

Monday, March 10: 40 Days and 40 Nights

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/1GMTYlrf90NegYvN9xFk1J?si=505967a5554849ba>

2025 is the year a lot of my friends and I are turning 40. They used to say to be 40 was to be “over the hill,” and I have never understood if that means the hard part is over or just beginning. 40 is a recurring number in the Bible. The Hebrew children wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. A number of Israel’s kings reigned for 40 years. 40 *weeks* is the amount of time many of our favorite Biblical characters spent being knit together in their mother’s wombs, whether Ishmael or Isaac, Jacob and/or Esau, Samuel, and of course Jesus.

But Lent is 40 *days*, the same duration of the rains that brought Genesis’ flood, and the same duration of at least two of Moses’ trips up Mt. Sinai to converse with the Almighty. 40 days also mark Jonah’s sojourn in the belly of a beast, and the number of days Goliath tormented the Israelites before he got what was coming to him.

So many epic Biblical tales occur over durations of 40, it’s no wonder that when Jesus begins his ministry it’s with his own 40 day sojourn in the desert. Jesus, after all, is the embodiment of all of these stories. He is the “pride and joy” of Hebrew history, so says Simeon in Luke 2.

For me, Lent hasn’t truly begun until I’ve gotten to hear or sing the hymn “40 Days and 40 Nights.” Unfortunately I don’t think it’s even in my church’s United Methodist Hymnal. I learned it from the Episcopalians.

I love it particularly because of its 17th century tune, AUS DER TIEFE. It turns out the original text (in German) was a poetic translation of Psalm 150, another Lenten must-have. There is a different 40-days hymn in one of our hymnals but its tune is far too cheery. It’s Lent! I want some foreboding (hence my preference for the German composers of the 1600s).

*Forty days and forty nights
You were fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.*

*Sunbeams scorching all the day;
Chilly dew-drops nightly shed;
Prowling beasts about your way;
Stones your pillow; earth your bed.*

This is Lent! At least it was for Jesus.

There is always a two-fold path we tread in Lent. It is at once the path of Jesus: the “Lonesome Valley” he alone could walk for us. And, at the same time, in Lent, *His* path becomes our path too, following his footsteps.

*Shall not we your sorrow share,
And from earthly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
Glad with you to suffer pain?*

This is the double-mindedness of Lent. We give things up. We abstain from “earthly joys.” We, in faith, choose to suffer a bit in remembrance of Christ’s own suffering.

Now, I fear at times too much has been made of Lent’s little sufferings. It can easily turn into a law: “No chocolate,” “No meat on Fridays,” “Say your prayers.” These are disciplines which I inevitably foul up such that I not only suffer through deprivation, I also suffer through my own guilt over not having been able to go 40 days without depriving myself of this or that little pleasure.

And yet, I wonder, maybe that is the point.

So many of our Biblical forbears’ forty-day or forty-year ordeals were experiences of deprivation *and* guilt. They were experiences of life with our backs turned to God, willfully or out of shame. Perhaps a bit of suffering, and even a bit of guilt are Lent’s way of humbling us, but in a good way.

Not long ago one of my internet pastors, Sarah Condon, after a profound experience of suffering, reported that while she would never wish to have gone through such deprivation, suffering, and grief, she noticed that on this side of it she was different. She no longer held grudges the way she used to. She no longer had (as much) contempt for a-holes as she used to. She concluded by saying “This is the terrible good news: sanctification may only come through suffering.”

*So shall we have peace divine;
Holier gladness ours be due;
Round us, too, shall angels shine,
Such as ministered to you.*

Again, I hesitate to say any of this. I wouldn’t want anyone to conclude that suffering is in itself a good thing, nor do I desire any more of the Lent Olympics where we compete to see who can suffer the most for Jesus. No. The truth is, 40 days is a long time. It’s time enough for suffering to find *you*, no Olympics required. We could *choose* to suffer a bit through fasting or prayer; but whether we do or not the odds are good that over these 40 days we will encounter suffering naturally—the suffering of others, or our own.

I cannot say that suffering in itself is good. However, what Jesus reveals to us is that any and all suffering is shared with him, with the one who willingly endured suffering with and for us. So, “shall not we [Christ’s] sorrows share?” Let us share our sufferings, and our guilt, with him, for he has come to bear them with us, and bear them away.

*Keep, oh, keep us, Savior dear,
Ever constant by your side;
That we may with you appear
In your resurrection-tide.*