

On Going Barefoot In Lent
Luke 4:1-13
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Isn't it such a great feeling to come home at the end of a long day and kick off your shoes? To wriggle your toes? Maybe get a foot massage by your loved one? Or when you go to the beach and feel the sand and the water bathing, comforting your feet? Going shoeless imparts a sort of freedom, not only from pounding the pavement in your workaday shoe leather, or tottering around on high heels, but also from obligations and responsibilities, the cares of the world. Kids run and play barefoot. Vacations are better barefoot, unless hiking is your thing. Sleep is definitely better barefoot.

And yet here you are, barefoot, or at least shoeless, and probably feeling a little more anxious than you usually do in church. Maybe that's because you are wondering whether anyone is going to see that hole in your sock, or the run in your stocking. Or whether the smell of your feet might be annoying someone around you. Or that your feet are too big or too small to be seen in public. Or that the color or style of your socks will reveal just what bad taste in clothing you really have. Or maybe it's just because church, even though it is proclaimed as a place of freedom, isn't a place that you normally associate with going barefoot. But maybe it should be.

The reknowned Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote this is his famous essay he called “Ash Wednesday”: “In some monastic communities, monks go up to receive the ashes barefoot. Going barefoot is a joyous thing. It is good to feel the floor of the earth under your feet. It is good when the whole church is silent, filled with the hush of men walking without shoes. One wonders why we wear such things as shoes anyway. Prayer is so much more meaningful without them. It would be good to take them off in church all the time. But perhaps this might appear quixotic or [impractical] to those who have forgotten such very elementary satisfactions. Someone might catch cold at the mere thought of it.”

For all the benefits Merton describes, it *is* far too easy to “catch cold,” to be scared off, by the thought of doing or being something new or uncomfortable, especially in church. The old saying goes that the Devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know. There is safety in routine, no matter how mundane, or soul-suppressing that routine may be. Risk is not for the fainthearted. The only person who likes change is the baby with the wet diaper. Yes, we might catch cold if we run outside to see a shooting star without our coats or shoes on. But, oh what we miss to remain comfortable. You see, it is precisely in those moments or seasons of discomfort or challenge or adversity that we find our faith growing, our relationship to God deepening, our compassion expanding. We are pushed to new limits or challenged to take a step we’ve never taken before. We are forced to admit our limitations or we are shown the depths of our sins and shortcomings. We

realize our dependence on God and one another, or even on people we despise or mistrust. We usually come out on the other side of our discomfort better for it, or at least recognizing how we might be the better for it if we let ourselves next time.

Of course, I'm not talking about the discomfort that comes with a major illness or the loss of someone dear to us, or from being tortured or the victim of a violent crime, although we've all heard stories of how even the harshest, most horrible experiences have been transformed by God's grace. No, I'm talking more about the kind of daily challenges we find at our jobs, as we are parents or grandparents, spouses or children, neighbors wherever we are but also citizens of the world, members of the church of Jesus Christ. Especially about that last category, as followers of Christ, but also about none of the others either, nowhere does it say in Scripture that life will or should be comfortable, or free from adversity. Yes, our God gives us comfort in times of trouble. Yes, Christ's yoke is light and his burden easy. But that divine comfort is a generous response to the daily discomfort we find carrying our crosses, if indeed we'll carry them.

And so there is virtue in discomfort, if we'll allow it. The trick to claiming that virtue is, I think, to persevere, to remain in our discomfort long enough for change to come. Usually, we bail out too soon, and our chances of being transformed by an experience are cut short as well. We find an excuse to leave a conversation that is getting too intimate, although deep down we want to be able to share our heart with that other person. We make excuses to avoid an invitation to

meet a new group of people even though we are withering up from loneliness. We don't speak our mind when we're asked our opinion, even though we've got a lot to say. In all those situations, by allowing God to stretch us just a little further, we could be experiencing something amazing. Maybe we need more courage. Maybe we need more experience. But maybe we just need to allow ourselves a little more time outside our comfort zones, maybe something like forty days.

