

## ***Forty Days and Forty Nights***

***1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent (B) – 2/18/24***

Seventy, sixty, fifty...and, yes, forty. Days and nights. In the Wilderness. In Latin, *Quadragesima* – that’s the beautiful older name for this Sunday, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent. There are forty days of Lent from now until Easter. We subtract the Sundays from the total, because Sundays are Feasts of the Resurrection. Eat up, me hearties. Sundays in Lent are in Lent but not of Lent, and therefore free of its particular disciplines. So also: drink up me hearties – but I did not this as a child, or even as a young adult. The chocolates and doughnuts I gave up, the ports and sherries from which I abstained, should have been available to me on any Feast of the Resurrection. Monday’ll be here soon enough, with all its disciplines, prayers, and challenges. Rainy days and Mondays; blessed be.

Forty days, forty nights. Forty lines to the Great Litany, too, I believe. We didn’t sing or say this, either, when I was young, or if we did I don’t remember. Where I grew up, children were sent out of Big Church for the Boring Part back then, especially the sermon, ugh. They only let us back in at the peace to sit with our families for the offertory and the Jesus part. We could, alternatively, or go up and sing at it with the choir while the priest got the Holy Stuff ready at the altar. Once it was over, we could get out of church quick, and get home to brunch, yum. We got the skip the “Alleluias” and the long, winding *Glorias*, which made the sausage, egg, and bacon my father cooked so well that much closer on Sundays in Lent. I suspect – no, I know – that I quite enjoyed them.

This time of year also had its blessings: not so many outside chores. No leaves to rake, unless one had slacked off in the fall. (In the home of my youth, none was let to slack

off in the fall.) No grass to mow, no fields to harrow, no seedlings to plant (yet). Trees? Sure, there were some chores there, treat against fungus and misery, but that's about it. Ah, suburbia. "In the suburbs / I learned to drive / And you told me we'd never survive" – thus sings Arcade Fire about it.<sup>1</sup> That song also sings of how "...all of the walls they built in the seventies finally fall," which they no doubt mean metaphorically. Make of that what you will, but I remember suburban walls literally falling. Or, not so much falling as being taken down and built back better (and make of that what you will). See, the only risk of a miserable task in the late winters / early springs of my youth was if my father had chosen that year to rebuild one of his retaining walls because they had started to sag. This was Western Pennsylvania hill country, and sagging there is bad. (You'll make of that what you will, whether I will ye or nill ye.)

The retaining walls help hold up the hill beside our house and, with it, our neighbor's driveway and his two big sedans: a 1972 AMC Ambassador Brougham and a 1974 Chrysler Imperial LeBaron. Each was about the length of the Queen Mary and had roughly the same turning radius. Man, that guy must be rich, I thought. Two cars to one man, living alone? Sure, but do they keep him warm at night? my aunt asked once. Depends who rode home with him, my uncle said. Then they all laughed, and wouldn't tell me why. Now, my dad wanted that LeBaron something awful, but he had by then two children, a mortgage, and business he'd just started, and so...K-cars. When LeBaron money finally came to him, Detroit had been oil-embargoed out of the land yacht business, and he decided that what he wanted more anyway was an inground swimming pool. So he got one; therein lie more tales. We'll make of them what we will once the weather warms. For now, back to the retaining walls. When

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<sup>1</sup> "The Suburbs," from *The Suburbs*. Arcade Fire. Album. 2010. The band members describe this song and the album as: "Neither a love letter to, nor an indictment of, the suburbs – it's a letter from the suburbs." Source: [Arcade Fire – The Suburbs Lyrics | Genius Lyrics \(https://genius.com/Arcade-fire-the-suburbs-lyrics\)](https://genius.com/Arcade-fire-the-suburbs-lyrics).

it came time to rebuild them in late winter / early spring, it was all (male) hands on deck, Stone Hauling and Earth Digging. I would've rather smoked bacon, as the saying goes, but what I wouldn't give for a chance to do that again now with him, just a little, help my father do something difficult and necessary. I know now, as he knew then, how hard hard work can be, and how easy it would've been for him just to let it go, sit down in his favorite chair and let the day go by, and leave stock and stone to look after themselves, let the driveway sag and the LeBaron fall. Such things are precisely what they both were insured for.

Tempting, we might say. That is the theme of *Quadragesima*: Temptation. Forty days and forty nights, fasting in the wild. Jesus, that is. Really? What did he drink? He must've had water or something. I mean, how long can a human body, even *gottvoll*, go without eating? I couldn't do 40 days. I couldn't do 40 hours. My mother and I tried, one Good Friday: fast for a night and a day, take in only water and tea. That was not easy. I did not see visions, though I did get light-headed and saw stars, but forty *days* of this, and the nights, too? With nothing and no-one to help keep you warm? Imagine waking up every morning in the desert sun alone think, "Yep. Nothing for breakfast again. I wonder what's on the menu for dinner? You guessed it: nada. What are we going to do today with all our free time?"

