Good morning! Today we continue our Lenten series as we contemplate what it means to be empty. We’ve talked about leaving an empty chair available in our lives for Jesus to occupy, we’ve talked about emptying our lives from the many things with which the world might try to fill us. We’ve talked about avoiding the use of empty words…Sometimes emptiness is a good thing, some thing we should strive for. But today, we acknowledge that often in this life we experience emptiness that does not come from blessing. It’s an emptiness that we bring upon ourselves or maybe it’s just a consequence of living life. But we have all experienced sheer exhaustion, we’ve been drained, we’ve tried to function on an empty tank.

While we were dating, my wife shared with me a story from her college days. She and a friend had attended a wedding in Iowa in early December. Exciting times no doubt. On their long drive home late at night, my wife discovered that small-town filling stations do not usually accept out of town checks, which, of course, is all she had at the time. Pressing on to find another option, these hapless young women found their fears had come true…In a last-ditch effort to find some fuel, their vehicle sputtered and rolled to a stop miles outside of town. They were out of gas. Their tank was empty. They were stuck. In the middle of Iowa. In the winter. It’s the stuff of horror movies.

Before too long a slightly weaving car approached. With no other choice the girls had to flag it down. The driver, a middle-aged man, inquired as to what might be the problem. As they clambered into the back seat, the annoyed driver informed them that he has just come from the bar. The plan was to return o the bar, find the owner of the local gas station and convince him to open up for one more customer. By the sheer mercy and protection of God, they obtained some fuel and were able to return to fill up their abandoned vehicle.

Now this story turned out alright…but you can only imagine all the terrible outcomes that might have been. How often do we push our luck and press on with nothing in the tank? How often do we find ourselves in unwanted situations we could have avoided?

Lent is a time that calls us to examine ourselves, to self-reflect on the state of our being. As a church we have been called to fast from screens, at least once a week, in the evening. (Example?) But we can recognize that the fast is not really about screens. It’s really about our time. It’s really about our hearts. What is it that our hearts hunger for? What is it that we crave?

White Castle? I know I should not have said that…my appetite perks right up at the mention of sliders. Here is what White Castle calls a Crave Case. It’s filled with delicious burgers and on the side it says a bit of truth served fast food style, “The crave is a powerful thing”. So, cave to the crave.

But we are Christians! We don’t cave to the crave! Yes, we may enjoy the drive thru from time to time, but we live with a different palette. We don’t enjoy the aftertaste of that movie. We don’t seek after the flavors of those Friday night activities. What the world considers good food, we find unsavory, unsatisfying….empty.

Man cannot live on White Castle alone….There’s a filmmaker named Morgan Spurlock. He decided to subsist entirely off of the McDonald’s menu for 30 days and he made a movie about it called “Supersize Me”. By the end of his experiment, Mr. Spurlock caused damage to his liver, gained 24.5 pounds, experienced mood swings, overall lethargy and found he was actually addicted to McDonald’s. Eating their food would make him feel better and provide him with a much needed “pick me up.” He found that he had trained his body to crave this type of food, and he didn’t feel good until he got to eat it.

Mr. Spurlock’s bodily reaction to his diet is no different from our own life of faith. We cannot expect to grow and progress if we do not intake the proper nutrients or exercise our spiritual muscles. Too often we try to live on empty calories. Which, in turn, leaves us with an empty tank.

Where can we find fullness in this fast-food world? Where can we find sustenance? The people of Israel had the same question. After they were set free from slavery in Egypt, they found a new way of life wandering in the deserts. This new freedom came with a large dose of hunger. Their stomachs ached for the steady meals of Egypt. They longed for a bit of meat. Their craving was powerful. So powerful that some of the people were ready to cave. They wanted to elect a new leader who would take them back to Egypt. I don’t know about you, but I read this part of the Old Testament story and I practically shout at the page, “How ungrateful! God has saved you from misery! He has great plans for you! You walked through the sea on dry ground for crying out loud. He gives you manna every day! And now you just want to throw it all away and pathetically return to your evil overlord Pharaoh for what? A hot meal? A few burgers?

Oh yes, a hot meal. Yes, a few burgers is sometimes all it takes. Church, we can read these Exodus accounts from our comfortable kitchens with stocked fridges. But make no mistake, you and I, we are Israel. We follow our appetites. We forsake the way of God for a tasty morsal.

Asaph, one of Scriptures psalm writers talks about Israel in the wilderness in Psalm 81. This is God speaking in verse 8, “Listen my people, I’m warning you! If only you would listen to me, Israel! There must be no foreign god among you. You must not bow down to any strange deity. I am the LORD your God, who brought you up from Egypt’s land. Open your mouth wide – I will fill it!” Don’t turn to the nearest fast food joint. Don’t turn to what you think is the easiest option. Trust me! Open your mouth and close your eyes! I will fill you with good things!

