

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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An Addiction to Pacifiers
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Our gospel text today is the one we probably most often think of in the season of Lent. Jesus, having been baptized in the Jordan and having been blessed with words we all long to hear (“You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased”), is ready to begin his public ministry. Instead of diving in head-first into preaching and healing, he heads off into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting. As Jesus was led into the wilderness, the text says that he was full of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus “wildernesses” for 40 days, the only viable option he had to fill himself with was the Spirit (no food, no human companionship). After having endured 40 days of no food and several temptations, the text says that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. We take time during this Lenten season to think about our lives and how we, as God’s servants, measure up to God’s desires of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. As we turn our eyes inward, what is it that we are filled with?

In our Psalm text, the Psalmist seeks refuge and sanctuary in God during times of affliction. By doing so, he puts his entire trust in God. This confidence in God constitutes true deliverance, rescue, and salvation.¹ When we seek refuge, what do we fill ourselves with?

Both these texts ask us the same question – what is it that fills our lives? What is it that pacifies us?

Most parents, Christine and Michael Kellett included, are filled with joy and much knowledge about becoming first-time parents (as we are for the second go-round). Though we had never been parents prior to West’s arrival, we definitely knew how a child should be raised right. We had our plan laid out for how we would raise our boy who is full of smiles, hugs, and balls.

¹ Commentary on Psalms by J. Clinton McCann, Jr. in *the New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 1048.

We would regularly say how we wouldn't be like "such-and-such", who would let their child go to sleep curled up in their parents' bed on a regular basis. And we certainly wouldn't be like "you-know-who", who let their child run around naked at the beach and go potty in the ocean (I don't mean go potty in the middle of the ocean, for which we're all guilty, but go potty at the edge of the surf for all to see). "Aren't they so cute? Aren't they so funny?" their parents would say as they boisterously laughed, while Michael and Christine silently stewed away. I have to say that if my child ever pulls his 'draws' down in public, the sun won't be the only thing that makes his bottom red.

And the peace-de-resistance was the pacifier issue. We had seen too many people who still let their 4 year old have a pacifier whenever they wanted. We would say, "we just won't let West ever have a pacifier. That way, he won't have to break that habit and, more importantly, we won't have to spend the dreaded hours of his wailing and screaming to break him of having one." Our cousins, parents of 4 year old twin boys, resorted to having them throw their pacifiers into the ocean because the baby whales needed some "paxis".

For the first couple of weeks, all was well on the pacifier front at the Kellett household. Then, grandparents stopped coming to be full-time nannies, and West's care rested solely on our shoulders - all day every day. No handing off the screaming baby to grandparents any longer when we were tired or cranky. Eventually, it was necessary that West leave the safe confines of our home. Daddy had returned to work, and mommy needed to shop for the essentials as well as find a cure for her newly-found cabin fever. Thus entered a new phase for the Kellett family - anxiously awaiting the moment when West would scream and the new parents would embarrassingly scurry around, trying to keep him quiet.

Then, it happened; it always does. Our idealism gave way to the need for sanity (for ourselves and for others who heard the squawking). West couldn't be consoled and his wails and screams became embarrassing to his parents. We wanted to be seen as the parents who had it all together, who could listen to his different types of cries and determine a plan of action calmly to quiet him; however, no amount of consoling or baby talking or parenting advice would do.

Insert pacifier!

Then, there was that “A-Ha” moment when we noticed a “paci” made the process of getting West to sleep (and keeping him asleep) a lot easier. Our ethics of pacifier-resistance was overridden by the need and desire for quiet, and, more importantly, uninterrupted sleep.

Please understand that I’m not here to share with you **the** theory behind perfect parenting. Christine and I, and for that matter, any of us, can’t raise our children alone. We rely on the communities of which we’re a part to help raise them. We’re so thankful to be a part of a community who sees West as our child (do arms) rather than our child. (*whispered*) We still know way down deep that our theories are best, but we don’t tell anybody ☺.

