

Kneading

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[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Introduction to Scripture

If there were a liturgical season that paralleled the ministry discernment journey, it would be Lent.

When Pastor Geoff asked me to come and share some reflections on the Maine School of Ministry and the discernment process, he invited me to ponder this question, “Is preparation for ministry anything like being in the wilderness for 40 days?”

Our scripture today is from the Gospel of Matthew, and it’s a passage that is situated right between Jesus’ baptism and the start of his professional ministry. It tells the story of Jesus undergoing his final preparation for this new career path.

There, in the wilderness, he fasts for 40 days before facing a series of temptations. This is the story that typically opens our season of Lent, and informs much of the spiritual practice in which we engage during this time.

Sermon

This past fall, there was a book everyone kept recommending to me called *Where the Crawdads Sing*, by Delia Owens.

“Oh, you’d love it, Jessie,” they’d say. “It’s this incredible coming of age story that’s been a *Times* best-seller for weeks!”

Sure, sounds good.

“It’s kind of a murder mystery, and a romance, but with a bit of a twist...”

Yeah, cool

“And did you know that the author was in her 70’s when she wrote it? AND it’s her first novel??”

Really?

That hooked me.

My first career was Adult Education, and I’m a Christian. I like stories about second chances, unexpected fresh starts, startling successes from people society underestimates. I loved the idea of spending ~370 pages inside the mind of someone who had over seven decades of

life experience and the chutzpah to buck the trend of the 20-something debut novelist. To be fair, Owens was already a published author in her primary field of zoology, and I'm sure her research inspired her novel in many ways. But even so, can you imagine what it would be like, to have this incredible story, or at least, all the ingredients for it, just swirling around inside you for decades, just *waiting* for you to weave them together in just the right way?

But then I felt a little convicted... why should I be so surprised that this accomplished woman published a best-selling first novel in her 70's? We do live in a society that makes an idol of youth.

Though sometimes I wonder if it's actually *youth* we long for, or just the possibilities that come with being at an age that society accepts as more flexible. A time rich with the possibilities that come with taking time just for education and learning and exploration.

Because later on, when you're at an age when your time belongs more and more to others, when the people you love the most depend on you to keep doing what you've been doing to provide for them and set them up to live their best life. It makes us in turn dependent on that status quo as well.

And then, what do you do if you start to feel a pull towards something else, a different track, when every day the track you're on sinks a little deeper into its established path?

I wonder what it was like for Jesus. Making a career shift at age thirty, at

what must have been considered mid-life back then. And, going from carpenter to itinerant preacher was, I'm sure, rather a leap. How did he prepare for that kind of change?

Well, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the last thing Jesus did, before he started his professional ministry, was go into the desert to fast for 40 days. He... emptied himself, cleared his head, so to speak. He let his body burn through all he'd been carrying from his earlier life, that he might be filled up with the spirit, and start fresh.

But all that "emptying," left him vulnerable to a temptation. When Jesus' tempter showed up, he suggests Jesus miracle himself some bread out of rocks, that his hunger might be satisfied. And while, yes, one doesn't live by bread alone, I'd also add: is bread *really* bread that hasn't been made from real dough, with real ingredients, kneaded together. I mean, I know magic miracle bread conjured by Jesus should probably be pretty good, but I don't know... there are some things that you just can't cut corners on... and I think bread-making is one of them.

Baking bread well is a process, it involves blending your ingredients, kneading them together, literally forming new matrices out of the chemical elements in the dough, and then letting it rise, shaping it, and baking it.

It's an image that I come back to often as I engage in various stages of ministry training. You're accumulating all these different "ingredients" through your reading, your instruction, your

conversations, and you're bringing them all together. But you can't just toss them in a bowl, give a little stir and call it good. You've got to let yourself be kneaded, be pulled and stretched and pushed in new directions, letting all those delicious elements weave into a worldview that will hold together, that doesn't crumble easily, one that can rise and breathe and still have the elasticity to remain cohesive. It's a process that takes time and effort.

