

Kate revisits the meaning and purpose of Lent in a sermon entitled “Lenten Courage.” It was given on March 13th, the First Sunday of Lent, and was based on Matthew 4:1-11 and Genesis 2:15-17.

I know that the season of Lent comes with some old baggage for a lot of people. Particularly for those of us who grew up Catholic, mention Lent and immediately our minds revert to years past when it was about “giving up,” giving up something that would normally make us happy. Chocolate was a perennial favorite.

I remember one year, I decided to give up dancing for Lent, which was not easy, as my little feet were always ready to be tapping. Even the wind would set my body moving. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining about any of this. For me the Lenten discipline of “giving up” something gave me a project. I could make a plan, I could carry it out, I could do something for God. I was happy as a clam during Lent, **charting my own course to holiness.**

Little did I know then that God had **already** charted the course. But I knew nothing about that. I was convinced that I had to work extremely hard to become a person acceptable to God. A person worthy of God’s love. A person strong enough to say no to Hershey’s, committed enough to keep my little body in check, and faithful enough to stay focused and disciplined, at least until Easter! As I look back on it now, I’m not sure if God laughed or cried. I do know this, God **continued to love**...and in the following years, taught me a bit more about Lent.

Now, I can tell you this – Lent is not about making ourselves worthy. There is **nothing** we can do to make ourselves worthy. There is nothing we **need** do to make ourselves worthy. We have been **created worthy**, out of the deep and creative love of God. Do we doubt that God loves this magnificent creation? The birds of the air, the creatures of the sea, the mountains and meadows? Only love could create such beauty. It is an Eden,

filled with miracles and wonders! And we, each one of us, is one of those miracles and wonders. How many times have I stood with someone, someone feeling undeserving and not enough, and thought, “If you could only see what I see.” Better yet, “If you could only see what God sees.” God loves what God has made. This is an **core teaching** of our faith.

Which is why I have no doubt that God mourns with all of Japan today, suffering the devastation within and among the people. And I also do not doubt that God is already at work unleashing the powers of creation that will somehow bring life out of death, order out of chaos, embracing the people in a healing compassion.

A second core teaching we find spoken today in the story from the book of Genesis. Human beings have a **purpose**, have been given a vocation, in the midst of creation. God puts the woman and the man right in the middle of the garden “to till and keep” it. The Hebrew word for “to till” is “*abad*”, can also be translated as “to serve.” “To keep” is “*shamar*”, also meaning to preserve and protect. “Beloved” all, human beings are created to care for this world. There, in the midst of it all, in the wondrous beauty and in heartbreaking devastation, our calling is to love, to serve, and to protect what **is**. To take in Japan and to respond from our hearts. To care for all that is broken and in pain and offer it healing love. For, it is **all worthy**. It is all good. It is all holy, created out of the heart of God.

So, we have a garden, we are loved, and we have important work to do...the course to to holiness, to wholeness and joy, is charted. It is **all** God’s doing. But as we know, the doubts, the

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fears, the hurts, the excuses, the temptations creep in...and they creep in on every one of us. The verse right before today's gospel in Matthew is at the end of Jesus' baptism. Jesus has just come out of the water and hears the voice of God, "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." He receives the ultimate affirmation, the ultimate embrace. (How many of us have longed to hear just those words from one or both of our parents? "I just love you, just as you are!" That is what Jesus just received.) And then he is led by the Spirit into the desert wilderness, and that ultimate affirmation is put to the test. Prove it, prove you are God's beloved son! Do something awesome, something spectacular! Turn stones into bread, throw yourself off this mountain! Wow the people! Become powerful! Show us what you are worth! Chart your **own** way to holiness!

I am sure that Jesus considered these things, just as the woman in the Genesis story considered what the serpent had said. They wouldn't be temptations if he didn't consider them. There was a difference in their response, however. And the difference, as I see it, was **courage**, the courage to believe that we need not do, be, or perform in any other way in order to be good enough, to be worthy, in order to be loved. Jesus found the courage to be fully and unapologetically himself. One of the commentators on this passage writes that Jesus "remains **maddingly** himself" the whole time. (Patrick J. Wilson, *Feasting on the Word*) I love that.

Lent is the time to find the **courage** to be "**maddingly ourselves**" and to receive God's love just as we are. It is the time to acknowledge and name our own temptations to be anything but that, and see the lie in them – the lie that we need to prove ourselves worthy, that we need to be **better** than others to be esteemed, that we need to be perfect to be good enough. These are all lies. The truth is we need not be number one to have an important place, as a person or as a nation, we need not put another down to raise ourselves up, we need not hide our faults or our fears to be acceptable, we

need not keep up a good front to get by, we need not pretend all is well when we are falling apart, we need not be anything else but maddingly ourselves. Do you know how much creative energy is wasted in trying to be something else? That is energy that could be used to love and serve this creation instead.

Now, something is telling me that since this is the First Sunday of Lent, I should use the word sin in my message. It won't be hard. Sin is the result of trying to chart our own course to holiness, not accepting that God's love is sufficient. For just as soon as we deny that we are beloved of God, along with every other creature that lives and breathes, our Eden becomes a place to conquer or survive, and our Lenten desert becomes a place in which to manipulate and establish control. The minute we make ourselves more than or less than anyone else, the harmony of creation is broken. Such is the wages of sin, and the destruction is personal and it is global.

So, let us take Lenten courage. Let us rest in the knowledge that God has already charted our course to holiness, and acknowledge any temptation to the contrary. Our courage is based on the affirmation that yes, we are loved, and it grows as we joyfully serve, protect, and preserve this creation, perhaps even dancing as we do. Our bodies, after all, were created to express the joy of God's love in this garden of wonders. May we have the courage to do it! Amen.

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