What is Lent?

Lent is the 40 days before Easter. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which was March 2 this year. Lent ends on the Saturday before Easter - April 16. Count the days between March 2 and April 16. Do you see the problem? How many days did you count? So, why is Lent 40 days?

The answer is - little Easters.

What does that mean? What day of the week do we celebrate little Easters? Now recount the 40 days leaving out all 6 of those little Easters.

40, 40, 40 ......

40 is an important number in the Bible. Can you think of Bible stories in which 40 is important? Here are a few:

- Genesis 7:11-12.
  1. How many days and nights did the rain fall?
  2. For fascinating insight into the ancient understanding of the earth, read vs. 11 again. How did the waters fall? Where else did the waters come from? Why did the ancient people think the flood waters would spring up from the ground and fall out of windows? For the answer read, Gen. 1:6-8.

- Deuteronomy 8:1-3
  1. How many years did the Israelites wander in the wilderness?
  2. What did they eat when they were hungry?
  4. How would you describe the Israelites? Obedient? Whiny? Brave? Scared? All of the above? Do they remind you of any other humans you know? This is why they are so endearing, in my opinion.

  1. How many days did Jesus fast in the desert before he was tempted? Why would this matter in the story?
  2. What were the three temptations? All of them are about power. How so?

Lent is a time of preparation for Easter. It is often marked as a solemn and reflective time. Why? What has to happen first for Easter or resurrection to occur?

Lent, especially Holy Week (the week before Easter), is a time in which we confront death. We reflect on our own mortality. On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we are reminded with ashes on our foreheads that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Life is finite and yet, life continues. Out of death comes life. This is true for the resurrection of Jesus but it is also true in our world. How do we see life come from death? Think of the natural world—life and death and intricately bound together. Name some examples.
40 Days, 40 Nights, 40 Years

So as you read, 40 is a common and important number in Scripture. It is also a representative number. It did not really rain for 40 days and 40 nights. The Israelites did not literally wander in the wilderness for 40 years. It is unlikely Jesus actually fasted for 40 days. So why do all these stories use the number 40? Whenever you read the number 40 in Scripture, it is trying to tell you something. They are clues to something important. But what?

What do you think it was like for Noah’s family to watch it rain for 40 days and 40 nights? How about the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years? How would it have been for Jesus to be tempted in the desert after he had gone without food for 40 days?

What kind of time were these experiences of 40 days or 40 years? An easy time? A hard time? A challenging time?

40 Years in the Wilderness

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They were sometimes hungry and sometimes thirsty. They made good decisions and bad ones, but all along the way, God was with them. God gave them food to eat. God gave them water to drink. (Do you remember how? If not, read about it in Exodus 17:1-5.) The Israelites were changed in those 40 years. They became a nation, a group of people bonded together by a shared culture, belief, and experience. Remember, they left Egypt as slaves. They were a people who had been robed of their belongings, their faith, their freedom, and their identity. It took “40 years” or what 40 years represents, to find themselves, to reclaim their identity, to know God, and to become a community of people that could love, trust, and depend on each other. That is a huge transformation to undergo!

The 40 year wondering led them to the promised land, where they would establish their own country and live by their own culture and religion. They became a united people who were faithful to God (at least for a time). Those 40 years in the wilderness were challenging but it was also the time that shaped and transformed them.

40 Days of Lent - Putting it all together

So, Lent is 40 days. Based on what we know about the stories of people going through 40 day or 40 year experiences, what do you think is supposed to happen to us during Lent? It does not have to be a hard or challenging time but it is a time for us to

__________________.

(The answer is not that we are to wander in the wilderness, go through a flood, or be tempted in the desert – in case you were wondering.)
**Pollinator Garden**

This Lent, we are going to continue preparing and planting the pollinator garden. We are going to allow the garden to help us prepare for Easter, which is the day and season (Easter is both a day – this year it is April 17 - and a season that lasts 7 weeks) that we celebrate life and new life.

So far, we have cut back the shrubs and trees, dug up the stumps, weeded, added compost, and placed a beautiful pollinator garden sign. Good work you all! Soon we will add a path, mulch, and plant.

**WEEDS**

One of the activities we will engage most often in the garden is pulling weeds. We will be pulling weeds for years and as long as the pollinator garden exists. There will almost always be at least one weed that needs to be pulled – trust me!

What are weeds? The definition is this: a wild plant growing where it is not wanted and in competition with cultivated plants.

So, are weeds “bad”? Can you think of some places we allow weeds to grow?

My yard is mostly weeds. We do not care about nor want a yard full of grass. We like the native weeds. Many of our weeds are wild violets and grow tiny purple flowers in the spring. They are so pretty! The great thing about weeds is they do not need much care. They grow with wild abandon. A yard full of weeds is also better for the environment than grass. Do you know why?

(find the answer on the back page)

Weeds are not inherently bad. In fact, they are often native and helpful because they attract pollinators. Sometimes however, they are invasive species or non-native plants that are harmful to the local environment and cause a lot of problems. Can you name any invasive species - plants, animals, or insects - in your area?

In this study, weeds are any plant we do not want in the pollinator garden. What is the problem with letting a lot of weeds grow in the garden? What will happen if we do not pull them? What will happen to the plants we plant for the monarchs?
Bible Study - The Parable of the Sower

Read Matthew 13:1-9

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

A parable is a story using things and experiences the people listening would understand to help explain something else. Why would the parable of the sower have been something those listening could relate to?

