

40

March 7, 2010

Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture

Genesis 7:1-4

Deuteronomy 2:7

3,456,000 seconds

57,600 minutes

960 hours.

In Hebrew In Greek

In English, 40 days and 40 nights.

No matter whether it is days or nights or seasons or years, the number 40 plays an important role in the story of God and God's people. No fewer than one-hundred seventeen times it appears in the scriptures.

So, what's going on here?

Is this some extraordinary coincidence? Is there some unseen, underlying cosmic rhythm that dictates all things divine? Should we throw out the Gregorian calendar we have used for the last 500 years and start numbering our hours, days, weeks and months in increments of 40? Or, did the writers of holy scripture experience a mass failure of imagination every time they wanted to express that a chunk of time had passed?

The answer is a little of all of the above.

When Judges tells us that Abdon, son of Hillel the Pirathonite had 40 sons ... when 1 Kings tells us David ruled for 40 years and Solomon had 40 thousands stalls of horses, most scholars have concluded that the authors were really just trying to say that Abdon had a big family, that King David ruled a long time and that King Solomon had a lot of horses. Either that or Solomon had to shovel a lot of, shall we say, fertilizer.

But any close reader also knows that scripture tells the truth on multiple levels, a truth that sometimes transcends numbers and even language. Thus it is with some other patterns in the Bible that include the number 40. In these instances, God is up to something. Someone important is set aside for 40 days and 40 nights and a change occurs, a transition in who that person was on day one to the person that emerges on day 40.

So, it is with each of us, or it can be, in this season of Lent. Christ was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. But Christ's transition was an echo of similar experiences by Noah (or, in his case, we might say the entire world), and also Moses, the nation of Israel and the prophet Elijah, all from the Old Testament. Each of them had their own time of change, both from within and without. As each of us prepares to receive the Easter message anew, we might reflect on those stories and what they tell us about how God changes people, sometimes in the least expected ways.

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The story of the great flood and its 40 days and 40 nights - is a story of God starting over, yes, but also a story about a promise.

Especially for those of us who first heard it as little children, the story of Noah's ark stirs simple-seeming images and notions. Noah builds the ark, the animals come two-by-two, the waters rise and, 40 days and nights later, they fall. And the dove returns with live twig to say that life goes on. But behind the set of the children's play we all rehearse in our minds lies a serious three-fold truth, a truth that, as sometimes with numbers and words, transcends the history of whether this event ever occurred or not.

The first part of that truth, a truth that ripples throughout the story of God and God's people, is that God does hold the power to start over. The one who created everything in the world stands sovereign over that creation, the one who gave us breath has clear expectations for what we do with the lives we've been given, including, by the way, not taking creation for granted.

The second part of that truth is that even while holding us up and hosing us down over 40 days and 40 nights, God does not let us go. Whatever we have done, God stands by us even when God holds us accountable. Third, God stands by his own promise – symbolized by placing his bow in the sky, never to be used again – that God will find ways to deal with us, whatever we deserve, while always leaving room for grace. In this 40 story, you see, even God is changed. If we are not changed by such divine patience and forbearance, what then, we might ask, ever will change us?

When Moses was called to dwell with God on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights, it was another case of God's forbearance. You remember the story. Moses had already been given the 10 commandments once, but when he came down the mountain he found that God's people had lost faith and turned to worship idols. Moses threw down the tablets. God threatened to leave the stiff-necked people, but Moses intervened on the people's behalf. God listened, renewed the covenant and, once again, started over.

Scripture tells us Moses was with God 40 days and 40 nights and neither ate nor drank. When Moses came down, his face shone, for he was changed. But surely Israel was changed, too. Surely God's people understood in new ways the depth of God's love for them.

The third story, that of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, once again heralds that same grace. Time and time again, Israel had betrayed God. Worse, Israel had whined ... and whined ... and whined. Israel's whining was really a demonstration that it did not trust God. Despite God's promise to deliver Israel to the promised land, despite God's coming to Israel's rescue time and time again, Israel whined. And, as with any good parent, God finally hit a limit. For a generation, 40 years, Israel would dwell in the wilderness before being granted passage into the land of milk and honey, the "time-out" of all "time-outs."

But as with the story of the flood, God never left Israel alone in the wilderness. "These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked for nothing." it says in Deuteronomy's account.

Scripture says God "knew Israel's going through the great wilderness." Every step, every day, every year, for forty years, God knew Israel's self-examination and repentance, just as God knows what we go through and how, or whether, we open ourselves to change and God's will along the way.

The final of our four stories of 40 tells of the prophet Elijah.

Elijah was a strong and loyal prophet who stood in the breach against the priests of Baal, the pagan God in the 9th century BC. For his loyalty, he was hounded by Queen Jezebel, who sided with the pagans. Forced into the wilderness, exhausted, depressed and hungry, Elijah shrank to the ground and cried out to God to let him die. He closed his eyes.

But in his dreams he pictured an angel coming to nourish him, and when he awoke he found bread and water before him. He was restored and redirected. On the strength of a morsel of bread and a drink of water, he traveled 40 days and nights to Mt. Sinai, the

place of the commandments, where God saved him from an earthquake and fire until Elijah could pass on his mantle of prophecy to his successor Elisha.

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What can we understand about our God from these stories of 40?

First, they tell of God's grace – God's immeasurable patience to start over and over again with a people who corrupt the earth, then whine and give up on God and who, time and again, fail to do as God asks.

Second, that God never leaves us – even when we make idols, even when we wander and stray as if God has not given us a compass, even when we are stiff-necked, selfish and stupid, God's is with us, wherever we are.

Third, that God restores us – that the waters recede, that the covenant is reestablished, that the promised land is reached and that God pulls us out of our depression, feeds us, redirects and protects us.

Fourth, and perhaps most important of all in this season of Lent, God sure does seem to believe in the power of a good "time-out." Let's be honest: We adults fight the time-out as much as kids do. We insist on the importance of our busy-ness and we avoid being still. We fidget in our own adult ways. We call it work. Or TV. Or the internet. Or some other idol of our own creation.

If anything, these stories of 40 remind us that at times God takes matters into God's own divine hands, if necessary. God stops the divine sedan on the side of the road. God comes upstairs when we are making too much racket.

God gives us Lent as a gentle, loving suggestion that we take time, all by ourselves, on our own initiative, to examine our behavior and take responsibility for our living.

Tomorrow is day number 17. That means we have 23 days left. 552 hours. 33,120 minutes. 1,987,200 seconds.

Just in case someone is counting.
Amen