

Lent 1
 Mar 6 2022
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1) **Lent**

Lent which began this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday:
 is a penitential season of preparation
 It has been observed in some form or other since apostolic times
 And was formalized at the first council of Nicea in 325
 when it became a 40 day season of fasting and purification
 in preparation for the baptism of new Christian converts
 In solidarity w Jesus who spent forty days in the wilderness of the desert where he was
 tempted by the devil.

So the ancient preparation for once in a lifetime baptism into new and abiding Christian life
 has become a yearly rite of passage in the modern church in preparation for the feast of
 Easter, reminding us of the ever-present radical possibility of new life
 even in the face of death.

In the modern world this period of radical preparation for new life
 has shrunk to fit our expectations and our lifestyles. We give up certain cherished
 pleasures/or pet temptations for lent, depriving ourselves for a limited period often as a
 form of self-improvement (which is laudable) or as an act of self-discipline (a good thing)
 and then we go back to ----thank God!--- normal. I can have coffee again! But, if we really
 believe in the risen lord, we aren't talking about going back to normal. We are preparing
 ourselves for something radical and unprecedented that won't ever go away
 for a life dedicated to the way of love in Christ.

2) **Swedish Fish**

But far be it from me to judge if you are giving up chocolate for lent. My last year of divinity
 school, I gave up...Swedish fish.

You see they sold them at the cafeteria and I'd developed a habit of buying them for my
 daughter and then...um... eating them and then buying them again for my daughter and
 then...um... eating them and finally becoming more honest, I bought them every day for
 myself and snuck them into the library and ate them one by glorious one out of my backpack
 during the long nights and days of studying. And over time I came to deeply love them: their
 awful red jelliness, their complete lack of nutrition, their goofy shape and I came to feel I
 even *needed them* to study and because you aren't allowed to eat *anything* in the library at Yale
 Divinity School, they were faithful. They never gave me away. Because Swedish Fish don't
 crunch, they *squish*.

3) **Subconscious Temptations**

My guess however is that it is a lot HARDER for us to recognize our more primary, unconscious temptations than it was for me to curb my craving for Swedish Fish. We cannot see them and do not understand their roots. Or how to get free of them...Like the man I prayed with on Ash Wednesday who asked me with frightened eyes to pray that he be freed from his addiction.

We need you I said to him, as I held his cheeks

We need you here with us.

So, as we begin lent this year, I ask you to try to imagine what your less **conscious temptations might be**. What are the habits of mind and heart that lie beneath our self-improvement programs and efforts at self-control and broadening this further?

What tempts us not just individuals **but as social beings** and as members of this community?

What could we as the Body of Christ give up or take on for Lent in this place? How might WE as a body and as a parish make space for radical unprecedented new life in God ***in this community?***

4) **Vulnerability**

Because I don't know about you, but in this time my real temptation is to become accustomed to the fear, anxiety, division, judgment, self-protection, hostility that I've been marinating in these past two years, which to a certain extent has been unavoidable: two years when even **a loving conversation** between two good friends or two close family members standing **closer than 6 feet apart could make you both sick, even unto death**. *It's been a nightmare*. And I believe the antidote to this habit of mind and heart will take some focus. It requires us to acknowledge our need for healing from this time and to pick up a practice of trust and then for each of us to try to figure out a **practice of joy**. And the first baby step might be finding some pleasure like touching the unmasked cheek of a friend.

But, wait, you may be asking. Pleasure in Lent? And what is joy anyway? And what would constitute my healing? I mean I'm fine!

So, what can heal us from this time of mistrust and anxiety when some of us know we are crumbling and others aren't even quite aware that we are hurting? How might we make space in our weary anxious selves, in our (cold) bodies, in our cramped and suspicious minds, in our aching or shellacked hearts, in our souls in this church for a new and unprecedented life?

5) **Lengthen**

The word Lent comes from the old English word Lencten which means to lengthen: to lengthen as the days are lengthening, to lengthen as the crocus bulbs are beginning to

lengthen underground getting ready to push up thru the dirt and lengthen towards the light. How might we lengthen into more generous lives as our cramped winter muscles relax and our very spines lengthen making more space for our equally cramped organs? How might we as individuals and as a church body lengthen into the light of Christ and make space even in this sanctuary for new and unprecedented Life? We are called to lengthen into the light of Christ in spite of and because of and in defiance of the anxieties that still continue to weigh us down.

