

**Ash Wednesday  
February 14, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Today is Ash Wednesday. The beginning of the forty days of Lent. So what are you giving up for Lent? Chocolate? That would be interesting to give up chocolate for Lent when today is Valentine's Day. I actually saw a greeting card that said, "Roses are red; Violets are blue; Lent is beginning; no chocolate for you."

So maybe I could give up ice cream? How about pistachio ice cream since I really don't like pistachio ice cream? I mean, aren't we supposed to give up something for Lent? Aren't we supposed to give up something that reminds us of how self-indulgent we are? Isn't that what we were taught about Lent?

As the Proper Liturgy for Ash Wednesday reminds us, in the early Church Lent was originally a time of spiritual preparation for people who were going to be baptized on the eve of Easter. New converts to the faith were taught in a question and response format ... what we call a catechism. And what they were taught is the basis of what we now call the Apostle's Creed ... our Baptismal Covenant.

I don't know where the name Lent came from, but the "season" was once only a few days long, and slowly was expanded to forty days. The forty days is reflective of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, which, of course, was an echo of the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years. Although Lent is forty days long, we don't count Sundays ... Sundays are always Feast Days ... so the actual time between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday is 46 days.

Along the way, Lent was also a time for those who had drifted from the faith to come back to the church. These backsliders, of course, had to repent of their sins and show signs of contrition. But then, aren't we all backsliders to one degree or another. So, I guess we all have to repent of our sins and show signs of contrition during Lent.

Finally, the Church tells us that we were all born in original sin ... that we are all bad from the moment we are born ... and to realize God's grace we have to admit our sinfulness. And, although we can't "earn" our way back into God's good graces ... that comes with the death of Jesus on the cross ... sacrificial redemption ... we have to do our best to make amends for the wrongs we have done.

Lent ... let's beat ourselves up as a sign of just how bad we are for all the horrible things we have done. It is as if we are inflicting self-retribution upon ourselves for no other reason than we are born in a depraved state of humanity.

I hope you realize that I am being somewhat sarcastic. But, does that really sound like something the God of all love wants of us? My sarcasm may border on being heretical but I don't think God is about seeking retribution ... especially self-retribution. The God I know is a God who wants restoration. I don't think God wants us to beat ourselves up. Rather, I think God wants us to be healed, restored, and renewed. God wants us to live a full life and not to waste time feeling bad about one's self.

So let's try to reframe this idea of Lent. I see Lent as a time of on-the-job-training for the new life that comes at Easter. I was with someone a couple of years ago who said they had been thinking about giving up coffee for Lent. This woman knew that it was a good and noble way to observe Lent, even if it was an old-school way of living into this season. She said, "I thought about it for a while and then decided instead of giving up coffee I would carry a camera with me and every day I would intentionally find an example of compassion in the world around me and I would take a picture of it ... and it changed the way I saw the world, at least for the season." Now that is a way to observe Lent.

Modern behavioral psychology teaches us that when we focus on the negative we don't see the positive. However, if we focus on positive behavior the negative behavior goes away. When Caren and I would work with a congregation in conflict we would note the unhealthy behaviors of the system in a report to the congregation, but then we would focus on healthy, life giving behaviors for them to live into as they moved forward. Slowly the unhealthy behaviors would disappear, and often, if those unhealthy behaviors were being acted out by emotionally unhealthy people, those people would disappear ... they could no longer find a reactive hosts for their behaviors.

So why, during this season of Lent, would we want to call attention to aspects of our lives that we have found to be less than healthy. Why not focus on healthy options and teach ourselves how to be spiritually healthy. Instead of seeing this as a time to live in guilt why not use the time to consider alternatives to past behaviors ... new behaviors that can lead us in new directions.

Our Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent calls us to self-examination and reflection, prayers, fasting, and acts of compassion, and by reading and meditating on God's holy word. "Self-examination and reflection" ... take a look at yourself ... what makes you comfortable and what makes you uncomfortable ... and I'm not talking about a warm sweater on a cool evening. How can you go beyond your comfort zone to embrace a new way of being ... a new way of being to others so that you might see a new you in their reflection?

Simply put, this Lenten season isn't about what you give up, or that you necessarily give up anything at all. It is about being reminded every day that you are a beloved child of God; that you are called to live into the image of God in which you were made; and that during Lent you take on an intentional discipline of acknowledging and giving thanks for the divine presence of God in your life in ordinary ways.

If you want forgiveness in your life then use these 40 days to forgive others. If you want to be appreciated then spend this season showing others how you value them. If you are feeling left out then go and welcome a stranger ... seek out someone who seems like they are on the outside because they are different in some way. If you want joy than be committed to comforting the sorrowful and grieving. If you are hurting, then visit the ill and bring to them a healing spirit ... you'll find that it just might open a healing spirit in your own soul.

And here are a few suggestions from Pope Francis: "If you want to fast during Lent, then fast from saying hurtful things and use kind words instead. Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from anger and be filled with patience. Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. Fast from old grudges and be reconciled. Fast from worries and trust in God.

However, just don't talk about it, or mull it over for 6 weeks until Lent is over. Teach an adult to read, or how to speak English as a second language. Sit down and share a meal with the homeless young man who can't get his dirty hands clean. Let someone know that you care about them. Visit the woman in the nursing home where the foul smells fill the hallways. Lend your ear to the friend who is confused and angry ... even if you can't do anything about their problems. Go beyond your comfort zone and you will be preparing yourself for the new life we'll know at Easter.

This season of Lent is a time of restoration, not retribution, and certainly not self-retribution. Be committed to Lent. Be committed to the life God gave you. And be committed to the new life that comes at Easter.

Amen.