Yes, forty is the magic number, at least it is in the Bible. Anytime something significant happens in the life of God's people, the number forty is probably lurking there somewhere. Forty days and forty nights inside the ark. Forty years in the wilderness. Forty days between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, to name just a few. And oh, forty days of Jesus' discomfort in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. Yes, back to our story from tonight, and how it might speak to the perseverance we need amongst the trials and temptations of our lives.

First, let me say that most of us will not experience the temptations Jesus faced, for these were his alone, part of his particular story, because he was the Son of God. I'm not even going to try to relate the three temptations Jesus faced to modern versions of them we might face, for they belong in a different category. Jesus' temptations were related to who he was, where he came from, and where he was going, and that's what matters for us too, but in our own time and place. The value of this story is not so much that Jesus was tempted and did not succumb to the specific temptations, but rather that he was willing to be tempted at all, that he

was willing to endure forty days of discomfort of mind, body, and spirit. In Luke's version of this story we learn that it was not at the end of the forty days that Satan tempted Jesus, but throughout the forty days. The three specific challenges Satan poses him are written in such a way as to suggest that they come at the end, but Luke is clear that for the entire time Jesus subjected himself to both physical deprivation, which would have been harsh enough, but also to spiritual challenge. But there was, of course, nothing keeping him there. No commandment of God, no divine electric fence keeping him out there in the desert. He could have left at any time, said, "That's it, I'm out of here. I don't need to prove anything to anyone. I'm the Son of God after all. Even Satan knows that." But rather, he persevered, for his sake, and for our sakes. And just what did Jesus' perseverance do for him? What did he gain from it?

We'll never know precisely, but author Frederick Buechner offers a helpful observation about Jesus, an observation which also speaks to us on this first Sunday in Lent: He writes, "In many cultures, there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sack-cloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”
Wise man, that Buechner.

What did Jesus gain from his forty days? Ask yourself that after your forty days of asking and answering Buechner’s questions, questions which are not in the least bit comfortable, but well worth asking and answering, no matter how long it takes.

Let me finish by returning to your bare feet. Lent is something like spending forty days without shoes. You may well develop blisters. You may have to pull some splinters or glass out of them. Or bandage up a stubbed toe. But at the end, here is what you will find. You will find, like Moses in his bare feet before the burning bush, that you have been standing on holy ground. You see, God is present in the midst of your trials and temptations just as God was present with Jesus in the wilderness. Remember how the story begins: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.” Not “into,” but “in.” Maybe it’s just the way my translation puts it, or the way I am reading it, but it doesn’t say that the Spirit led Jesus to the border of the wilderness, as if showing him the way, dropping him off at the edge and watching him wander in. But rather, I read it to say that the Spirit led Jesus *while he was in* the wilderness. Jesus spent his forty days on holy ground.

Going barefoot through Lent, you will find that you have a better understanding of the terrain of your own life, and the life of the world. When you go barefoot, you feel everything differently under your feet, every sharp object, every hot or cold surface, every wet or dry step. But you also feel every soft patch of feathery grass, or smooth sand, or gentle breeze. You touch the earth in a different, unfiltered way. Some of you know that I ride a motorcycle, and what I love most about it is the access I have to the world around me in a completely different way than in a car. You feel the temperature change going up and down

over even a small rise in the road, something you miss with the air conditioning on. You smell your surroundings change subtly, between cattle farm and wildflowers. You get hit with a lot of bugs, some of them nice and juicy, but you see the world unlimited by the rectangular frame of your windshield. There is an immediacy to life that brings you closer to God. It's a lot like being barefoot.

And finally, at the end of it all, you will feel freedom, that end of the day, toe wiggling feeling of rest and comfort and liberation, that you belong in the world without shoes, just the way God brought you into this world, and just the way the undertaker will let you leave this world, if you are lucky. For if, as Merton says, "prayer is so much more meaningful without" shoes, I for one do not want to spend eternity in even the most comfortable shoes. Through the discomfort of Lent, we become comfortable with who we are, and with who God is, the one who challenges us to grow, but loves us even with our shoes on. May we all observe a Holy Lent. Amen.