Maybe that was the devil's temptation. To see if Jesus would cut corners and go for a quick solution, an easy answer, a sort of theological fast-food. But Jesus *waits*, spending forty days hungrily weighing his theology, letting his understanding of scripture be challenged, testing his own spiritual strength, against temptations of quick but shallow answers.

Right now, I'm taking a class from the Maine School of Ministry on "God and the Problem of Suffering," the age-old question of "If God is good and powerful and all-knowing, why do bad things happen to good people."

I don't expect to come out this class with a tidy answer to that question. In fact, I'd be pretty disappointed if they tried to offer one. But neither are we given a pass to shrug off the question with a simple "It's *ineffable*."

No, in this class, we are called to stare into the heart of one of the great unanswerable questions of our faith, and

put it in conversation with scripture and tradition and our own experience... and draw what meaning we can from the process of wrestling.

It's pulling at some of my beliefs, and pushing at others. My very spirit is being kneaded. Sometimes it's a little rough, but it is good.

It helps that I'm in this class with a wonderful group of people. Of the dozen folks in the class, about a quarter are already ordained clergy, another quarter are lay-folks taking the class "just for fun," and the rest of us are "Members in Discernment," those of us working out our pathway to ministry. Given that we range in age from our thirties to seventies, ministry would hardly be a first career for any of us.

I sometimes look around that classroom of folks on their second, third, fifth, seventh career, and think I might be sitting among one or two "Delia Owens-es" of ministry, with a septuagenarian who has that incomparable combination of imagination and life experience and chutzpah that will be a gift to a congregation somewhere. And I am grateful to the Maine School of Ministry for being a community that caters precisely to these kinds of folks.

We, in the UCC, talk a lot about how "God is still speaking." But perhaps the more remarkable revelation *underneath* that statement is that "people are still listening!"

After the complicated legacy of the "The Church," and all those ways in which the

public witness for Christianity has been characterized by some of the uglier “-isms”... There are still so many wonderful, Spirit-seeking, curious, loving people who keep showing up to places like this, and keep listening for and finding God in communities like these.

And, there are still those of us who want to make it our life’s work serving those finding their way to churches on Sunday.

If there were a liturgical season that paralleled the ministry discernment journey, it would be Lent. It’s a season of contemplation, as we students get pushed and pulled and kneaded as we wait for our “real” ministry to start. We’re in the wilderness, fasting, hoping to be filled with something that we might share... someday.

There is a certain restlessness to these quiet “waiting” seasons. The seasons where you “still” yourself, where you *deny yourself* the satisfaction of *doing*. And, as you fast from doing and going and activity, you do find yourself starting to weave together all your reflections, weighing them and testing them and making new discoveries and witnessing light bursting forth from new revelations about how God moves in the world and yet you’re still... still. Your hour has not yet come.

So here’s what I tell myself. In spite of all the restlessness I know I’ll be wrestling with in this season, I still hope for a discernment journey that takes its cue from Lent... because I know how this season ends.

Lent might begin in a desert, and end in a tomb. But just outside that tomb, there’s a woman, waiting... waiting for she knows not what. A woman who had spent some three years following a teacher. Listening, observing, wrestling with her demons, and learning from her teacher alongside his other disciples.

The woman enters the tomb, and who should arrive but a stranger, someone she supposes is the gardener, someone she doesn’t recognize as her beloved teacher until... he calls her by name and gives her a message, a commission, a place to *go* and a job to *do*.

Only then does she see Jesus clearly. When she knew that *he* knew that she had something to contribute to the story.

And now, we pilgrims in this “2020 Lenten story,” the one still being written, we accept our trials in the wilderness. We will do our best to be still as we reflect and witness and take in all we can. So that we will be ready.... So that we will be ready when our Lord shows up, calls us by name, and says:

Run.

Run, my clever child, and tell them what you have seen.