

Sermon: Making Room for Less

Year B, Lent 1

[Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15](#)

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So what are you giving up for Lent?

That's the one thing everybody know about Lent. People give stuff up. We know it's a time of preparation for Easter. Churches make a big deal out of it. Most of us suspect there might be more to know about Lent, but it's kind of embarrassing to come to church Sunday after Sunday and ask such a basic question. We can probably figure it out.

Or we could just talk about it. Easter is the first major holiday celebrated within the branch of Judaism that became Christianity. Within a 100 years of Christ's death, we have historical evidence that it's being celebrated. It takes about 600 years before we have good evidence for Christmas. Think of those earliest churches. It would be unusual or impossible for you to have Christian parents, to have grown up in a Christian family. So the people who joined this new religion were converting to it as adults. Within a couple of hundred years, we see rituals established for bringing these people into the Christian communities. They would prepare for three years or more. If they were judged ready and worthy, they would be baptized on Easter. Those baptisms let them divide their lives into Before and After. The idea was they would never be the same people they had been before they got their new beginning in Christ. It's so cool that this church's tradition is to welcome new members on Palm Sunday. It's so cool and so retro, all the way back to the earliest traditions of the church.

At the very beginning of Christianity, there were was a sense that Jesus was coming back pretty soon to straighten out the mess that the world was in. They sort of expected Jesus to show up in their lifetimes. When you read the letters of Paul, basically the earliest Christian writings we have, people were worried about their loved ones who had died before having the chance to convert to Christianity, not about their children or grandchildren. As time went on, they began to adjust their thinking. They realized that it wasn't just the new converts who needed to refresh their spirits in Christ. Everyone needed that. If you were going to live faithfully from one Easter all the way to the next, you needed to be renewed.

Jesus was human. Jesus needed to be renewed. What did he do? Before he starts his ministry, he goes off into the desert for 40 days. That's where the forty days of Lent comes from. Now there are some of you who are doing the math in your head and realizing that February 18th to April 5th is 47 days. You're right. But remember that Sundays are always feast days, always holidays, in Christianity. Part of the strange ritual of coffee hour is to celebrate the feast of Sunday. Although I'm skeptical that the earliest Christians would have known banana bread or donut holes or coffee. But they would have liked them - how could they not?

We need to be renewed whether it's with feast days and donut holes or quiet reflection or both. We need to repair our soul because we are living in the reality of this world. All this conflict and hatred, all this need and want, all this spite and bitterness is real and has devastating impacts that tears lives and hopes apart. If we are living from Easter to Easter, we are living for the promise is that this is not all there is. The promise of Easter is that the story does not end on Good Friday, when humanity so completely fails. The promise of Easter is that God is with us throughout, from beginning to end and beyond whatever we imagine the end to be. That's a big promise,

huge and overwhelming. It's hard to live as if that promise is really true. And yet that's what's we're called to do as Christians. Because that's how Jesus lived. He lived as if all the wrongs would be made right. He lived as if no lives could be thrown away or any moment wasted. Because there was such good news to share.

To prepare my sermons, I try to read from a variety of perspectives: men and women, protestant and catholic, developed world and developing. I read academic and popular articles as well as things written in the last decade and things written a century ago. I don't always do all of those things every week, but I firmly believe that the more ways I have of seeing the Scriptures we read every week, the more ways I have to offer you connections with the texts, with each other and with the world outside the church.

However, some weeks, there is one author that just opens up my understanding in such a profound way that all the others fall silent. This was one of those weeks. Some of you may have already read something by Joan Chittister. She's a Benedictine nun in Pennsylvania. Word on the street is that if the Catholic church ordains women in her lifetime, she'll be the first woman cardinal. In her book on the liturgical year, she spends 30 short and readable pages reflecting on Lent. They broke my heart open. But they also left me in a dilemma, because I really only wanted to pick one of her sentences that started, "Lent is ...". So I will share my pick, but really, there were so many good takes on Lent in there.

In light of the big, huge, overwhelming promise of Easter, "Lent is our salvation from the depths of nothingness. It is our guide to the more of life."¹ By inviting us to step away from the things that absorb our time and energy, our money and calories, our living as if this world were the only thing that mattered, Lent helps us open to the Easter promise. How does it do that? Or, put another way, "I am so in. I want to live that Easter promise. What am I supposed to do for the next 40 days to get ready?" Let's go to this week's Scriptures.

