

A Sermon Delivered by  
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Glenside, Pennsylvania

Second Sunday of Lent  
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*Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8: 31-38)*

Today is the Second Sunday of Lent, and we are well underway with our respective Lenten disciplines on our journeys in faith. The Gospel lesson appointed for this Sunday is quite telling because it gives an indication of the unique journey that Jesus will be taking in the days ahead. Jesus, we are told, began to teach them, underwent suffering, was rejected, killed, and after three days, rose again. In light of this, Lent is a time of reflection, examination, and also foreshadowing as a way of getting ready for the complicated narrative of Holy Week. It gives us an opportunity to understand the drama of events that occur in our collective consciousness in terms of what Jesus' earthly ministry is all about. Lent is important because it marks us seriously as followers of Christ, people who seek to believe in the resurrection, and who strive to make sense of it.

Before we get to the Easter event, however, we have important work to do during the Lenten season. I have been struck by the seriousness that many of you have taken in your respective Lenten responsibilities, and I appreciate that you've shared some of those efforts with me. A few of you have even said I could pass along the urgency inherent in those struggles, particularly in regard to the idea of taking on a discipline that is supposedly designed to help us deepen our appreciation for God's purposes. All this spiritual work of course is an endeavor to both understand and assimilate the meaning of that which is disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God.

Let me give some brief examples of what is happening at St. Peter's.

After the Ash Wednesday service, one parishioner thanked me for putting my sermon on the website where it could be read again.

*I benefit from having the sermons available. ... (The parishioner said:) It's almost like being back in graduate school (without the pressure) - I listen to the lecture (or in this case, the sermon) then read the electronic copy to refresh my memory and use the notes as a jumping off point to do further research on the internet. I find it fascinating how so many different groups have observed the Lenten season in so many different ways throughout history. Having been raised with the traditional "give something up" approach to Lent, it's interesting to explore other options. I particularly liked your point that "Forcing ourselves into something that is too much to handle is no virtue, and*

*ultimately such an approach defeats the purpose of a reflective Lent." Interesting thought!*

Well of course it's always nice to get positive feedback on sermons, so I wrote back a note of thanks, and said:

*Since you say you were raised in the "traditional 'give-something-up' approach to Lent" I am curious what you actually DID give up, and how long you kept up the discipline. Most people seem to have good intentions at the start, and sincerely try a "giving-up" approach for two, maybe three, possibly four weeks, and then.... "Other things come up."*

*What I implied in my sermon was that the giving-something-up discipline leads to a two-fold disappointment, in that 1) by giving up something we ordinarily enjoy (such as chocolate, going to the movies, whatever) we forgo ordinary pleasures that add meaning to our lives and, 2) by the end of the season our sacrifices make us feel like failures when we don't succeed because we can't even be true to ourselves. What's the lesson to be learned in that kind of an approach? And what's the value, other than guilt, inherent in that kind of religion?*

Of course today with emails, turnabout is fair play; so the parishioner replied to my "reply" by saying:

*I can only remember 3 times when I successfully made it through a Lenten period - one year it was not just chocolate, but ALL candy (what was I thinking???), another year it was Chinese food. I worked in Center City at the time and there was a hole-in-the-wall take-out Chinese food place where the food was so good (and cheap) that I would pick up lunch at least twice a week from that place. That was a real challenge. The third time was when I gave up going to casinos.*

*Looking back, all those exercises didn't really result in much spiritual reflection - it was more like, "Hey, I did it"! I think it was important for me to keep the commitment because I associated it with the spiritual strength that Jesus used to get through his days in the desert - he didn't give in to temptation and his fast was obviously at a much deeper level than just giving up one thing he liked. So if he could make it through 40 days of fasting, I should have the spiritual strength and commitment to do the same thing albeit on a much smaller scale.*

*So I have come to a tentative conclusion that I think Lent is an important opportunity to try and be more Christ-like in our lives. My attempt this year is to try and consistently live by the Golden Rule. Otherwise, I think Lenten sacrifices and promises become just the "holy" version of New Year's resolutions, but with the added benefit of a finish line at Easter. I don't think it's much of a stretch to say that there is more value in using the season to better ourselves in some way that benefits others and to use the time for spiritual growth and reflection, rather than some arbitrary form of denial.*

Well that's a very honest and compelling statement, and worthy of our attention.

Still another parishioner from a free-church Baptist background informed me of a discipline I had not been aware of previously. It is based on the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, and is called a “Daniel Fast.” I learned that the regimen is grounded in the dietary proscriptions of the first portion of the ancient scriptural text.

*It’s a 21-day fast ...(said the parishioner) where you do not eat things that are considered “pleasurable,” such as wine and most meat and rich foods. You eat fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts and drink fruit or vegetable juice or water. During this time you are seeking God’s vision for yourself in a similar way that Daniel got his vision. So as of today (Ash Wednesday) I am not drinking any coffee, or dairy products, or meat. We can’t have anything that is processed, and no sugar is allowed (other than what is in the fruit). At the end of the fast, I am praying that I will find God’s vision for me.*

Well, sure enough, when I went to the Book of Daniel in the Bible I read the following account that corroborated what the fast is all about. Verse 8, of Chapter 1 reads:

*But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s rich food, or with the wine which he drank.... And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the palace officials.*

Then Daniel proposed a test to see whether feasting or fasting was more productive in developing character. He said to the palace steward:

*Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s rich food be observed by you, and according to what you see deal with your servants. So he hearkened to them in this matter, and (the steward) tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fuller in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s rich foods. So the steward took away (from the youths) their rich food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

*As for the four (favored) youths, God gave them learning and skill in all letters and wisdom, and Daniel (particularly) had understanding in visions and dreams. Eventually the four youths stood before King Nebuchadnezzar and the king found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.*

Well, I can’t speak for you, but that seems to make the case for “fasting” rather convincingly.

I am aware that others of you here at church have assumed intentional behaviors and objectives relative to this season. The examples I cited are indicative that ordinary people can find the discipline and commitment to make Lent a meaningful season for reflection and self-examination. It need not be a heroic effort, but it must at least be a sincere one. More than likely, a genuine and well-intentioned discipline like that of the “Daniel Fast”

will produce the best outcome.

By design, these are the days when our faith is tested, and we need to be in top condition, spiritually, for the rigors of Holy Week that lie just ahead. All this we ask, of course...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.