Jesus probably thought: "Oh, yeah: talk to Satan. And today's temptation is...turning stones into bread. Why can't it be bread into stones and making them the food of my enemies? A fair number of my fair neighbors could use a rock or two between the teeth. Why should Pilate have all the fun? Or, speaking of Pilate, Satan might tempt me with Seizing Power and Fixing Everything. Make 'em listen to you; your Dad said they had to. That's one of his best ones, tempting me to Do the Right Thing for the Wrong Reason. But who knows? Maybe today's weaponized desire will be one of those they don't bring up much in the Bible. You know: the temptation to

take it easy, rest under my own vine and fig tree. Also: marry a nice girl from down the road, let her keep the Son of God warm at night, give him a passel of kids and a Dad bod. Or, alternatively: be the good son of a real man: take on Joseph's carpentry business, and take care of Mother Mary when they both get old. There's a word or two of wisdom there. It sounds lovely: live a normal life, a quiet life, enjoy what passes in Galilee as the good life. Why try to solve other people's problems? 'God / Is distant, difficult', as Geoffery Hill has Ovid say, in a poem Hill sets in the Third Reich.<sup>2</sup> Even if Augustus's empire is not quite so cruel as Hitler's, what can I do to stop either one of them? Why should I accept that I'm God's Son and have His hard Work to do? It won't make a difference anyway, I mean, not really. Just look at them: people. Made in God's own image. What a mess they've made of that image. Dad gave this problem the water treatment in Noah's time, speaking of forty days and forty nights. Is it time, finally, for the fire next time? Well, fine, Dad. 'Light 'em up and watch 'em burn, teach 'em what they need to learn.'<sup>3</sup> I'll admit, it's tempting.

"You think he comes out here tempting me with wealth and riches, the power to move mountains and alter the casts of minds, or with silken girls bringing sherbet? Oh, no. That would be too easy. Ambassadors and LeBarons get tiresome once you've had to change the tires in the middle of a country drive, and once you realize just how much they don't run on faith. Imagine having to tend to one of those out here. I mean, this wilderness is so barren even my cousin John couldn't find enough locusts to make a decent meal, let alone the oil to fry them in. Where did he find ll that, by the way? I meant to ask him at my baptism, before that dratted dove came down and Dad let me know once again of his High Standards and Great Expectations. Wait till I have to tell them that all their walls will come tumbling down.

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffery Hill, "Ovid in the Third Reich," *Broken Heirarchies: Poems 1952-2012*. Ed. Kenneth Haynes. (Oxford, 2013), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Miranda Lambert and Steve Earle, "Kerosene." *Kerosene*. Album. 2005.

“Yes, it’s the simple things that tempt you the most, really: eat your fill, take it easy, don’t think too hard, give into the easeful death you’re already half in love with anyway, despair. Big word, that: despair. To despair, give up, is not that hard to do. All you have to do is stop believing that anything makes a difference, stop thinking that anything we do, that I do, matters. You can’t change the world, and you can’t save the world; who do you think you are? Heck, you don’t even much like the world, and why should you? It’s ugly and mostly cruel. Human beings are born free but everywhere in chains and nature’s red in tooth and claw. People most of all: man is wolf to man, remember? Worse, much worse. What other creature sets out intentionally to enslave, abuse, mistreat, rape, deceive, exploit, and then eliminate its own kind? People, Humans, made in Thine Image, Dad, so what does that say about Us? They don’t deserve to be saved, and would only ruin heaven or the next world if you gave them one. If humanity really is made in the image of God, given what they do, I think we Gods better take a look in the mirror to see if maybe we’re the actual problem here. No way. I’m not saving the world; it’s just not worth it.”

Forty night and forty days of this – that’s what he went through, Jesus of Nazareth. He did this before he’d so much as opened one deaf ear or one blind eye, read one scripture out loud to the people or forgiven even one sinner who repented. That’s also what Noah went through without even having had the blessing of baptism and the dove to prep him for it. The last, most lasting temptations? There are two: We Can’t Do It and It’s Not Worth Doing.

It? Saving whomever we can.

From what? From whatever hurts them, corrupts them, or besets them.

From all of it.

So that they can do it, too, the righteous and the unrighteous, as 1<sup>st</sup> Peter says, giving to each a conscience set free from malice and a consciousness set free from despair. That's what salvation means: hope in its guise of faith, or faith in its cloak of hope. It sets to rights that which only we can set to rights, in this world. We do it now and as best we can, in any which way we can, while we can, and because we can. In order to give that to us, Jesus had to resist the Great Temptation to not give it to himself. Like Noah, Jesus had to believe that what he did could save all those it was given him to save. Each had to believe that he could bring them safely to the shore, to start again, and be free. Each had to believe not only that he could do it, but that it was worth doing.

May the hope that was in them be also in us, through the grace of God and by the power of the Spirit. May we also prove, by our hope and in our faith and with our love, that the hard work it called us to was worth it. *Amen.*