometimes the real temptation isn't to want the wrong thing.

It's to secure the right thing the wrong way.

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Now I want to be careful here.

We are not Jesus in this story.

We are not standing on temple pinnacles or being offered the kingdoms of the world.

But we are being formed by something.

And we, too, live under pressure.

We, too, face moments when we are hungry — not for bread necessarily — but for security.

We face moments when we are offered influence.

Moments when we want certainty.

Moments when we feel exposed.

And the question is not whether we will become Messiah.

The question is what kind of people we are becoming.

Because the same dynamics are at work.

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What does “turn stones into bread” look like now?

It looks like the instinct to secure ourselves first.

When we feel anxious about the future — of our country, our church, our finances — do we scramble to protect what is ours?

When discomfort hits, do we numb?

When vulnerability surfaces, do we grab control?

Yesterday I went to Table of Reconciliation - which is a group of women across racial differences talking about healing racism. The conversation yesterday was on the chapter silence as consent. And I was listening to them talk about the way that churches are often silent. And I thought about the numerous conversations when I'm in pastor spaces and I hear them talk about speaking out in today's climate. And the argument goes like this... we are trying to balance speaking out with knowing that we do good things in the community. If our big donors stop giving then won't be able to feed the hungry and keep up our work to fund the shelter for the unhoused. And so they hang their hat on that logic. et's just stay quiet. We can still do good. We can still feed people. We don't have to ruffle feathers.

That logic sounds compassionate and reasonable. It also looks like self preservation.

And what about the second temptation?

What does "all the kingdoms of the world" look like now?

It looks like the belief that if we just had the right people in charge, everything would be fixed.

It looks like the assumption that power from the top will solve what is broken.

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This is why Lent matters.

Because Lent asks:

What are you cultivating?

When no one is watching, what habits are taking root?

Because practice makes permanent.

What you rehearse becomes your reflex under pressure.

And the small ways we respond now are shaping the kind of people and church we will be

The kind of movement we will become.

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And so I ask you; what do you think?

How do you see these tests showing up in our world today...

To turn stones into bread, to gain power, to force God's hand and prove a miracle?

So what does it mean to cultivate endurance?

Endurance is not gritting your teeth. It is not white-knuckled survival. Endurance is the steady refusal to grab control when you feel exposed. It is the discipline of staying aligned with love even when shortcuts are available. It is trusting that slow faithfulness shapes something deeper than quick results ever could. Endurance is choosing integrity over efficiency, trust over spectacle, solidarity over self-protection — again and again — until it becomes who we are

