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St. James', Mt. Airy
3/5/17

Lent 1C
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Have you ever wondered why we have Lent?

In “Lenten Discipline”, her sermon on Luke’s version of the temptation of Jesus in the desert, Episcopal priest and scholar Barbara Brown Taylor gives a wonderful description of how Lent came to be.

Many years after Jesus had not returned as quickly as expected, the followers of Jesus learned to accommodate their own lives to the surrounding culture, finding “no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian.”¹

Once Christianity became the religion of the empire, that comfort was complete – no more martyrdom, bold witness, and challenging the powers that be.

She notes, our ancestors in faith decided to be nice instead of holy.

But comfort left a longing and hunger for something deeper, and as the church began to organize itself, the seasons of the church year began to be developed. The season of Lent came into being early on as season of preparation for remembering Jesus’ passion and resurrection.

¹ From *Weekly Seeds* by Kathryn Matthews, www.ucc.org.

So the church dug deep into its faith story, recalling the time that Israel, Elijah, and Jesus each spent in the desert, wandering and suffering, longing and learning: hungry. All those stories had the number forty involved, and so it was Lent became forty day “springtime for the soul.”²

Like our urge to clean house in the spring, the church recognized a need for a spiritual spring cleaning as well, and Taylor says, it offered “forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone – to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves.”³

The image I offered on Ash Wednesday is that of dust.

Nothing revolutionary there – it is the practice to impose ashes on our foreheads with the admonition, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Dust can come either from lack of use, or dust can come from construction.⁴

Dust that accumulates from lack of use is a symbol of an unexamined faith life. It is faith as obligation or as social norm. It is remaining in that place of spiritual comfort.

Construction dust is present with you consent to God’s work on you, and through you. It is the consequence of a faithful struggle – of new square footage being added.⁵

We are covered in construction dust when we are intentional in self-examination and honest in repentance – when we fast from our comfort.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ From Facebook post from The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, 3/1/17.

⁵ Ibid.

We see Jesus covered in the dust of the desert – but also the dust of construction in our Gospel reading today.

In the verses just prior to our passage, Jesus was baptized and sky opened up – the Spirit descended and the voice of God pronounced him God’s Beloved Son.

In response to such a life-changing revelation, Jesus followed the Spirit into the desert for forty days of fasting, reflection, and prayer. A time to be alone and figure out what it all meant and who God was calling him to be (construction dust!).

It is telling that all of the temptations offered by the tempter amounted to things that would make Jesus’ life more comfortable.

You’re hungry? Change these stones to bread.

You’re trying to come to grips with being God’s beloved and what it means?
Test God to find out!

God says you have power, but it’s not of this world. I’ll give you power over all the kingdoms here and now if you put me above God.

Jesus refused to use his power for his own comfort and sent the tempter away.

And when he did eventually claim and use his power? It was exercised on behalf of others, to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and give glory to God.

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Temptation was not for Christ alone.

Like those earlier Christians who settled for a comfortable faith, we're tempted today to turn away from the suffering of the world, tempted to build our own defenses against doubt and risk, tempted to concentrate not only on our own needs but also our wants, before thinking of others.

When we do this, we forget who and whose we are – we fall prey to the tempter.⁶

The tempter is always empty talk. We need to resist the narrow vision that he provides and instead welcome the all-encompassing vision of God.

Lent is a dusty season in which we can choose to set aside our comfort and live into that grand vision.

Let us spend some time in the empty places within us that belong to God alone, listening to a Gospel vision larger than we can imagine, opening ourselves for what is yet to come.⁷

~ AMEN ~

⁶ From *Weekly Seeds* by Kathryn Matthews, www.ucc.org.

⁷ Ibid.