

March 10, Lent 1C (Luke 4:1-13)

## **Lent invites us to pay attention to our hunger.**

by [Winn Collier](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue

In the summer of 2015, our family spent a week in Scotland walking the Great Glen Way. Our boys were 12 and 13, and though they enjoyed the wide country and the accents and the Scottish breakfasts, the ten-mile walks over craggy terrain with only a ham sandwich and Cliff bars in their packs wore them thin.

On the third day, we set our sights on Drumnadrochit, a hamlet of 813 people nestled at the edge of Loch Ness, where the Glenurquhart Highland Games are held every August. However, by midday our sons were fatigued, complaining, trudging at a snail's pace. For hours, the older one (Wyatt) had complained of foot pain, sharp stabs increasing to unbearable intensity. My wife, Miska, and I took turns hoisting this beast of a boy on our back and lugging him for as long as we could.

I realized we'd reached situation critical. It was 2:00, and though we had only an hour more to walk, I knew we were on the verge of mutiny. Our two boys, now dropped to the ground in exhaustion, would soon refuse to move another inch. On a previous stop in the village, I had spied a small candy shop tucked into an old stone row. I remembered the sign on the front door announcing the hours of operation: 9-5. Our boys love candy, and their eyes light up at the possibility of discovering a new shop with novel treats.

*Boys, I said, I've got good news and bad news. Groggily, they raised their eyes. Good news is there's a Scottish candy shop in Drumnadrochit. A spark lit. Bad news is it closes at 3:30. Panic shot across their faces.*

"Alright," Wyatt said, hopping up from the ground. "We've got to get moving." For the next hour, our boys prodded us forward, asking every five or six minutes what time it was. Wyatt even removed his torturous hiking shoes, walking the final half mile barefoot. It was a joy to watch them, relieved and wide-eyed, entering that shop filled with racks of jelly beans and shelves of chocolates. Priceless, however, was when they caught sight of the sign revealing the shop's actual closing time,

their shock turning to laughter as they realized what I'd done. The story has entered our canon of family lore.

While I don't condone my fatherly subterfuge, I knew that unless I tapped into our boys' desire, into their appetite, we'd never make it. Their rabid hunger offered a gift because it led us forward, toward goodness. Their hunger showed them what they really wanted. It got us moving.

Lent provides a 40-day season when we're invited to pay attention to our hunger, to those yearnings that move us toward healing and ultimately toward Easter's feasting. In Lent, we join Jesus in those disconcerting, isolating, ravishing weeks in the wilderness. Jesus, we're told, is "led by the Spirit" to be "tempted by the devil." Do any words disrupt our safe, tidy theology more than these? Would God do that to us? Would God lead us into harm's way?

Preparing for the rigorous temptation he will endure, Jesus doesn't eat a crumb for weeks. Throughout the Bible, fasting is what God's people do when they are desperate to become more aware of God's presence. Fasting is how we use our body as a prayer. Isolated in the wild, Jesus fasts because he is a human with a body and needs to express his longing for the Father's nearness. He knows there is a spiritual capacity that only manifests when heart and body are joined in humility before God. Christian spirituality never stays as an idea in the mind but always moves into the body, into the belly.

With belly growling and strength fading, Jesus refuses to gratify his natural impulses. He uses his gnawing hunger to place himself in a posture of attentiveness. Through his deprivation, Jesus connects to his deepest craving, awakens his most ravenous hunger: God. And Jesus will need all his spiritual alertness when the devil arrives in a fury of temptation. The devil assaults Jesus where he is most vulnerable, enticing him to satiate his needs in his own way.

But Jesus, attuned to his deep soul, knows his voracious hunger is for the Father above every other craving. Centered in this truth, Jesus' words pulse with conviction: it is written, *One does not live by bread alone*. Jesus knows with crystal clarity that the bread all humans truly want is God.

Traditionally Lent is a season of fasting, surrendering food (or certain types of food, or other things) in solidarity with Jesus' own experience and in recognition that we too crave God above all else. While Lent often invites rigorous discipline, it need not

be grim. We are fasting toward joy, Easter, life, hope. We simplify. We cut things loose. We go silent. But we do all this as we move in faith toward hope. We move toward God.

Alexander Schmemmann referred to fasting as holy therapy. Lent is an embodied way that we receive God's healing and return to the One who is good and true. We don't spurn food or take on some practice merely to prove our spiritual fervor. We do it because we're physical people who, every so often, need to use our bodies to pay attention to God, to be renewed in God. Our hunger pangs remind us of our truest hunger, prodding us toward what our soul craves most. Lent reminds us that we desire God—that we need God, if we are to truly live.