

## GOD'S COMPETITORS

Lent 1: Shaped by testing

*Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11*

Welcome to the empty season—  
the season of empty stomachs, empty hearts and minds,  
the season of fasting, sacrifice, confession,  
the season of contemplation, examination, and deprivation,  
the season we all know and love—*Lent*.

Welcome to the most un-American season of the church year.  
Welcome, therefore, to perhaps,  
one of the most spiritually important seasons of the year.

Emptiness is not something any of us naturally aspire to.  
Especially not those of us shaped by a culture of self-indulgence.

Don't know about you,  
but I've often gone into Lent thinking something like . . .  
Well, *yes*, Lent is a fast, a season for sacrifice.  
But I don't *have* to undergo any rigorous actual *fast*  
to experience the spiritual benefit of Lent.  
I just need to be more intentional  
about prayer and spiritual contemplation  
and work at a posture of submission to God.  
That's what Lent is really all about—  
submitting my heart and mind to God.  
Getting hung up on what I'm giving up for Lent—  
sweets, chocolate, Facebook, *whatever*—  
that's *not* really the important thing.

And it's not unusual for me to have talked myself right out  
of needing to sacrifice *anything* tangible during Lent.

So, is this a problem, or *not*?  
Am I missing something important during Lent,  
if I don't actually, physically, fast from something tangible?  
even if I try to pray more and meditate more?  
The reason I'm asking this question

is the worship series we just finished.  
I just spent the last nine weeks  
thinking about, reading about, and preaching about  
how our practices shape our desires.  
How our routine, physically-ordered actions, habits and practices  
shape what we desire,  
what we are strongly oriented toward—  
emotionally, spiritually, and physically.  
We applied this principle as we looked at the practices and rituals  
of Christian worship,  
but we also reminded ourselves, *repeatedly*,  
that there are many other regular, daily, secular practices  
in our lives that shape our desires,  
and we need to examine those practices more,  
and reflect on how they shape us.

So if I really *believe* what we just preached about for nine weeks,  
I might have a pretty weak argument,  
if I talk myself into saying Lent is really about my *attitude*  
and *spiritual* posture of sacrifice,  
and not so much about what I actually, *literally* give up,  
in daily practice.

Ouch. Because until today, even though Lent began four days ago,  
I hadn't decided to "give up" anything.  
Today I'm beginning a fast.  
I'll explain it in a bit.

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But *first*, let me say more about why it's so important  
that we learn to embrace Lent as a season of emptiness.

I'd sum it up this way:  
"Only people who are empty can know the fullness of God."  
To experience the full measure of God's presence and grace,  
we need to empty ourselves.

In fact, I think that at the root of all sin,  
is our failure to admit and to embrace,

a state of emptiness before God.

In a story Jesus told, two men were praying in the temple,  
*One* man, a ruthless swindler, a tax collector, bowed low crying,  
“God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”  
and went home reconciled with God.  
The *other*, a holy man, a good, righteous, thoroughly ethical man,  
stood tall, and thanked God he *wasn't* empty of all goodness  
like that lying, cheating tax collector.  
The holy man went home still full of sin, Jesus said.

I think this failure to embrace emptiness before God,  
is what caused all the trouble in the garden of Eden.  
We heard that story again this morning.

Adam and Eve were put in the garden to take care of it for God.  
Their only job was to be God's humble servants.  
Dependent on God.  
In *themselves*, empty.  
But one day they were tempted by the serpent  
to reject that emptiness.  
The serpent said, “You can be like God.”  
Boy, that sounded good.  
Way better than being empty, depending on *God* for everything.  
To “be like God.” That was the temptation.  
And they bit on it, *literally*.

And their eyes were opened. They saw they were naked.  
And that made them uncomfortable. *Ashamed*, even.  
So they sewed together fig leaves to cover up,  
to hide their vulnerability before God.  
And human beings have been sewing fig leaves ever since.  
Today we still stitch together fig leaves, in a manner of speaking,  
and we cover up before God,  
we hide our vulnerability,  
we deny our emptiness and need.  
And we therefore act in all *kinds* of sinful ways.  
We orient our whole lives around ourselves.  
Protecting. Guarding. Securing.

