

Life Begins At Forty
Luke 4:1-13

“I’ve often heard it said and sung
That life is sweetest when you’re young
And kids, sixteen to twenty-one
Think they’re having all the fun
I disagree, I say it isn’t so
And I’m one gal who ought to know
I started young and I’m still going strong
But I’ve learned as I’ve gone along.....

That life begins at forty
That’s when love and living start to become a gentle art
A woman who’s been careful finds that’s when she’s in her prime
And a good man when he’s forty knows just how to take his time

Conservative or sporty, it’s not until you’re forty
That you learn the how and why and the what and when
In the twenties and the thirties you want your love in large amounts
But after you reach forty, it’s the quality that counts

Yes, life begins at forty
And I’ve just begun to live all over again....¹

I suspect that is the origin of the old saying, “life begins at forty.” I also suspect that Sophie Tucker (anyone remember her?) meant something totally different from what I’m suggesting this morning! But in one sense, it is similar – life really does begin at forty. That is, in the cycle of the Christian year and in the Biblical story, new life happens only after a period of struggling for 40 days or years.

To appreciate fully the new life offered to us on Easter, we must first walk through that 40-day penitential period known as Lent.

Of course, Lent is patterned after the 40-day period of fasting and temptation that Jesus experienced in the wilderness.

That story recalls the 40-year period of wandering in the wilderness by the people of Israel. Before they could enter into the promised land, there was this time of discipline and refining and learning what it meant to be led by God and to depend on God.

And that story in turn recalls that Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai before he came back down with the Ten Commandments.

Even beyond history, in the introduction to our story as God's people, we are told that a sinful world had to be purged of its sin by a flood. It rained for 40 days and nights. The New Testament interprets this story as a kind of baptism where the emphasis is not on being saved from the water, but by being saved through the water.²

So today, let 40 be a metaphor for all those uncomfortable times when we feel like we live more in a wilderness than we do in the promised land. Those are the times that test us and tempt us to give up faith and otherwise to be unfaithful. Those are the times when we feel sick or just sick and tired, of life's pressures and demands.

Life begins at 40! Give or take a few days, 40 weeks approximates the definition of a full-term pregnancy. And childbirth is painful--so I'm told. So is new birth. Who would dare to say that it is easy. St. Paul reminds us **"that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth, but it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his sons and daughters and set our whole being free."**³

There's always a lot of groaning in the wilderness. "Oh, if only we had meat to eat!" the Israelites complained while en route to the promised land. "Slavery in Egypt was better than this drudgery!" "Why doesn't anything ever go right around here?" "How much suffering and heartache can one person endure?"

There's a man who often is exercising at the Y when I'm there. He pushes his body to extremes, so much so that I've often worried that he'd have a heart attack on the spot. All the while he grunts and groans and it's impossible not to hear him. There are even some health clubs that are concerned about too much grunting and groaning. They've adopted a three-strike and your out policy against it. That's too bad. Groaning is part of the struggle. Maybe if we did more of it and we were more open about wrestling with the issues of faith and life, we would grow and become stronger in. I think of the story where Jacob wrestled with God. At the end of the struggle, God gave him a new name, *Israel*, which means "one who struggles with God."⁴ It just doesn't seem that new life happens without such a struggle. One of my favorite lines from the *Confession of 1967* reads, "Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage."⁵ Life demands courage for the struggle.

So, too, does new life. Those who identify themselves as "born again Christians" often give the impression that all you have to do is take a little bit of this and a little bit of that and add some water and you have instant Christian! "If you just open your life to the Spirit your life will be all love and joy and peace," they sometimes say. To be sure, God's spirit brings love and joy and peace, but the next fruit of the Spirit is PATIENCE.⁶ That should be a clue about choppy waters ahead. We need patience for the struggles that also come with the Spirit.

