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Paul Purdue preaching

elmont orders our calendar around the rhythms of Christian Year and today is the first Sunday of Lent. As Advent prepares us for Christmas, Lent readies us for Easter. Lent is often about subtraction: self-denial, sacrifice, giving something up, and stepping out of the ordinary. Lent arrives unadorned. Do you have a box of Lenten decorations in your basement next to your artificial Christmas tree? Do you have a Lenten Spotify playlist?

As a preacher who values the Lectionary cycle, I am aware that all three the lectionary cycles A,B &C begin Lent with "Jesus' Temptation." Luke describes Jesus' fasting and prayer in the wilderness in 13 verses. Matthew tells of the devil twisting Scriptures in 11 verses. Mark gives us 2 verses: *And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and Jesus was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.* Matthew, Mark, and Luke launch Lent with forty days of fasting and facing temptations, but what about John's Gospel?

When some of our clergy staff suggested using the "Tell me Something Good" resources for worship and discipleship, I was not sure we could really do Lent right apart from Jesus fasting in the wilderness. Perhaps, I was guilty of preferring the "old wine", old ways, old hymns, and comforting old traditions. (Luke 5) I know, "*The Word of God is living and active*", turning over settled ways of thinking, but still even on Monday, when I dove into sermon prep, my attitude could have been better. But then it struck me "What about John's witness"? What can we learn about Lent from John's Gospel?

Wouldn't it be much simpler if some committee had blended our four Gospels into one fully homogenized story? But perhaps, four witnesses, four accounts, four editors, four perspectives tell us something about how much God values our human perspective? John introduces Jesus without 40 days of fasting. What might we learn about Lent from John?

John is so different from the other 3 Gospels, featuring long monologues and distinctive "I am" statements: Light of the World, Good Shepherd, Living Water, True Vine, The Door, Way-Truth-Life, The Resurrection and the Life. John is likely a passion play focused on Holy Week. Right after today's story, before we get out of chapter 2, Jesus flips over the tables of money changers. Matthew will not get to this Holy Week protest until chapter 21! What about John? What can John teach us about Lent?

Matthew Mark and Luke show us Jesus facing temptations, fasting in the wilderness, and arguing with the devil about Biblical interpretation. John introduces Jesus as a helpful guest at a wedding party. Ponder that Wilderness, wild beasts, fasting, Bible bowl -vs- Wedding Feast, partying, water to wine.

Archaeologists have not found an ancient scroll written by a first century wedding planner, but the Bible suggests that weddings were joyous occasions with fancy clothes, beautiful jewelry, big families, and joy. Songs of Songs is too racy and too clunky for church, but you get a sense of the joy of a wedding...

*Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest!*  
*Look at you—so beautiful!*  
*Your eyes behind the veil*  
*Your hair braided with purple and silver ribbons*  
*Your lips like a crimson ribbon*  
*Your smile- so lovely.*

*“Dark, I am” she answers*  
*“Dark and lovely like the black tents of the Kedar Nomads”*

*Your name is like perfume*  
*Your nature is like fragrance*  
*And so the young women adore you*

*They have built a wedding canopy*  
*the finest Lebanese trees*  
*Silver pillars, Gold table settings, Purple cushions*  
*The bridegroom wears a crown,*  
*Crowned by his mother on his wedding day*  
*Inlaid with love*

*Look at you so beautiful*  
*Look at you*  
*You are utterly beautiful, my dearest;*  
*Set me as seal upon your heart*  
*Bind love around your arms*  
*For love is stronger than even death.*

(selected and adapted from Song of Songs)

A wedding feast might last 7 days, building up to one big party. The Bible mentions ten bridesmaids, 150 gallons of wine, beautiful clothes, fancy jewels, the best food, the best band, and funny traditions like the bridegroom and groomsmen coming in the middle of the night for a surprise lamp lit parade down main street . (Matthew 25) It feels more like Mardi-Gra than lent. You remember that parable: *“keep your lamps trimmed and ready... don’t run out of lamp oil”*. We often remember the message about spiritual disciplines, but forget that the story ends in a party. The Bridegroom will arrive to lead us to the Banquet Hall because there is going to be a party as Lionel crooned *“People dancing all in the street, See the rhythm all in their feet, All night long! Life is good, wild and sweet*

*... Feel it in your heart and feel it in your soul, Let the music take control. We're going to Parti', Fiesta, forever Come on and sing along- all night long!*

That does not feel so Lent-like, but maybe sometimes the church loses focus on why we put on ashes or give up chocolate? Jesus brought wholeness, healing, sight, welcome, Good news, and food for 5000. How does Lent ground us in Good News?

This is a big wedding. Jesus is a plus 12 or maybe some of the disciples were in the band or the kitchen staff? Had Jesus stepped outside the party tent to cool off, when his mom came up and said *“They have no wine”*? My mother would have frowned if I had spoken to her like Jesus did to his mother, *“Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come.”* Lizzie McManus-Dail explains *“An embarrassing squabble with one’s mothers in front of friends as a seminal human experience”*

It fascinates me that Jesus expresses reservations about stepping into the ministry limelight, *“my hour has not yet come”* and then launches his ministry as a favor for his mother. What does that kindness teach us about Jesus? Often we think we need to feel good to do good, but maybe the good feelings follow our right actions. Maybe Jesus needed a motherly nudge?

Mary does not argue with Jesus about whose concern it is- or lecture Jesus about kindness or love of neighbors; she just alerts Jesus to a need and tells the wait staff *“Do whatever he tells you.”* We do not learn how the water became wine. It appears only the kitchen staff and a few disciples knew, maybe the bridegroom never even knew how Jesus saved the day.

If you think of all the problems in the world, Jesus turning water to wine for a party seems pretty inconsequential. Some preachers might have preached *“when the wine*

*has run out it is time to go home*". Jesus' miracle only saves the caterer and the wedding party from embarrassment and yet John tells us *"This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."* We may look for big glorious signs from heaven; they may arrive in quiet selfless-acts only a few waiters see. The tiniest good seed can grow a healing forest.

What can we learn about Lent from Jesus who quietly turns water into wine to keep the party going? In Luke 5, the crowds around Jesus are growing and some perhaps well-meaning folks point out to Jesus that *"The disciples of John fast and pray frequently as do the Pharisees, but your disciples are always eating and drinking."* I have never noticed this critique. Jesus, your people like parties too much and could stand to pray a little more. How did Jesus respond? Will Jesus tell them about 40 days in the wilderness fasting or frequent early morning or late night prayer sessions? Jesus answers, *"You can't make the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The time for fasting will come, but right now, while the bridegroom is here, we feast!"*

What if we were known for joyous feasting, for having enough, for meeting our moment's need? What if our spiritual disciplines brought wholeness and Good News to our neighbors?

As we make our Lenten journey, with fasting and prayer, let us not lose sight of the Good News of Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life, Savior, Prince of Peace, The Bridegroom, Son ready to amend a timeline for his mother, Child of God, True Vine, Wine-maker, Bridgegroom, Christ. Amen