

## **Full (Enough) to the Brim**

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Lent 1 (Year C), March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

I.

Dorotheos of Gaza, whom we just met in our children's message, is considered one of the "desert fathers." He was born in the year 505, and was a Christian who joined a monastic community in Palestine. Many of the desert fathers and mothers were ascetics or hermits who renounced comfort in order to grow spiritually close to God, and to do this they had a very serious schedule they followed every day. Gosh I read about the order of their days, and sometimes I just want them to lighten up a tiny bit! Like, when did they watch netflix in their pajamas or have a picnic or go bowling? But they were serious for good reason— they were early Christians who experimented with how to grow spiritually, and some of their wisdom still speaks to us all these centuries later. What I appreciate about Dorotheos of Gaza is that his teachings are super practical. He has one funny-but-applicable teaching on "why a person sometimes gets annoyed when he hears an insult, and other times he endures it without getting agitated." I mean, where was Dorotheos of Gaza three weeks ago when we were talking about criticism versus critique? Anyway, he is most famous for his idea that the closer we grow to God, the closer we are to one another.

Lent is a time for growing closer to God. Our Lenten theme this year is "Full to the Brim." We'll be nourished by beautiful art on our bulletin covers, poetry each week in worship, a new song that Andy's going to teach us, and the scriptures throughout Lent are about God's overflowing grace, even in desert places. There's a "Full to the Brim" devotional you can pick up in the church office to take home with you. As a community, we'll be gathering for a beautiful evening we're calling "Faith Journey Cafe" where we'll be sharing the faith story of our congregation as a whole, as well as sharing our individual stories at small group tables. 26 people attended the Lenten Nature Walk last Sunday out in the redwoods, gathering up symbols of life, death, and resurrection. We're beginning to gather again as a church community, and it feels good to be in relationship with each other face to face. There is something, maybe you feel it too, there is something about being in person that allows us to take a step forward in the circle. It feels like momentum. It feels like growing closer to each other and to God.

II.

And I know it may sound like an odd juxtaposition to meet “momentum” with the “slower pace” of Lent, but as we re-engage at this moment in the history of the world, I think Lent might end up being the perfect season for us. Lent invites us to think about challenging ideas like confession, forgiveness, and grief. It’s a time when we –on purpose– dwell in the shadow of the valley, without sidestepping it.

So part of me argues with our Lenten theme, Full to the Brim, because I think there is value in emptying ourselves out and through penitent reflection. I think resisting temptation and showing restraint can be useful in emotional situations where thoughtfulness is needed in order to move forward. And I think humans need confession and forgiveness, we need to face mistakes and allow space for grief. Traditionally, that’s what Lent is about– self-examination and repentance. So, how can we be emptied out and full to the brim at the same time?

And if Dorotheos of Gaza is correct, and the closer we grow to God, the closer we grow to each other, is there a moment when that becomes too much togetherness? I mean, one of the scariest risks we can take is with God because the heart of God is willing to come very close to us. And that level of intimacy can be overwhelming. We might reflexively want to pull away because it’s just too close. So what could it look like to come close to God and each other in a way that’s just risky enough? What if our goal this Lent is not total fusion but each of us being our full individual selves, taking a small step closer to God. And thereby taking a little step closer to each other?

III.

We begin Lent with Jesus being tempted in the desert. He’s totally famished, as he has fasted for over a month. The devil tries to get Jesus to satisfy his own hunger by turning a stone into bread. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and says they can all belong to him. He tries to get Jesus to prove himself by performing a miracle. To all of these, Jesus quotes scripture and says No. It’s not that he isn’t tempted at all– or else we wouldn’t call this portion of scripture “the temptation of Jesus in the desert.” It’s that when he does experience temptation, inside himself he chooses not to give in. He resists malignant power, even though he’s tired and hungry. Even though it might have felt good in the moment to react without holding back. Jesus resists.

Jesus probably could have avoided this episode with the devil . He could have completed his fast, and left the desert wilderness without ever having met up with the devil. But ironically he chooses to stay and engage. He chooses to show up and be accounted for. Even though the devil is trying to

push him off balance, Jesus stays true to his principles. And exactly how does he do this? Well he has several supports going for him. He is supported by the inner care of the Holy Spirit. The scripture tells us that Jesus is “led by the Spirit” in the desert. So the Holy Spirit is one support. Another is the effect of fasting itself. Fasting is a spiritual practice that many religions teach as a way to be closer to God. It has a way of peeling back layers of self-righteousness and being fake, to get to the core of what’s most important spiritually. So fasting is another. Jesus knows the Bible well enough to be able to quote scriptures back to the devil in his arguments. Scripture is another support. And honestly I think Jesus is supported by paradox. By that I mean, he tolerates being close to the devil and being distant from him. He is simultaneously tempted and resistant. He doesn’t try to reduce the tension he likely feels, instead he does his best to allow paradox to exist.

There are complexities that live within each of us, our families, and church community as well. Some of us are running on fumes to be here today. I have heard the word “weary” more times in the past few years than ever before. And I want to say, it’s ok to be weary. It’s also ok to be excited to come together as a community here in this sanctuary. It’s ok to show up here today with tear-stained faces, with exhaustion from months of trying to convince a vulnerable elder she can’t live alone anymore. It’s ok to be here with skin that’s been discolored from radiation treatments. It’s ok to come to this moment with hurt feelings that need to be laid down. It’s even ok that we are a community that includes people who are ready to throw their masks out the window and others who are feeling cautious and vulnerable. It’s ok because I have every confidence that we are all doing our best with what we have. It’s ok because, no matter how we arrive at Lent this year, God’s expansive love and the presence of the Holy Spirit are right here, shepherding us along. We are being held by God and one another while we walk through the valley this Lent. Our confession is received and held by God’s grace. God surrounds us with extravagant love.

The paradox here is that the more we empty out, the fuller we become. It’s not a puzzle to be solved but a way of life to be lived.

Maybe, even though our theme for Lent is Full to the Brim, maybe it’s ok to skim off a tablespoon for pandemic and drought, and for weariness and war. Because God fills us back up through the power of the Holy Spirit, through fasting, prayer, acts of kindness, and even through paradox. Perhaps our devotional group that’s praying with Kate Bowler’s book *Good Enough*, can give us some grace for ourselves and each other, to be— well, to be “Full Enough to the Brim.” I have a feeling that our spiritual development this Lent will end up helping us to move closer to the heart of God, and thereby

move closer to each other. Being made empty and being made full are part of that journey, complex as it is. Momentum and a slower pace at the same time. Confession and forgiveness held together. Expansive faith growing in broad desert places. Dwelling with death, and resurrection on our horizon.

IV.

The world needs thoughtful people right now. At their best, the religions of the world help shape thoughtful people who consider their own role, in something larger than themselves. So even though it might seem small and perhaps difficult to really allow ourselves to be in the paradoxes of Lent– I think actually, engaging a thoughtful Lent is so needed right now–not just for us individually, but for our church, and our moment in human history.

So this Lent let's strive to be Full Enough to the Brim. Amen.