The Gospels are clear about it. At his baptism, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus. That same

spirit, according to Mark, "drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted."⁷ Luke softens that word by saying, "**Jesus ... was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ...**"

For me it's disturbing to think that the Spirit would deliberately put us into situations where we would be tempted. But on second thought, only those who are led by the Spirit can be tempted. If the Spirit is not at work in your life, if Christian faith means nothing to you, temptation means nothing as well. Consider all the news clips we see of sociopaths and hardened criminals who, when arrested, smirk and smile and thumb their noses not only at the camera, but at everything in life that is **"true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."**⁸

Being open to the Spirit of God does not keep us out of the wilderness. The more serious we are about our identity as Christians, the more intentional we are about living a life of faith, the greater our struggle will be. This is especially true living in a culture whose values are the exact opposite to the teachings of our Lord.

Temptation is a fact of human life. That our Lord was tempted is another sign of his humanity – the humanity he shares with us. The Scripture says, **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."**⁹

Jesus' temptation is not ours. We are not the Messiah. We can't turn stones into bread. In fact, what we call the three temptations of Jesus are really three different forms of the same temptation: What kind of Messiah are you going to be? Are you going to live up to human expectations or are you going to be obedient and do it God's way?

On another level, however, Jesus' temptation is our temptation, for we all must struggle with whether or not we will be children of God or children of the world. No matter what forms temptation may take in our lives, they always seem to boil down to this: Am I going to try to save myself or am I going to throw myself upon the mercy of God and trust in God's salvation? New life can only be born out of that struggle.

The struggles of being 40, that is, of being in the wilderness – sick or just sick and tired – can be blessings in disguise. They can be opportunities for growth and new life.

There's a danger in that suggestion. There are those who believe that God sends us trials and temptations as some kind of test of our character. I simply cannot believe that God sends you troubles to teach you some kind of lesson and to force you to graduate from the school of hard knocks. I resonate with the letter of James: **"No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it."**¹⁰

Again, one cannot be "full of the Spirit" or in the presence of God without, at the same time, being

aware that life is not right. Perhaps that sense that something is not right is due to our failure to have faith and trust God or because we have rebelled against God's moral law.

We heard it a couple of weeks ago in the story of Isaiah's call to be a prophet. Aware of God's unmistakable presence in the temple, he could only respond by saying, "**Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.**"¹¹ That same week we read the story of the miraculous catch of fish. Peter, knowing that he was in the presence of the holy, could only respond by saying, "**Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!**"¹² And we heard it this past Ash Wednesday when Job finally had the audience with God he begged for throughout the story: "**I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.**"¹³

New life begins with such unsettledness. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes:

Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the Law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power – it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk.

Henri Nouwen refers to a professor who said with a certain melancholy in his voice, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."¹⁴ I can attest that's the way ministry really is. But some interruptions can also be occasions for growth and new life because they force us to struggle with the meaning of faith and life, and those kind of interruptions happen all the time – a health crisis, a family crisis, a financial crisis, a national crisis.

The late Paul Tournier, the noted Swiss psychiatrist of a generation ago, differentiates between sickness as the cause of growth and sickness as the occasion of growth. Preferring the latter emphasis he writes, "Events give us pain or joy but our growth is determined by our personal response to both, by our inner attitude."¹⁵

Though I don't believe that God would send us misery, I do believe that no matter how miserable we may be, no matter how hot or dry the wilderness is, there is always the occasion to grow through our struggles and we can become stronger as the result. "**In all things God works for good with those who love him.**"¹⁶ So let's not fear the wilderness, let's learn and grow from it, responding creatively to it.

Endnotes

1. “A Musical Monologue by Sophie Tucker” by Jack Yellin / Ted Shapiro
2. See 1 Peter 3:20
3. Romans 8:22-23
4. See Genesis 32:22-32
5. Book of Confessions, 9.17
6. Galatians 5:22
7. Mark 1:12
8. See Philippians 4:8, *The Message*
9. Hebrews 4:15
10. James 1:13-14
11. Isaiah 6:5
12. Luke 5:8
13. Job 42:5-6
14. *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*
15. Creative Suffering, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) p. 29
16. Romans 8:28