- In the Scripture text, which seeds did well? Why?
- Which seeds appeared to do well at first but then died? Why?
- What happened to the seeds that fell among thorns (which are a form of weeds)?
- This parable is not really about seeds. What do you think it is about?
- What do you think the seed represent?
- What does the good soil represent?
- If you want Jesus’ explanation of the parable, look at Matthew 13:18-23

Distractions

As we said earlier, weeds are not necessarily bad. They are just growing in a place that might hurt the plants we are trying to grow and therefore, we have to remove them. For example, a gardener would not want weeds to choke out the lettuce she was growing by blocking light or taking too much soil and water. We must make sure weeds do not crowd out the milkweed we want to grow in the pollinator garden. Weeds are plants that are not helpful in the garden you are growing. Weeds are like a distraction. They distract and take away from what you are trying to do or grow.

All of us have distractions or things that take us away from what we should or want to be doing.

What distracts you from doing homework?
What distracts you from finishing your chores?
What distracts you from paying attention to the person speaking?
What distracts you from staying present to the things that are happening at any given moment?

Distractions are not necessarily bad. My cell phone is a huge distraction. I can waste a lot of time on my phone but it also keeps me connected, contains my calendar, and gives me access to information. The phone itself is not “bad.” It is how I use it that matters.
Sometimes during Lent, people give up something so they can focus on God or pay better attention to their faith life. They may give up watching TV so they can spend time reading and praying. Other people add something to their lives, like helping others or reading the Bible. This is because people are trying to make more room for God. They are trying to pay attention to God. They are hoping to be changed and to focus more on God and less on all the things that distract them.

What distracts you from God? From your faith? From church?

**Lenten Spiritual Practices**

During Lent, I will offer ideas for spiritual practices, or activities to help us tend to our faith. Spiritual practices help us pay attention to God and to our own thoughts and feelings. We lead busy lives full of distractions. Spiritual practices are intended to help us clear away some of the distractions at least for a short time so that we can pay attention and focus. They help us be mindful of the present moment, which is often hard to do as we tend to dwell on the past, worry about the future, and distract ourselves from the present. Many of us find that when we try to sit still or pray or find quiet time, our minds go into overdrive.

For a fun explanation of this phenomenon called “monkey mind,” watch this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxyVCjp48S4

**Pull Weeds & Journal**

Moving our bodies and physical labor can be a good spiritual practice, especially when our task is something we must repeat over and over - the more monotonuous the better. When we get into a rhythm of doing one task over and over, we often find we are able to pay attention to our bodies, focus on the task, and clear away some of the chatter or busy thoughts in our heads. We are able to quiet the monkey mind.

This week, I invite you to weed as part of your spiritual practice. You can weed the pollinator garden. You can weed the flower beds at your house. You can weed a neighbor’s flower bed. You might ask an elderly person you know if you can weed around their house. Weeding is not an easy task as you get older because it can hurt to bend over for a long time or get down on your knees.

When you are weeding, pay attention to how you are feeling. Notice how the dirt feels in your hands, how your body feels, the sounds around you, the color of the dirt and weeds. Focus on the task and what is happening in that moment. Try not to let your mind wander too much. If it does, simply call it back to the task of pulling weeds or to the sounds you hear.

After you weed, I invite you to write about your experience.

- Was it calming? Frustrating?
- Were you worried about other things or were you focused on the task of pulling weeds?
- Did your body get into a soothing rhythm?
- Were you able to pull your mind back when it got lost in thoughts and turned into monkey mind?

Next write about that which distracts you from doing what you want or should do. How might you pay better attention? How can you help yourself focus on what is really important to you?
Why are Weeds Better for Your Yard Than Grass

The answer to the question on page 3.

There are many reasons it is good to allow weeds to grow in your yard. First, growing grass requires a lot of work and often chemicals that are harmful to the environment and insects, including pollinators. Second, fields and open spaces in nature are not covered in one kind of plant. When we plant grass in our yards or open fields we are creating a monoculture – or an ecosystem with too little diversity. Native weeds provide greater diversity and are also good for pollinators. I have insects and pollinators that visit our yard full of weeds - not just the pollinator garden I planted for them. To find out more about why a yard full of happy weeds is good for the environment, check out these articles:

https://www.onegreenplanet.org/lifestyle/weedy-lawns-better-fancy-grass/
https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/lawn-care/lgen/your-weedy-lawns-is-a-good-thing.htm

In Defense of Dandelions

Unfortunately, dandelions get a bad wrap. Many people spend a lot of time and money pulling and treating their yards to prevent the growth of dandelions, but these sunny weeds are great for the environment. Pollinators love them! They also have deep tap roots which bring nutrients up to the surface and help other plants. Dandelions are fun and bright and bring a bit of color to your yard. And who doesn’t love blowing dandelion seeds. They are the best! While some people may think a yard full of dandelions is ugly, it is actually a sign of a happy healthy yard that benefits pollinators.

Resources:

The image of the caterpillar on the milkweed leaf on page 1 is taken from Monarch Butterfly Garden and can be found here: https://monarchbutterflygarden.net/milkweed-plant-seed-resources/asclepias-purpurascens-purple-milkweed/

The image below is a photograph by Julie Johnston. You can find her beautiful work at https://juliejohnstonphotography.com/flowers/