Looking after our *own* interests first.  
With force, if necessary.

The sin of Adam and Eve, is still,  
a perfect metaphor for the sin that continues  
to shape our lives so deeply.

Lent is a season we so desperately need, *spiritually*.  
It forces us to face up to this lie that we are self-sufficient.  
Lent exposes us for what we really *are*.  
Rebellious creatures—deeply loved by God,  
but sorely in *need* of redemption.  
Of forgiveness. Of grace.

The punishment for Adam and Eve, and for all humanity since,  
was being sent out of garden into the wilderness.  
A place where we *don't* have everything it takes.  
Where we lack what we need.  
Where we have to look to God in a deep, vulnerable trust.

Sometimes, like the tax collector,  
we embrace the empty wilderness,  
we acknowledge our need,  
And God restores and reconciles us.  
Other times, like the holy man,  
we stubbornly cling to the deception,  
that we can do this alone, on our *own* strength and wisdom.  
And we walk away still burdened.

Those two choices—  
whether to embrace emptiness and need,  
or to fight emptiness and assert the power to *make* things happen—  
were precisely Jesus' choices when he was tested in the wilderness.  
Satan came to him at his point of desperation  
and tempted him to choose the latter—  
to take care of himself and his needs  
and “just say no” to being empty and needy and dependent.

That was also Adam and Eve's temptation—to “be like God,”  
to reject their dependence on God.

They fell in the trap.  
Jesus did not.

Jesus, with clarity of purpose,  
having just been baptized by John in the Jordan,  
and having heard, in a voice from heaven,  
a profound *reminder* of who he was,  
“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”—  
Jesus was able, even in the wilderness,  
to be clear about who he was and who he belonged to.

Like Adam and Eve, and like Jesus,  
we are still tempted, by the Adversary, to skip the wilderness.  
To avoid this empty place:  
Where there is hunger, and no bread.  
Where there is suffering, and no relief in sight.  
Where there are questions, and no ready answers.

Our constant human temptation  
is to take the place of God in this equation,  
to take matters into our own hands,  
to turn away from being God’s servant  
and become God’s competitor, *instead*.

But in an amazing gesture of grace,  
God invites us into fullness of life as God’s collaborators.  
God invites us to lay down our puny agendas,  
take up God’s cause in the world,  
to participate with God in God’s mission,  
and only by God’s grace and power,  
to live in this world as God’s collaborators.  
To do this *requires* that we empty ourselves, as Jesus did.

That is the struggle—  
between accepting my emptiness and God’s grace,  
or rejecting my emptiness and taking matters into my own hands.

When I reject emptiness,  
I become God’s competitor.

I compete against the purposes of God.

When I live as if I have to prove my worth,  
*I compete against God,*  
who made me worthy and created me in God’s own image.  
When I act out of anger or resentment for someone who did me wrong,  
*I compete against God,*  
who loves *me* no matter *what* I do,  
and forgives me without hesitation, over and over.  
When I grasp for power and control,  
*I compete against God,*  
who in the person of Christ,  
emptied himself, even to the point of death on the cross.  
When I grasp for security through wealth and possessions  
*I compete against God,*  
who revealed himself to us in Jesus,  
who lived as a servant of all,  
and refused to let the things of this world distract him.

Every time I yield to temptation,  
and deny my emptiness, deny my need for redemption,  
and seek instead to take control,  
I shift from being God’s collaborator, to being God’s competitor.

This requires a constant, vigilant, awareness  
of who I am in relation to God.  
The world I live in  
would have me believe I belong to myself.  
That by a sheer act of my will,  
and the power of positive thinking,  
I can become the person I want to be.  
But that’s not *God’s* story about me. That’s not *God’s* narrative.

God’s narrative is that God has an exclusive claim on me.  
Sure, I’m always free to *choose*,  
free to accept or reject God’s claim.  
I’m always free to take my life in my own hands.  
But that’s *not* the story God created me for.  
God willed me into existence with love,

and that love keeps drawing me toward God.  
All that I am, and all that I have,  
is owed entirely to this lover-creator God.

