

Forty Days of Freedom
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Recently, Juliet Macur wrote a book about a famous cyclist called *The End of the Road for Lance Armstrong*. It has been some time since the news broke that Armstrong used performance-enhancing drugs during his competitive cycling career. It's not news anymore. But Macur's book makes it clear that the drug use started almost 25 years ago, when Armstrong was barely out of his teens, before he was diagnosed with cancer. He had talent, he wanted to be the best, and performance-enhancing drugs were so common in Europe at that time that it seemed ridiculous to refuse the temptation. So a career of cycling, of fame, of good works on behalf of cancer research and cancer patients was entangled from the beginning in its own destruction. And not just one individual became entangled: teammates, friends, doctors... a whole host of accomplices and collateral damage has been revealed. Interestingly, in this article, Armstrong calls his former corporate sponsors - Oakley, Trek Bicycle Corporation, RadioShack and Nike - "traitors" for abandoning him and cutting him loose, after all the good publicity he brought them.

This is a human tragedy, and we might react with sorrow, with outrage, with regret, with wonder at how little Armstrong seemed to have learned about the responsibility that comes with special talent and power. It is a moral tale, and so we might make it an opportunity for learning and insight, as well as field day for gossip and scandal and book sales.

Today our Scriptures present us with two moral stories, two opportunities for learning. I want to begin to think about them with a suggestion: remove from your minds any worries about historical facts. These are narratives that tell us about the human condition, not about human origins. They tell us about what it means to mature and to grow: to become fully human in relationship to God.

We all know that the stories from the first few chapters of Genesis have been used to bolster "creationism," to justify certain gender roles, and to speculate about and teach the doctrine of Original Sin. But literal readings of these chapters take us to some very strange places. I am going to interrupt myself with a little story here to show what a child does when presented with the second chapter of Genesis: At a Sunday School, they were teaching how God created everything, including human beings. Little Johnny, in the kindergarten class got very intent when they told the story of how Eve was formed from one of Adam's ribs. Later in the week, his mother noticed him lying down, looking ill, and said, "Johnny, what's the matter?" He responded, "I have a pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."

Now, this is, of course, a question of interpretation and focus. To me the most important phrase in chapter 2 is not in the rib operation, but in verse 18: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" The first human was alone. The first human needed an "other" outside of himself, for the goodness of creation to be complete. Just as we, as we grow from infancy and mature, realize that we need others to live.

Usually, the next part of the story has been told as a story of disobedience: God has given a clear command to the undifferentiated, alone, first human. Eve (usually portrayed as the second “derivative” human) is then tempted by a snake (usually identified as the devil, although the devil is not mentioned here), and she gives in. This is in clear contrast to the parallel Gospel story: Christ is tempted, not in a garden, but a desert. Jesus, unlike Eve, and supposedly, unlike us, resists the temptation and displays his heavenly strength and origin. We are so familiar with the stories that we do not always see what’s there. We read into it centuries of elaboration.

I am going to propose a different way of looking at it, which has less to do with sin and more to do with freedom. The story about Adam and Eve is about human maturation. We can see ourselves there. The story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert is about vocational maturation. We can see ourselves there. Testing – perhaps a better translation of the word “temptation” – gives the possibility of growing enlightenment, growing self-knowledge. Testing offers us freedom, and then asks, “What will you do with this God-given gift of freedom, and all the other gifts and blessings before you?”

Today’s readings tell us what it means to be human. They give us a framework and definitions. One definition says that being human means that there is a possibility of knowing of good and bad, there is a hunger in us for that knowledge, that that the freedom of choice leads us into deeper awareness, both of self and of other. So testing or temptation is not some sort of demonic attack. It is not evil in itself. It can be, in fact, both educational and liberating. It is certainly revealing. Testing reveals to us our attachments and entanglements: the price of becoming human with other humans. One pastor has written, “Temptation is not the penalty of being human, temptation is the glory of being human.”

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, when, in many churches around the world, we hear of Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. We read the story because we are aiming towards Holy Week and Easter. This is our 40-day period of intentional reflection. The Bible has a lot of wilderness stories, and once again, they are less about historical geography than about a geography of the human spirit. These wilderness periods – whether 40 years or 40 days – signal transition, or I might say again, growth and maturing. The wilderness gives us space to experience problem, symptom, and solution. Or in medical terms: illness, diagnosis, and treatment. Or in narrative terms, hunger, testing, learning.

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, and heard God claim him as a child of God, and felt enveloped by the Spirit of God, that same Spirit led him to be alone in the desert. At the age of 30, he was experiencing a new birth: the birth of his vocation. This required some gestational time, some wrestling with his identity that needed space. He sought the freedom to do this in the desert for 40 days. His physical hunger would match his spiritual hunger for knowledge. He asked those perennial human questions: “Why am I here? What should I do? Who am I? What will I do with this God-given gift of freedom, and all the other gifts and blessings before me?”

Hunger. Then testing. Two of those three propositions put forth by the tempter start with “If you are the Son of God, then. . .”. In other words, what does your relationship with God mean, how does it play out, “how does it show up for you” . . . how are you entangled with the divine. And then finally, the last question: how would you like a different entanglement, one that gave you unlimited

power over “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor?” Then you will never be hungry again, you will never be vulnerable again: imagine the freedom!

Jesus found the glory of being human in this testing. He found the glory of being a child of God in this testing. He learned something about himself and his ministry. He learned that he did not want to eat bread alone, in the desert, but at the table, with friends. He learned that he did not want to display God’s favor through avoiding death, but by tasting death along with all humanity. He learned that he did not want to own all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, but be free to challenge any kingdom that did not value justice and peace. He learned, all over again, that “It is not good that the human should be alone.”

Some Christian traditions emphasize repentance through deprivation and suffering during Lent. This is a valuable practice, and many have found it to be both revealing and formative. But today, I want to talk about what we can learn about freedom during Lent. Not freedom as a license to ignore all the rules. Not freedom as a way to establish dominance. But freedom as a gift for learning how to be a better human being. In a spiritual wilderness, we are free to take note of our hungers. We discern which will bring us into closer relationship with our neighbors and with God. In a spiritual wilderness, we are free to notice attachments and loyalties...one might call them entanglements. We discern which will give us life, and which will drag us into a network of abuse and injustice. In a spiritual wilderness, we are free to imagine a future where hunger is shared and satisfied, where the bonds of love give hope and comfort. We are free to live into a future where we learn the courage to speak with integrity when temptations of power and dominance have led societies and individuals to act unjustly.

Perhaps the Lenten task for us, here, is to understand more fully our needs for independence and connection. We could become more self-aware about how we are needy, and how we fear need; how we are hungry, and how we wish to appear satisfied; about how we are wise, and about how innocent we are when confronted with freedom.

So, this Lent, think broadly. Let your mind and spirit roam freely in the open spaces of the wilderness. God is there, blessing us with hunger, with testing, with learning. with grace. Amen.