



## Lent 1 (A)

### Lent: A Season for Dominance

[RCL]: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32

“If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

What image does your mind conjure at the phrase “exercise dominion in life”? Is it Serena Williams pumping her arm as she wins another Grand Slam? Maybe it's Eliud Kipchoge grinning as he breaks the two-hour marathon record. Perhaps you picture a rock star with an inimitable command of the stage and a crowd of thousands of screaming fans. Maybe your mind paints an image of a warrior or superhero standing triumphant over defeated enemies. Others may picture a roaring lion, strolling along as the undisputed king of the jungle.

But the image of dominion sketched in the scriptures is a far cry from these examples.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and appropriately, the lectionary passages bring us into the wilderness. The reading from Genesis starts off with one of the less happy stories—how humans succumbed to temptation, allowing death and sin to enter into the world. The Psalm, traditionally attributed to King David, does not give us the picture-book image of a triumphant king standing victorious over a beheaded giant or field of subjugated enemies. Rather, the psalmist is broken over wrongdoing and transgression. The day's readings culminate in the gospel reading from Matthew, which follows Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit.

Lent is a season that acknowledges those places and times of wilderness. There are times in all our lives when we find ourselves in the desert. Financial stress, chronic illness, the death of a loved one, or a breakup can all be named wilderness. The wandering and the hunger that Jesus undergoes in our gospel passage are universal to the human experience. Even without personal suffering, it is easy to look out across the globe and feel like nothing is improving; death runs rampant through disease or environmental catastrophe; society seems to be crumbling at the seams. And reading the news or scrolling through social media certainly exacerbates that sense that the world is falling apart.

When we think Lent, we often think self-sacrifice or penitence. And yes, Lent is a penitential season, but these forty days are not so much about self-flagellation as they are about following in Jesus' footsteps through the wilderness. Matthew tells us that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There are times when the world feels like a desert or wasteland. And there are other times when we follow the Spirit's lead and Jesus' example and journey out into the wilds in a material act of solidarity with all who are already there. When we sit in the desert, it usually feels like the furthest from exercising dominion. But the scriptures tell us there is more to the wilderness and more to dominion.

In today's passage from his epistle to the Romans, Paul describes an apocalyptic break in the world as we know it. Without Christ, humanity is bound up in the sin of Adam and the curse of death. Try as one might, even obeying every iota of a moral code or the law, death still reigns and every human lives under the shadow of the fear of death. But in Christ, we are given a new path and new way of life as the kingdom of God interrupts and breaks into our broken world.

Exercising dominion is re-envisioned in the wilderness. This is not "participation trophy" theology where the good news ends with a pillow cross-stitched with "God is with you even in hard times." Certainly, this is true, and certainly, this is good news. But the news gets better than that. The hope that Paul is pointing out is not a capitulation to the reality of suffering, but a move towards recapitulation. Second-century bishop and theologian Irenaeus saw humanity and all of creation as being summed up and transformed through the life and death of Christ. This action of recapitulation is an atoning move in which Christ replaces Adam as the mold for all of humanity. Through Christ, humanity once again has access to living fully into the Image of God and living in the victory that Death is not the end. Thus, redemption means that we are free to exercise dominion in this life—even in the midst of the wilderness, even in the midst of suffering. In the Scriptural witness, we are given a kaleidoscope of dominance that differs vastly from most of the images immediately conjured when we think of dominion.

The dominion pictured in the gospel is not a *Rocky*-esque underdog tale nor a comeback story in the style of *Karate Kid*. Christian dominion is not an exhibition of physical prowess or power. Christ transforms our idea of dominance in the wilderness. He rejects the temptation to change the stones into bread. Likewise, he refuses to jump from the temple or bow down to Satan. Dominance is not transforming our surroundings to suit our wants or satisfy our immediate needs. Dominance is not popularity, fame, or glory atop the mountain heights.

Rather, dominance comes from feasting on the word of God and from worshipping God alone – rejecting the worship of money or power. Irenaeus saw the goal of redemption and of Christ's work as the participation of humanity in the divine. This kind of dominion does not require one to leave the wilderness. For many, dominion means finally getting out of the desert. For many, to be a winner means to be without struggle. But that's not the kind of dominion promised in scripture.

The picture of dominion given to us is power in life even in the wilderness. In Christ, we are given new agency to imagine and dream a life that is not just getting by or trying to make it through the desert. We are

given agency as individuals, and perhaps more importantly, as the body of Christ, the Church. Together, we lift each other up, dreaming and imagining and exercising dominion in life through Christ. We draw on the grace and love that God has poured out into us, sharing that with each other and the world. Filled with God's abundant grace and love, we can dare to resist systems of racism, economic inequality, loneliness, and despair. We name the temptations and brokenness around us. We acknowledge the burdens we carry. We can dare to resist those systems of thought that say that nothing will ever change and we should just look out for ourselves. We can dare to resist the consumerist and individualist lifestyle that says individual pleasure and immediate gratification is the highest good. Like Christ, we reject those temptations.

As we begin this journey into Lent, we enter into a period of self-examination and penance. We enter into the wilderness. We look to Scripture and to the saints for those models and images of those who have shone with the brilliant love of God even in the darkest of times. The goal of Lent is not to inflict punishment on ourselves but rather to allow the grace of God to transform us more and more into God's image. This Lent, let us exercise dominion in life together. Let us dare to resist the temptation to capitulate to the broken systems around us, and instead work to transform the world around us.

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