

Blaise Pascal, was a seventeenth-century French philosopher.

He wrote of the condition of being human as one in which we have, what he called a "God-shaped hole," within each of us.

He did not see this as a flaw, but rather as the means by which God keeps us tethered to our life-giving relationship with God.

I think we become more aware of this hole, when we are in pain, or when we are suffering.

What I mean is that many of us don't think about our need for, or reliance on God, until things go south.

Until something goes wrong.

Whether someone hurts us or wrongs us or we were fired unfairly, or we don't get our share of the inheritance, or a loved one receives a terminal diagnosis, there are so many things in life that can make us feel sad or angry or hurt, and it's in those moments when a spotlight is turned on, and it shines on that God-shaped hole that is within all of us.

In order to be fulfilled, to find ultimate meaning, we have to have the wisdom to know that our relationship with God, our Creator, the Great Beyond, is the only thing that will give us that ultimate life-satisfaction that we seek in so many other places.

Or, as Augustine said, "*we humans are always restless until we rest in God.*"

When we are suffering, that hole becomes obvious and we focus on filling it.

Do we fill it by turning to God, relying on our faith, confident in the knowledge that we are not in total control?

That's what faith is, it doesn't magically get rid of our hardships and pain, but it gives us the courage to stand amid them, to fill that God-shaped hole with our relationship with God, so that we can resist temptation that might lurk around the corner.

When we turn towards God with piety and devotion, we are reminded of *who* we are and *whose* we are, and we need not be distracted by the temptations of this world.

See, in my humble opinion, that's what a temptation is, it's that unhealthy thing or vice that we turn to when we are in pain.

When are in a healthy, happy place, temptations are relatively easy to avoid.

Relatively.

But when your defenses are down, when you are sad, angry, hurt, mad, etc., that's when we try to fill that hole with other things.

You see, I don't think it's any coincidence that Satan tempted Jesus AFTER he had just fasted for 40 days.

The text says that, "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*" (Matthew 4: 1-2)

If there ever was a time that you wanted to get me to say, “yes” to something, or to agree to something I really shouldn’t agree to, a very effective strategy would be to ask me when I am really hungry and tell me that I can’t have any food until I answer.

So, presumably Jesus’ coping mechanisms are compromised, his cognitive faculties aren’t working as sharply as they would be otherwise, because, fasting for 40 days.

Surely he will give into Satan’s temptations!

He will see that God-shaped hole within himself and because he is feeling so empty and depleted, he will fill it with the bread he made out of the stones.

He will throw himself off the cliff because God will save him, he will command all the Kingdoms of the world and worship Satan, because, power!

He will have so much power!

But no, not Jesus.

Perhaps that’s one of the many things that makes him different from us.

Even when he is at his lowest point, his back is up against the wall, he’s literally starving, he still has the strength of faith to trust in God and God alone.

Although Jesus is very, very hungry, he knows that his mission is greater than him, it’s about much more than his immediate, temporary appetite.

God was reaching the whole world through him and his ministry.

After all, this is just after he's baptized and everyone gathered hears the voice from the heaven's say that he's God's son, the beloved.

He knew the Gospel message is bigger than him, and he won't let Satan narrow its scope or succeed in derailing/sabotaging God's work in the world.

Jesus knows what's at stake.

Now, we aren't Jesus, and maybe there isn't quite as much on the line when we are tempted to give into temptation.

But there's a lot to be said for how we behave during our lowest moments, when we have nothing left to lose, the decisions we make are what really speak to how faithful we are.

Do we have the courage to stick to our convictions?

To keep our faith and reliance on God?

Or do we give into temptation, revenge, deceit, selfishness, greed, all the other things that pull us away from God?

When we fill that God-hole with faith and prayer and devotion, we are constantly reminded that we are beloved.

It gives us the strength to resist filling that hole with other things, like material possessions, or power or vanity, or so many other things that we think will give us ultimate meaning.

But in the end, trying to fill that space with anything other than God will still leave us feeling empty, depleted, still miserable at the bottom of the pit, with no upward progress.

As I preached on Ash Wednesday, I see the season of Lent as a gift from God.

It's a time set apart from the rest of the calendar year for each of us to do whatever we need to do, in order to draw closer to God.

One of things we can do is to reflect on pain we've experienced. You might think that sounds like a terribly unpleasant idea, but if we don't work through pain or allow ourselves to feel the full extent of emotions associated with it, then resentment can crop up later.

We all try to hide or mask or avoid pain in our own different ways, we all have our own coping mechanisms.

New York Times bestseller and UCC member Glennon Doyle Melton asks us,

*"What is your hiding place?"*

*Hint: it's what you grab for when you feel vulnerable—it's where you run so you don't have to feel all the feelings that life insists you feel....*

*We are all so afraid of pain.*

*We think it's our job to avoid it.*

*Whatever it takes to avoid it.*

*But we shouldn't be afraid of pain, we should be afraid of our fear of pain.*

*Because all these things we do to avoid the pain hurt us much more than the pain would have.*

*Pain is not a sign that you've taken a wrong turn or that you're doing life wrong.*

*It's not a signal that you need a different life or partner or body or home or personality.*

*Pain is not a hot potato to pass on to the next person or generation.*

*Pain is not a mistake to fix.*

*Pain is just a sign that a lesson is coming.*

*Discomfort is purposeful: it is there to teach you what you need to know so you can become who you were meant to be.*

*Pain is just a traveling professor.*

*When pain knocks on the door—wise ones breathe deep and say:*

*“Come in. Sit down with me. And don't leave until you've taught me what I need to know.”*

Jesus was in some sort of pain, or at least severe deprivation after fasting for 40 days.

But it was during that time in which he fixed his focus on God.

With a renewed commitment to God, he was able to resist Satan's temptations, knowing who he was, Beloved, and whose he was, God's beloved.

He filled the space within himself with his relationship with God, and it worked.

This season of Lent, we are invited to reflect on our pain. The last time you were hurt, how did you handle the vulnerability?

Did you scramble to numb the pain with a temptation that lured you?

Did you sit with it and allow yourself to learn from it?

Having a deep relationship with, and trust in, something beyond us does not inoculate us from feeling pain,

or protect us from experiencing it, but it does give us the strength we need to resist temptations,

even in our lowest moments,

because we know who we are, and whose we are. Amen.