So again I ask, what is it that you crave? If you are not sure, take this test. Answer one simple question: When given the idea of free time, what do I immediately think about? When I have some free time, what do I jump at the chance of doing?

This is why our fast from screens can be so helpful. We are purposefully saying no to our initial cravings of how we fill our time. We are choosing instead to let God “fill our mouths” and hearts. And just like our taste buds and stomachs, we can develop a taste for the holy things of God. With consistency and dedication, we can train our souls to crave a bite from God’s word, to long for his presence, to fill up our empty tanks.

Paul writes in Romans 15 this blessing, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Let me read that again.

This is a wonderful verse. It is just so nice. I mean who could argue with hope and joy and peace. But let us not miss the context of this verse. The point Paul is making earlier in the chapter is that Jesus became a servant to all so that the Gentiles, that is the unbelievers, could glorify God for his mercy. Then Paul pulls some passages from the Psalms one of which says, “I will confess you among the Gentiles, and I will sing praises to Your name.”

How often do we confess among unbelievers? Neighbors, family members, co-workers? Have they ever heard God’s praises from our lips? Let me read the nice verse again with unbelievers in mind: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” See, all the good things, hope joy and peace, are not just for us. God is looking to fill us to the point of overflowing so that these good things spill over into the lives of unbelievers! If I over fill my gas tank, all I do I make a mess on the ground. It’s a complete waste. But when God overfills my heart and life, the spillage is used by the Holy Spirit to bring about knowledge of God in the lives of those who do not believe!

We cannot continue on with an empty tank. It is not God’s intention that we be stranded on the side of the road at the mercy on Iowa’s drunken drivers. We need to allow the Lord to fill us. How do we do this? Is it as simple as pulling into the nearest gas station? Close.

If I want to fill up my gas tank, there is only one place to go, the gas station! I can certainly choose which station I want to frequent, but when I need gas, there is no question as to my destination. And just like a gas station, when I am running on empty, I can pull into church. Sure, there are plenty to choose from, but when I am empty, at as loss, impatient, unkind, depressed, detached, apathetic and stranded, I need to be filled. And let me tell you, this life with take it out of you. It’s a draining experience! So, you need to be filled again and again! And I can’t be filled from a preacher’s podcast. I can’t be filled from just worship songs on the radio and I can’t be filled from a fishing trip spent out in the woods. These things are good, these things can satiate for a little while, they can serve as a supplement so to speak. But if you find that these tidbits are all you need, then you are not getting enough calories. You are starving yourself and spiritual growth will be impossible.

Only in the gathering of believers, only in the corporate worship of His people, only in church does God pour out the fullness of his blessings. And that is exactly what we get to experience here today as we share in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In communion we get to be filled. As we remember the fullness of God’s love, the love that would sacrifice everything for my sake. The love that would blot out my transgressions and cover over my sin, the love that overflows from the midst of the Trinity and comes to my dry and barren soul. This love is made mine and this love is made yours here at this Communion table.

For some of us, this time of Holy Communion is just a weird thing that we do at church. Sure we will partake, but it is not something we crave. For others, we approach this time of communion in desperate need. We need to be filled by our precious Lord. We cannot go on without him. And I’ll be honest, Jesus is an acquired taste. The world continually serves up sugary snacks and fizzy drinks that go down easy. Jesus offers bread and juice. Basic elements. Nothing flashy…no free toy included. But in this simple meal is represented the body broken for us and the blood shed for us. In this meal of communion, we find the miracle of re-union. But as you get to know him and walk with him, as you depend on him and trust in him, you will find that nothing else satisfies.

So as we think about what it is that we crave, as we engage with a weekly fast from saccharine screens, spend some of that time meditating and thinking through what it is that occurs here in communion. What is it that occurs here at church? To help us do so, engage with the scriptures. Use Psalm 116 as a template…carefully read through it, a few times, and then re-write the psalm in your own words and in your own style. It can be long of short, it can rhyme or not. The point here is to take time away from the flashy screen and develop a taste for God’s word, to not be a consumer of the world’s diet, but to try our hand as a psalmist offering our hearts in praise to him. For some of us, this idea is right up our alley, for others this sounds terrible. Whatever the case may be, I want to encourage you to give it a try…stretch where you might be a little stiff and try to develop a deeper taste for God and his word. And if you keep at it, you will find that your craving for more of Him has become powerful thing. Amen.

**Communion**

As we come to the Lord’s table today, we come thankful and trusting. We come with our eyes closed and our mouths open. We come empty, in need of being filled not just part way, but to overflowing!