Bishop Tutu and Dalai Lama, two men who have suffered greatly but exude sparks of joy when they come together have some suggestions. We will talk about and practice some of these after church each Sunday in lent. But one of the first things they do is connect joy with a generosity of spirit which was very instructive for me perhaps because I found generosity a lot easier to imagine than joy.

When I can't let go of what I have, whether it's my purse strings, my point of view, my anxieties or my desire for control, my fists clench and my soul darkens and I'm back in the desert.

Alternatively, when I feel I can afford to share some of the unvarnished love of which I am made by God, through no special work of my own, I find I am more willing to open my heart and share my vulnerability instead of hiding behind the anger and fear and righteous indignation and fear of judgment that shellac me
And lo...I lengthen like a little flower and I am joyful.

So here goes:

6) Faith

Several weeks ago I got word that my sister has a terrible and rare cancer. This is horrible. This is horrible not only because it's horrible but because....this is my little sister. My amazon queen of a little sister. She is a neurosurgeon and scientist and cancer researcher. She is winner of accolades and scholarships, a marathon runner who qualified for the Olympic trials years ago.

She is gorgeous, talented and completely annoyingly great and I love her, even more than I already knew I did. And we are a family that doesn't get cancer. Oh sure, we get everything else: mental illness and suicide, lewy body disease, dementia, strokes, infertility but we don't get cancer and yet...she did.

And what could I do? My brain couldn't seem to take in the information. I felt cut in two, like a felled tree. I couldn't find my legs, my roots. The world made no sense. I couldn't just go on in the world with this huge emphatic awful NO in it as if it were still the same world. I

was crumbling. But she, her name is FAITH by the way, is valiant. I begged but she really and truly didn't want me to go to her in California. She needed to safeguard her depleted immune system, focus on chemo or radiation and she has great doctors and a loving husband, no children and a good game plan. So, I'm here in CT but I still can't feel my legs. How could I possibly prepare for Easter, prepare myself to be a sanctuary for a new and unprecedented life when all was going dark. I needed a way to choose life. And so I decided to go on vacation because I need to feel my family around me and let them know how precious they are. So for 5 days this Lent: during this season of fasting, of walking towards the valley and through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll be in the Caribbean, in solidarity with Jesus who was tempted to give it all up in the wilderness

But if you ask me, Jesus doesn't seem all that tempted when this stranger asks him questions intended to undermine him.

Jesus's answers are immediate and clear and he does not falter. When he is put to the test the words of his Jewish faith, the words of Deuteronomy hold him up as I pray the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible and our **community** can hold us all up in the weeks to come.

But what is really noteworthy is what happens to Jesus afterwards. What is noteworthy is not only that he resists this devil but that he emerges from his 40 days in the desert, shining with the radiance of his true self, affirmed in his authority and authenticity and courage and ready to begin a short radical ministry that will change the world. Did giving up Swedish Fish do that for me?

So ask yourself: what practice do you need? What might help you get ready to pick up the cross of your one wild and precious life? There is authority and authenticity and courage that often comes to the fore in the midst of suffering. I see it in my sister, Faith. It is what I see in the Ukrainian people, this small country marching right into the face of fear, not just fighting but fighting **for** something they would die for. It's inspirational and humbling. In their faces we recognize that authentic life is our birthright and we have forgotten this in our practices of irony and cynicism. What would you die for?

This conviction is what the Apostles had. It's what the freedom fighters had. It's what the mothers of black boys shot unlawfully have. A fierce resilience and resistance in the face of the big boots of cancer or the big tanks of Russia or the kneeling on the neck or the cancer of prejudice or the empire of Rome ready to kick them in the teeth. This resistance too is a kind of generosity of spirit, a light that shines in the darkness and that shone from inside of Jesus as he walked out of the desert.

So how might we prepare ourselves this lent to be a sanctuary for this kind of life?

(Singing)

Please prepare me to be a sanctuary
 Pure and holy, tried and true
 With thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you

As Richard Rohr says....

Cathedrals. Castles. Temples. However we describe our inner terrain, one thing is certain: we tend to live in just a few rooms of our inner landscape. The full person God created us to be contains more than we can imagine, but most of us dwell within only a small portion of the superb castle of ourselves. Opening the door of our heart allows us entrance to the vast treasure of who we are and to the divine presence within us.

So, this lent I invite you to listen for what you truly need to be a sanctuary for the Risen Lord and to LENGTHEN into this season of Lent and to choose life.

AMEN.