

Overview:

This week marks the midpoint of Lent, so we are taking this week to think intentionally about this season. This week we will be using a study from the daily devotional guide “The Journey to the Cross.” Some of you are already going through this on your own; may you be blessed and encouraged by the opportunity to share the road with others. “This is what Lent is about: joining the company of God’s people to consider Jesus’ suffering and death; denying ourselves and being sustained by God so that we may run straighter and stronger; gaining hope and strength from the faithfulness of God in Christ Jesus.” (from Day 4 of the guide)

Discussion:

Getting Started:

Describe any personal experience you have with celebrating Lent, whether your own or what you have observed in the lives of friends, roommates, coworkers, or family.

Looking at Our Lives:

“The forty days of Lent parallels the forty days that Jesus went without food in the wilderness, so one of the ways we identify with his suffering is by practicing self-denial. Whether it’s food or TV or “me-time,” we deny ourselves particular comforts and pleasures as a way of remembering what he endured. The point is not to manufacture suffering, as if we could earn some kind of righteousness through self-denial. Our heart in Lent is simply to declutter our self-absorbed lives, making room to remember how our Lord suffered for us.

It began in the wilderness: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry” (Luke 4:1-2) The striking thing in this story is that Jesus went into the desert under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He chose this suffering. Indeed, his whole life was a choice to enter into our suffering. Again, we are not to go looking for hardship. “Each day has enough trouble of its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34, NIV). God does not tell us to choose suffering, but that does not mean he will always keep it from us. Jesus was in the wilderness because the Holy Spirit led him there. Further, the Apostles were adamant that Jesus’ death at the hands of sinners was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). The testimony of Scripture is that Christians need to embrace suffering as part of our calling and endure it as part of our witness:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Our wilderness is not literal, but it is very real. We are tempted – perhaps even determined – to sustain ourselves, to escape our vulnerability, and to chase our aspirations without thought of others. But Jesus offers us another way, a humble way that waits patiently – despite the suffering – for the Spirit of God to direct our steps. He reveals to us what it means to embrace our humanity without short cuts. “The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread’” (Luke 4:3). Certainly Jesus could have done this, but the lack of bread revealed a deeper hunger for God, and a deeper satisfaction of being sustained by God. “And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him ... worship me, it will all be yours” (4:5-7). It would all be his eventually, but to have it now would be to have it without suffering and death. How often do we worship whatever promises to give us what we want now, without inconvenience or discomfort?

Considering Lent

Week of March 3, 2013

But Jesus worships God alone, not because it is easier, but because it is truer and far better. “And [the devil] took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you’” (4:9-10). Had Jesus done this, he could have ended all this temptation and trial. How often do we call upon God for miraculous solutions to our suffering, not because we trust him in our circumstance but because we want out of it? But Jesus would not put God to the test. We live into our in-Christ-humanity by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, wherever he may lead us. This season is about waiting, maybe even suffering the loss of things that have come to define us, because we know that our life is dust, and because we are looking forward to resurrection life.”¹

Looking at the Bible:

When Jesus was in the wilderness, hungry and suffering, he answered temptation with God’s word. Last week we looked at how to meditate on God’s word. Take a few minutes, as a group, to meditate in the *Lectio Divina* style we used last week on Jesus’ responses to temptation:

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’”

“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”

“It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Head, Heart, and Hands

1. In what ways do you try to sustain yourself? In your present wilderness, what are you trying to live by?
 - a. What do you feel like you need to do or have when something difficult happens?
 - b. How might a potentially good source of comfort be interfering with a deeper relationship with Jesus?
 - c. What might it look like to give that up for a season in order to seek looking to Jesus alone?
2. When you wake up in the morning, what does your “to-do” list look like? Think about one or two things you needed to do today. Why did you need to do them? Follow back a string of “whys” until you sift out your motivation for doing something. In whose service was that “need?” If you can, share that process with the group.
 - a. In what ways have items on your agenda or gaining the desires of your heart become a master, in contrast to “worship the Lord your God, and him *only* shall you serve”?
 - b. Consider ways in which you can fulfill your commitments working unto the Lord. How might that look? What would change from the way things are now? What would be the same?
3. In what ways might you fill in the following blanks? “Lord, it would really help me to trust you if you would ____.” “I would know God was good if he would ____.” “If the Lord would only ____ then I would or could ____.”
 - a. What does it look like to trust God without those fill-in-the-blanks filled in to your satisfaction?
 - b. How can we encourage and support one another as we await the end of suffering and of waiting?
 - c. How might Lent be used to practice this mutual encouragement in our Community groups and in our church?

“Lent is a journey that ends with resurrection, but by way of the desert and the cross. Anyone who takes it seriously quickly discovers the challenge of entering into this wilderness. It is not a casual shift—we must devote ourselves to it as a matter of the heart. Nor is it a sudden shift—we have to unravel the entangled habits of our bodies, and make ready our preoccupied minds.”² Lord, may it be so.

Praying for Each Other *(suggestions to help focus your time in prayer together)*

If time remains, take prayer requests and pray for one another.

¹ Journey to the Cross: Readings & Devotions for Lent © 2013 by Providence Church. “Looking at the Bible” taken from Day 19.

² Journey to the Cross: Readings & Devotions for Lent © 2013 by Providence Church. Day 4.