The reading from First Peter says Christ suffered. The reading from Mark says Jesus was tempted. We step right into the heart of life in this world. We suffer. We are tempted. Lent urges us to stay in the heart of life with its suffering and temptation.

We are tempted in this world. So many of us join gyms and after the first "month", "week", we are so tempted not to go. We don't want to go. But the point is not to want to go, the point is to go. And if that is not your temptation, then just substitute your own. The food, the alcohol, the hours at work, the reality TV, the explosions of temper. Whatever it is for you that seems so pleasing at the time but leads you away from the person you were becoming.

We can look around this room and see the dear faces of those that are suffering. They have lost loved ones or their children are struggling or they've lost a job. We can look around this room and see the dear face of those that are suffering and we don't even know they are suffering, because some many of us keep that suffering private, which is our right. So when I talk about Christian suffering, I don't mean for us to think that suffering in and of itself is good. Suffering is often the price we pay for something worth suffering for. We suffer because we love the person we lost. We suffer because we love our children and the potential we see in them, even if they do not see it in themselves. We suffer because the job we had allowed us to show a unique gift that God had given us and now that spark is put out.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 122.

Lent says that holding on to the reason that is worth suffering for, holding on to the reason for resisting temptation, is hard work. Even the people who love winter, who love snow, are pretty irritated right now. It's not so much the snow as the fact that the enormous volume of the snow is really messing up the world we thought we had set up for ourselves. How many of you cleared the first big storm out of the way and are now regretting that you didn't shove the snow further back? We're New Englanders. We have boots and shovels and ice melt and snow blowers and everything else. But 90" of snow in three weeks puts our world all out of shape. It just points out how much we are not in control.

Lent just nods and says, "Yes. You've forgotten. You're not in control. You didn't make this world and you shouldn't be surprised when you can't make it to suit you. You can't make the suffering and the temptation go away." When we numb ourselves to the reality of the world, to the suffering and temptation, we also cut ourselves off from the reason they are worth enduring.

Lent invites us to give something up, to give up something that is numbing us to this world, that is preventing us from sinking deeper into the divine, that is keeping us trapped in the very small package we become when we are all wrapped up in ourselves.

Now that's all very grand talk. So how about a concrete for instance? Let's say you are a plow guy. You say, "Got it. I'm going to give up beer for Lent. God knows I don't need the calories, and really it just helps me unwind faster so I can fall asleep for a few hours before I go back out again." OK. Maybe. But is beer really keeping you from connecting with the divine?

Ask yourself what's going on when you feel the most centered and the least self-centered. Put that way, you might say, "I haven't really spoken to my spouse in weeks. When we talk, I'm a better person. I don't yell at the kids as much. I can deal with the crazy customers calling about when I'm getting to their driveway." Maybe the thing to give up for Lent is the assumption that you can just put off making time to talk to your spouse. Perhaps Lent invites you to say, "Honey, would you split a beer with me when I get home at 3:00am and maybe hang out for a bit before going back to bed? It seems like forever since we did anything but make sure that we had milk in the house and someone was picking up at basketball practice." Many spouses will say something like "Are you kidding?!!" But most will probably find a time when they can pick up a pizza and meet you somewhere with a thermos of hot coffee. We never get away from suffering in this world. We do tend to lose contact with the reason the suffering is worthwhile.

On March 22nd, we're going to have an afternoon retreat here at church, where we'll go through some exercises on discerning the voice of the divine. Learning some skills, experiencing a little bit of that quiet when we get out of the way and make space for God to speak to us is one way of holding onto the things that make suffering and temptation endurable. Hearing that voice, the way Jesus did in today's passage from Mark, gets us past all the earthly voices. We become a new person in a new world. In the gospel of Mark, he uses the word translated as "torn" only twice. Once in today's passage, when the heavens are torn apart as Jesus comes up from his baptism. Once after Jesus' crucifixion when the curtain in the Temple is torn from top to bottom. The world is changed when God speaks. We are changed. The suffering and temptation endure, but we come to them differently, with our existence and identity anchored in God, in the eternal. Once anchored there, we can live as Jesus did believing in God, declaring that faith in God, making the world better as we pass through it.

So what are you giving up for Lent?