

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent: Matthew 4:1-11

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Lent! You know, I've never quite known how to greet someone during Lent. "Happy Lent" doesn't seem right. But then again, "Have a miserable Lent" doesn't seem right either. And "Have a holy, self-reflecting, life-giving forty day fast to prepare yourself for the coming miracle of Easter," while probably accurate, ain't all that catchy.

You know, Lent's kinda funny. In a weirdly ancient-modern combo, this season brings us a ton of gifts. There's certainly the ancient benefits of fasting: a sense of absence, a growing depth of belief, perhaps even replacing something nasty with something sacred. But the more we learn about how our society works now and what psychology has to offer, too, the fast of Lent invites us into much-needed self-reflection and, presumably, correction. But sometimes we can do too much. Fasts can become obsessions taken far too far. I have a family member whose fasts are positively pathological. But there's also the problem of taking our own fasts and applying them to others. Just 'cause I'm giving up chocolate or coffee or participating in a racially charged system (all things I've heard people say this year), that doesn't mean I *can* make or even should expect to make other people do the same.

Actually, I think we've stumbled into an important wilderness here, one where our own beliefs and other people's beliefs bump up against each other. Our freedom to fast, really our freedom to believe, means we get to opt out or opt in to certain things because of our religion. Our freedom does not mean we get to dictate what other people opt into or opt out of. Now, that may seem kinda straightforward. I can believe in Jesus all I want, but I can't require anyone else to. That's a fundamental part of our government's system, but it's also fundamental to our own religious system. We may want to share what we have with others. We may wish a family member or a friend could fill that hole in their life with the treasures we have here, but we can't force 'em to. It's sort of the legal and religious version of leading a horse to water. I'm sure for a lot of us, all that's a little obvious. But that isn't the case for everyone. Y'all know I love living up here, but I do keep half an eye pointed south, and there's some wild stuff going on down there, I mean wilder than usual. Or at least, bolder in its wildness.

The Arkansas State Legislature (and they're not alone on this, I just know more about what they're up to) is in the process of legislating Christian belief into law. To be clear, I should say they're legislating one kind of Christian belief into law. Or maybe it's even more accurate to say they're legislating discriminatory and hateful policies into law under the guise of Christian belief. However you look at it, here's what they're up to. They're singling out trans folks and drag performers, trying to make it illegal for someone to appear in public wearing clothing from what they're calling the opposite gender. Now, there's all sorts of holes in that kind of language. For example, what do you do if Sean Connery had shown up wearing a kilt? Or if Dolly Parton came on stage wearing jeans? Or if the buttons on your shirt work from the wrong side? Or what do you do with folks like me? I've got long hair and a dress on right now, in public, in front of God and everybody. And as much as I disagree with the folks behind those laws, they have every right to believe how they want to. What they don't have the right to do is make everyone else abide by their beliefs.

It reminds me of when I was a kid and my uncle used to show us movies. He had this way of coming in film that was in some ways typical for the kind of Christian he is, but it was real weird for me. He loved *Excalibur*. We watched that one often, and we watched it so many times that the tape itself started to sorta skip in the middle. It got all fuzzy, always in the same place, and the sounds warbled and then jumped and then kept right on going. Turns out, it wasn't the tape that wore out. My uncle got tired of seeing the "shameful" display of one of the female characters \*gasp\* *dancing*. So he literally cut the scene out of the tape and then scotch

taped it back together. I went back and watched that scene. Maybe he didn't want young eyes to see something licentious. Nope, it's pretty tame, like really tame, he was just so prudish he couldn't abide even a hint of human sexuality entering his household. So he cut out the offending part and threw it away. It's like it never existed, at least so he could pretend. That's what the state lawmakers down south are trying to do, trying to cut out and discard one or two kinds of people from our society, and then pretend like they never existed.

I mentioned earlier that forcing morality onto someone goes against both our legal and our Christian framework. I'm not a constitutional scholar by any stretch of the imagination, so I'll leave that conversation for someone better suited to it. But I do know one or two things about the Bible. And over and over again, it is abundantly clear that people get to make their own choices. Adam and Eve make their own choice. Cain makes his own choice. Jacob chooses. Noah chooses. Moses chooses. Saul chooses. David chooses. The prophets try to tell the people what they should choose, but the choice is left up to them. Jonah gets real grumpy about that one, by the way. After plenty of grumbling, he finally gives into prophesying, and then when the foreign city makes their choice to repent, he's mad that they chose the right thing! He wanted to see some good old-fashioned come-uppance, but he sees the beauty of choice instead. The disciples choose to follow Jesus. The crowds choose to hear him preach and choose to pursue healing. Even Jesus himself chooses. In Gethsemane, right before his arrest, he laments what's to come but chooses to accept it. And way on the other side of his journey, Jesus chooses to walk into the waters with John, chooses to get baptized in spite of John's protests, and then chooses to walk into the desert alone. Where the devil finds him and offers choices, too. Give up on God and come with me, but Jesus chooses God each time. It's notable that even the Devil offers a choice, isn't it? I'll let y'all do with that what you will.

Coercion or forced-belief or forced-fasting or forced-societal-wide dress codes, none of that is our business. I mean, it's not our business what other people do, but also, we're not in the business of forcing belief or practice or adherence to our way of doing things, we're not in the business of forcing anyone to do anything. What we do is offer. We offer a way of living, a way that imbues meaning into the big stuff all the way down to the tiniest details. You know that's one of the gifts of fasting, right? If you give up something mundane -- like sugar, say -- it's not just about making you miss sugar. It's about where your mind goes when you miss it. It's the discipline of experiencing absence and then, in the sudden awareness of an otherwise meaningless moment, turning your attention to God. The absence reminds you that God is there, that the absence is filled with the sacred, that meaning is present in every moment. That's always true, but fasting helps us to see it. That's why we fast. Not so other people can see what they have to do now because we said so. Maybe they'll choose this, maybe they won't. It's not ours to choose for them. It's ours to show what could be, what is.

I think I've changed my mind. I think "Happy Lent" might actually be a beautiful thing to say. If what we're about is inviting God into more and more moments, or really, recognizing God in more and more moments, what could be happier? That we choose this, that we long to share it, that's beautiful. And to know that our neighbors, our families, our friends might see what we're up to and choose to join us, too? What an immaculate gift. So, with all the love and longing I can muster, I choose to say: Happy Lent.