

Sermon Title: **“Forty Days and Little Easters”**

Bible: **Genesis 9:8-17 & Mark 1:9-15**

When: on the 1st Sunday in Lent, Sunday, February 18, 2024

Where: about 25 people (plus Youtube Live Streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Are you Father?

One of the privileges as a pastor is that I can visit our sick church members in the hospital. This clergy shirt sometimes works like a free pass, even when visitors are not allowed. One day, I went to the hospital to visit. When a person asked me, “Are you Father?” My answer was “No, I do not have any kids yet ...” Immediately, I changed my answer, “Aha, I am a Methodist pastor. I am not a Catholic Father.”

Lent began on Ash Wednesday. I provided “Ashes to Go” in front of the church, and many people came to receive the ashes, including our church members. Some people asked me, “Are you Father?” No worries. This time, my answer was not “No, I am not a Father. I do not have any kids yet,” but while pointing out our church sign, I said, “I am a Methodist pastor! We worship the same God, God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We welcome everyone. Do you want to receive the ashes?” And I gave the ashes, saying, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

2. Lent: Forty Days and Little Easters

Non-denominational churches and some other denominational churches do not observe Lent and Ash Wednesday. But we, as Methodists, respect our Christian tradition, and we enjoy the abundant meaning of Lent and Ash Wednesday. Lent means “lengthening” and refers to the lengthening days of spring. Lent is the season for preparation to celebrate Easter Sunday! How many days? Forty days, because it represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, as we read in today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark includes a good summary. After Jesus was baptized, did he begin his ministry right away? No, somehow, Jesus was taken into the wilderness for forty days, enduring a test of temptations by Satan. And then, he began his ministry. Just as Jesus prepared for his ministry, traditionally Lent is the season of preparation by fasting, prayers of repentance, and giving. Today, many Christians focus on their relationship with God by giving up something or doing something.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. How many days is it? Do we count Sundays? We do not count Sundays. And we call today the first Sunday in Lent, not of Lent. I learned that some denominational churches observe the Sundays of Lent, do not sing Gloria or Alleluia, do not put flowers on the altar, and other “do nots,” in order to focus on repentance and Jesus’ passion and death. But to us, Sundays are always little Easters. We should have the joyful expectations of the Resurrection. So, it is okay to sing Alleluia in the Doxology, and to put flowers on the altar! We can smile and be joyful! That’s because we know that at the end of this Lent, there is Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the

victory of our Lord. His resurrection is ours. And his victory is ours.

3. Rainbow, Ashes, and Blessing

When I read today's lectionary scripture reading of Genesis, I did not like it at first. Even though it was about God's covenant, the rainbow, it came after forty days and forty nights of rain. It was after the flood, after the judgment. And it was after the destruction. My question was "Could our God save us without judgment or destruction?" Actually, that's why God made a covenant to Godself. God is the almighty one who can judge and destroy. But God bound Godself with the covenant, not to judge and not to destroy. And then, God might want to save us without judgment and destruction. So, God might send Jesus on the earth as a humble and vulnerable one. Jesus has the power to avoid the wilderness, the temptations, the passion, the cross, and death! But as God did not use God's power, Jesus did not use his power. But just like us, Jesus experienced a time of wilderness, temptations, suffering, and death. That's because God loves us more than Godself. That's because Jesus loves us more than himself.

On the last Ash Wednesday, many people came by for Ashes to Go. I gave the ashes to young children and babies. I made some of them cry. And the youngest one was a two-week old baby. After the parents received the ashes, they wanted their baby to receive the ashes. I asked how old the baby was—two-weeks. Because the baby was just born, I was a little hesitant to say, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But they told me that it would be a blessing. Then, my heart and mind were opened, and I realized that we are

created by God. God's breath, God's life was there to create us with dust. So, I blessed the baby with the imposition of the ashes. I cannot help but say, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return," but my blessing to the baby this week is "Remember that you are created in God's image and by God's breath, you are blessed here on earth with God's grace and love through your parents and many people, and to God's merciful arms you shall return." Thankfully, this baby was not crying.

During this Lent, you might want to give up something, or to do something. That is great! And please remember who you are. You are God's loved ones. You are God's chosen ones. I believe that's why Noah and his family built the ark and endured forty days and forty nights of rain. I believe that is why Jesus endured the wilderness and the temptations for forty days. Our life is not easy. Sometimes it feels like the wilderness or the rainy days. But you were formed in God's image. You are created by God's love and grace. And God was with you when you were created. God is still with you in your life. God is still pouring out God's grace and love upon you. God will wait for you and receive you into the arms of God's mercy. Please do not forget who you are.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, you are so great! Your love and grace is with us. During this Lent, please help us to be who we are. We are your loved ones. We are your children. We are your people. In Jesus' name, Amen!