That's the posture we must learn to live into.  
God as lover-creator-provider.  
We as creature-servants in utter need of God's grace.  
When I *reject* that posture,  
when I orient my life toward myself,  
I become God's competitor,  
and I become a lost soul.

The season of Lent is the season we all need,  
to wake up from the self-oriented stupor of our culture,  
and to be reminded of our holy emptiness.  
I say *holy* emptiness,  
because it's an emptiness that we  
hold before a loving, redeeming God.  
And God will fill it.

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Now, perhaps, moving from the sublime to the mundane,  
and perhaps, even, slightly amusing.  
I want to tell you about the fast I began today, 4 days late.

Most of you know about my love affair  
with one of God's great gifts in life—freshly-roasted coffee.  
[You're *allowed* to chuckle at what's coming.  
I see the humor in it, too.]

It's one of my great pleasures in life—  
getting green, unroasted fair-trade organic coffee beans,  
then roasting them to perfection,  
grinding them with a hand-grinder,  
and brewing them with water we draw ourselves  
from a local mountain spring.  
I take serious pleasure in my coffee.

I've had persons, over the years, when Lent rolls around,

jokingly suggest that I should give up my coffee addiction for Lent.  
I always brush it off,  
because I really don't *have* a physical addiction.  
I've *often* gone 2 or 3 days without coffee,  
for one reason or another,  
and I don't get headaches or withdrawal.  
I don't *drink* huge amounts of coffee every day.  
Just one, good, tall, luscious insulated mug in the morning,  
slowly sipped in the first few active hours of the day.  
I drink coffee for the pure pleasure of it, not the caffeine boost.

So why give it up for Lent?  
I'm not addicted. Nor, is it even a vice.  
I can point to many scientific studies showing the health benefits  
of regular, moderate coffee consumption.

Well, I began to think.  
Maybe, precisely *because* it's something that brings me such joy,  
and that I put so much love and time and effort  
into creating each morning,  
coffee might be an ideal candidate for something to abstain from,  
for the very purpose of inserting  
some intentional emptiness into my daily life.  
Because of the culture I live in,  
this culture that craves fullness, that encourages hyper-activity,  
that tries to create and control everything good,  
rather than receive it as gift,  
because of this culture and because of who I am,  
I *need* some tangible reminder  
that emptiness is not something to run from, but to embrace.  
Isn't that the whole purpose of a fast?  
to be naked and vulnerable before God and self?

So if I abstain for this season  
from this deeply embedded daily morning ritual,  
every time I walk through the dining room,  
past my custom coffee-making station,  
it will be *impossible* not to remember why I'm doing this.

If I was giving up some vice, something bad for me *anyway*,  
I might not look at it as opportunity to embrace emptiness.  
I might just see it as a health move.

So now I commit myself, publicly,  
to give up drinking coffee during Lent.  
I'll keep on roasting, sharing, and serving it to others in our home.  
I'm not denying the essential goodness of coffee.  
I'm just giving up something *I* do  
that is meaningful and deeply enjoyable,  
so that I actually insert into each day  
a bonafide experience of emptiness,  
as a reminder that for me to truly live the life I was made for,  
*requires* that I empty myself daily before God.

And I invite all of you, if you have not done so already,  
to also choose some way that you might during this season  
incorporate some experience of emptiness into your daily life.  
The fourth day of Lent is not too late to start.

One final thought,  
in light of the complete emptiness and utter barrenness  
*forced* onto the people of Japan in these last days,  
giving up something so small and insignificant  
as a morning cup of coffee  
is nothing I can take *any* pride in.  
It's almost *laughable*, how puny my sacrifice.

Nevertheless,  
it will provide a tangible reminder every day  
both to embrace my own emptiness before God,  
and to remember those who have emptiness forced upon them.

Let's turn to hymnal #558.  
I think the choice of this hymn was a God-thing.  
Karen chose it the day *before* the earthquake and tsunami  
struck Japan and the Pacific Rim.  
But the text couldn't be more fitting:  
"When the storms of life are raging."

Let's sing it as a prayer for those in our world today  
experiencing emptiness over which they had no choice,  
as well as a prayer for ourselves  
as we embrace the presence of God  
in our *own* places of emptiness.

—*Phil Kniss, March 13, 2011*