

Sermon: Running on Empty
Scripture: Matthew 4: 1-11
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: March 5, 2017

The season of Lent can be such a gift to us if we engage it fully. When else in our day to day, year to year lives are we asked to empty out. So so much of our lives are about filling up – filling up our minds with knowledge, filling up our calendars with activities, filling up our tanks with gas, our pantries with food, our conversations with opinions, our bank accounts with money, our down times with things to do, our depressed states with stimulants, filling up the silence with words and news and noise, filling up, always filling up until about mid-February or the beginning of March when the winter sun is weak and Spring is still too far off to dream too much about it, Lent comes along and blows the whistle on all of our filling up and says welcome to the season of emptying out.

The story is told of a student of religion, a voracious learner with a background in religious studies and an expert on the mystical traditions and the desert fathers sought out the Abbess of a particular monastery for her deep wisdom. He asked the Abbess to teach him all she knew so that he could become awakened and know God. He shared with her his extensive background in various traditions and religious studies and the Abbess listened patiently even as she arose to make tea. As the young man continued to talk, the Abbess placed a cup at each place, took the teapot and began to pour tea for him. The tea cup filled and she kept pouring as the tea flowed over the side of the cup and

saucer and began to flow over the table when finally the young quit his reverie “stop, stop, the cup is full and overflowing!” The Abbess stopped pouring and said “Yes, it’s true and you are like this cup, full of your own and others’ ideas. You come asking for teaching and wisdom but your cup is already full. I can’t put anything more in. Before I can teach you anything, you’ll have to empty your cup.”

On the other side of the world and from a very different tradition, a great Chinese spiritual master named Send T’sans once said “Do not search for the truth, only cease to cherish your own opinions.” The spiritual path for so many of the world’s great spiritual traditions but especially for Christian spirituality is the way of emptying. If the cross as the central symbol of our faith does not represent the path of emptying out then it represents nothing. Remember the Apostle Paul’s words: “though Jesus was in the very nature of God, he did not consider equality with God something to use to his own advantage but he emptied himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2)

The Lenten paradigm is Jesus driven into the wilderness for 40 days, fasting and alone, tempted by the devil to fill up his emptiness superficially with bread and control and power and all sorts of tricks of the ego, to make it all about him, and Jesus responds to the temptation to be centered upon himself with the commitment to be centered in God, from being full of himself to remaining empty until he could be filled with God.... remaining empty til he could be filled with God.

The 3 traditions of Lent – Fasting, Prayer, and Alms-Giving – are all spiritual practices of emptying. In fasting, we intentionally empty

our bellies and resist the urge to devour unconsciously whatever is put before us. In prayer we empty our minds and resist the urge to fill our minds on our plans and our worries and our obsessions. In alms-giving and charitable works we empty our pockets and resist the urge to hoard. In each instance – prayer, fasting, alms-giving, we give back a little of the control to God, we become a little less full of ourselves, a little more full of God.

At the beginning of Lent we hear of Jesus emptying himself in the wilderness in preparation for his public ministry. At the end of Lent, 6 weeks down the road from here, Holy Week and Good Friday we will read of Jesus taking the deepest cut and emptying himself unto death, even death on a cross and it is after all of that that we will awaken with Mary Magdalene to a new day in a garden on Easter morning to the emptiness of a tomb, once filled with death and darkness, then empty with light and we remember that's where it's all going, that is where it all ends.

We rehearse all of this at communion, when we gather at the Lord's table not to fill our bellies with bread and juice, but to taste a small morsel that leaves us physically still empty but in representing the body and blood of Jesus, broken on the cross for us, that love and light fills our every cell

I'm going to sing through this hymn for you as we prepare for communion and once I've sung it through I invite you to sing it with me on the insert as we prepare to receive the light of Christ...

The Light is in the Summer Sun

D G Bm G
The light is in the summer sun that ripens grape and grain.
A D G A G A Bm
They fill with light when life is done, the fruits of light remain.

The light is in the bread and cup when winter sun grows weak.
They fill our shadowed spirits up with all the light we seek.

May light that flowed through Jesus Christ now fill our every cell,
His love that served and sacrificed now shine through us as well.