

2 Lent Year B

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What God Gave up for Lent

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

Who here has given up something for Lent? Show of hands? Can you shout out what you're giving up? There's still time. To be honest I'm still figuring that out too.

It's a practice that helps us make room for Easter. It helps us to practice resisting temptation, which is a good skill to have. All good work.

But what I'm wondering today is what does God give up for Lent? What has God poured out and surrendered so that we might enter into Easter life? Does God even eat candy?

Because today's Bible stories are about what God has promised to us, and what we have promised to God as God's people. The big word for that is covenant. But promise works just as well. Promises have a bit of give and take to them – when we make a promise we give something up for someone else. And they do the same for us.

The whole story of our life with God goes back to the promises that God made back at the very beginning with Israel – they would be God's people and God would be their God. There were a lot of gods to choose from back then. And there still are today – false gods like power, and money, and violence, strength, and having lots and lots of stuff.

God's promise has always been to **be with us**. And being with us, especially being with us as Jesus, meant that Almighty and Powerful God had to give up some things.

To help us understand that, I'd like to back up a bit and tell a Christmas story. It takes place about 35 years ago when I was a member of a church called Corpus Christi, which means Body to Christ. The priest at that church, Fr. Jim, had just returned from a trip to El Salvador, which is in Central America. Our parish had a long-standing relationship with some of the churches there, sort of like St Peter's has with churches in Guatemala.

Shortly after Fr. Jim arrived in the village where they were staying, he met a little girl named Natividad, which means Nativity. It was right before Christmas. How cool is that? Jim soon learned that Natividad's greatest desire was to learn how to read. So, right there outside in the dust, they had their first lesson. They knelt down on the ground. Jim found a nail nearby, and he began to scratch out words in the dirt in Spanish. He wrote Dios, which means God. He wrote Amor, which means love.. Natividad copied them down, and sounded them out, and wrote and read her first words of faith. Words she already knew by heart. She was just learning how to spell them and tell them.

When Jim returned to our church, he preached a sermon about Natividad and the Word of God and the meaning of the word humility. He pointed out that the word humility – where we get the word humble – means being “close to the Earth.” Which is where God came to be one of us, as Jesus the Word made flesh. Jim told how the story of how Natividad learned the word of God in a country where there was a lot of war and conflict. And he told the story of the power of humility in a country that ran on humiliation, or shame.

It's important to remember that there is a difference between humiliation and humility. When a person humiliates another person, they make them feel like dirt. We learn this very young. On

the playground – where we find the bully who makes fun of the kid that looks and acts a little different than everyone else. There's those kids that join in the laughter or stay silent, rather than sticking up for the person being hurt. Humiliation is a tool that people use to make others feel small so they themselves can feel bigger in comparison. No one chooses to be humiliated. It's done to them.

But humility, being humble, that is a something we choose for ourselves. When someone chooses to be humble, they put down their own desire for power, their own wish to look like everyone else, or fit in; they do that in order to make sure that someone else is cared for, or included, or has what they need in order to feel good about themselves. We learn that when we're young too. Back on the playground, choosing to befriend and defend someone who is being bullied when no one else will do it, that's an act of humility, of being humble. It might mean that you'll be bullied or rejected too, but that doesn't matter.

Whenever I think of the word humility, I think of that story of Jim and Natividad and the Word of God. Jim knelt down in the dust with her because Jim knew the story of Christmas, of God bending low to born as Jesus, a baby so powerless, he needed people's love and care and protection in order to survive. Jim was carrying out his part of the promise he made to God to follow Jesus, and that meant bending low to love and help people who had been made to feel like they were dirt.

That Christmas Story helps me understand what God gave up for Lent.

If Lent is the path to Easter, of eternal life with God, then God started on that path as soon as God made us. That story of God making promises to Abraham and Sarah that we heard today, is one of our oldest examples. In this story God bent down close to the Earth to change the names of a faithful couple who were too old to have children, and God made them the parents of Israel, God's people.

And God didn't stop there. Got kept on bending low in order for people to recognize God among them – as one who heard their cries for help, and delivered them from enslavement, and sent prophets to help them stick to the promise they had made to be God's people.

And on and on God bent closer and closer until God was kneeling in our own dust with us as Jesus, whose very life was an act of humility, whose very life was the path to Easter.

See how that works?

Jesus showed his followers over and over again what their part of the promise back to God looked like. He showed them with his life – in the ways tht he bent low and poured out love and healing and care. And in the ways he also received the love and healing and care of others who bent low to meet him. And our Gospel story reminds us that God asks the same of us – to bend low and to let go of everything that might take the place of God or lead us away from God or away from loving God's creation and the people in it. These are acts of humility, not humiliation. We choose them. They are not forced upon us.

In today's Gospel "Jesus told his followers that soon he would suffer under the hands of the people in charge, that he would be rejected by them all, and then killed. But that after three days he would come to life again."

That was very hard for people like Peter to accept. Peter wanted a powerful Messiah, who would conquer Israel's enemies and help the people feel great again. Saviors don't make losing part of their plan for winning. That's just embarrassing. Shameful. Humiliating.

So Peter tries to talk Jesus out of giving up his power, and losing his life, in order to bring Easter. And Jesus tells Peter to stop tempting him, away from the path he'd always been on.

In that moment Peter has a choice to make. Would he follow Jesus down a path of humility, of pouring himself out in order that others might be filled with God's love? In the end, Jesus's followers and us are invited to enter a promise with God that requires the same kind of humility that God had as Jesus. We are asked to give up the same thing that Jesus gave up for Lent – our lives.

“If any of you really want to follow me, you have to put your own wants aside, and walk with me carrying your cross. If you mainly want to save your life, you'll end up losing it. Those who lose the life they're living on account of me and God's message of love, will save it,” Jesus said in today's translation of Mark's Gospel.

That is how low God bends to Earth to make the Kingdom come near enough for us to find the way in. We can't climb up to the Kingdom of God by grasping onto things like wealth and worth, and perfection. But rather we enter the Kingdom of God by letting go of things -- power and supremacy and self-centeredness and control.

And that's not just a lesson for Peter. It's a lesson for us as well. We know what kind of world we're in. It offers us a lot of things to hold on and to love instead of God. And God asks us to give up our love and desire for those things for Lent, so our hands are free to be placed into the hands of God at Easter.

Lent asks us to trust in God's promise to take our empty hand and lead us into something that we truly can't live without. That is the path that God started on when God bent low to be with humanity. That's what God has given up for us.

And so, in order to meet Jesus's eye, we might have to bend the knee. To find the Word of God we might need to look for it written in the dust. It's possible that that's where God's promise to us has been waiting for us all along, Amen.