This past Wednesday, we entered the season of Lent – a 40 day long journey (excluding Sundays) of preparation and self-examination, culminating in our joyous celebration of the risen Christ on Easter morning! Barbara Brown Taylor defines Lent as “Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves”.²

Baptists have been slow to catch on about Lent. In my younger years, I don’t recall ever hearing about Lent. If I did, it didn’t mean much to me. I did know that Lent was about giving something up for God, but I never quite understood how giving up chocolate for 40 days helped draw me closer to God. Some of you may continue to ask that same question. I hope and pray that, if you choose to give up one of your pacifiers that is filling for you, you will commit to answering the question I pondered for many years – what does sacrificing drinking sodas have to do with God?

I entered a wilderness of sorts in New Mexico almost 2 weeks ago. During my ordination process, I focused some of my energies on learning about what it means to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” So, for a Christmas and ordination gift, my wife

² Quote from *Settling for Less (Lk. 4:1-13)* by Barbara Brown Taylor, as appeared in *The Christian Century* Feb. 18, 1998.

made preparations for me to spend some time at a Benedictine monastery in New Mexico called Christ in the Desert. My first words to my wife after having experienced the monastic life were “everybody should be able to experience what I did at least once in their lives.” It was that meaningful for me.

What was difficult for me was stripping away many of the comforts of life that most of us enjoy on a daily basis – television, radio, sound, IPODs, electricity, human companionship. Except for meal times and times of prayer with the brothers, my day was spent in solitude reading, studying, praying, and immersing myself in God’s creation. This trip seemed to be an ideal one for me because as an introvert, I treasure those times I can be alone. I thought this trip wouldn’t be difficult at all. I found out that after a full day of reading, solitude, studying, and utter silence, being by myself was, at times, unpleasant.

I would return to my room at 7:00 in the evening to the guest house where I was the only guest. My room welcomed me with a bed, a desk, books full of deep spiritual thought, and a battery powered lamp that shed very little light. The monks had since gone to bed in order to prepare for their 4:00 morning prayers the next day. After my full day of reading and studying, I no longer sought time for such. I needed something else. I was lonely, and I missed my Seinfeld re-runs.

I needed my comforting “pacis”!

I soon realized that I crave solitude, but only if some “pacis” are there with me to occupy the time, to fill the empty space and silence. We all have our own examples of “pacis”, those things that soothe us and without which, we would wail and scream – television, long hours at the office, shopping, smoking, alcohol, money, technology, eating, gossiping, Panther games – you insert your own. “Pacis”, just as those things Jesus was tempted with, are not bad or negative in and of themselves. They become idolatrous when they become our sole provider of refuge and strength, when they become the safe place to which we retreat.

The great thinker and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor speaks to our addiction to pacifiers:

...[We] all found out what [our] pacifiers are – the habits, substances or surroundings [we] use to comfort [our]selves, to block out pain and fear. Without those [pacifiers],

[we] are suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to painkillers whose prescription has just run out. It is awful. It is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole. To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up.³

This Lenten thing seems like something we can do. We can give up one thing for God for 40 days. If we put our minds to it, we can take on something that nourishes us. We can focus our attention more on God. We can become more spiritual. We have control over these things. We want to know that our own efforts will effect a change in us, in others.⁴

Our culture is one of taking something by the horns and of having the power to accomplish whatever we want. We like to be active, not passive. We want to say that we lead, not that we are led. In grammar terms, we fill our lives with verbs in the active voice – I do, I go, I eat, I lead.

I can hear you thinking, “Michael, you obviously listened in English class in high school, but I didn’t come for a grammar lesson this morning.” Well, thank you for noticing. If we look at the beginning of the Lucan text, we notice something about the grammar that I think can speak to us. Jesus, after having been baptized, was led by the Spirit – a passive voice. For all you folks who didn’t listen in English class, a verb in the passive voice means that Jesus was acted upon. Jesus yielded to the Spirit in his going into the wilderness and gave up trying to control the situation.

Yielding to the Spirit is a matter of trust. We have to trust God that our spirits, our beings, our whole lives, can be renewed without any effort on our part, save a willingness to being led by the Spirit (there’s that passive voice again).

³ Ibid

⁴ *Borne in Courage and Love: Reflections on Letting Go* by Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L. in the journal *Weavings* Volume XII, No. 2, pp 7-8.

The act of giving something up during Lent is a tangible act of yielding to, and of accepting and receiving that which God has to offer. As we do the difficult work of giving attention to those soothing pacifiers that have become our comfort, may we loosen our grip and give space for renewal that only God can bring.

It's time for us to be weaned off our "pacis". How will we respond?