

“Things I Love About Lent”

Psalm 121; Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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My mind’s eye can still see the poster in my college dorm room. It depicted a train—you knew it, right?!—traveling away from the viewer through a mountain pass at sunrise or sunset, looking for all the world like the Cumberland Narrows in the western part of my native Maryland or, for New Englanders, like Crawford Notch near Mount Washington, New Hampshire. At the bottom was the reminder, *“Life is a journey, not a destination.”*

Today’s readings speak of journey and, specifically, journeying to unknown places. Abram is told to leave his home and journey to an unknown and potentially unsafe place. Nicodemus is invited to an inner journey requiring him to be *“born again”*—not, as he immediately asks, by being physically returned to the womb but by being born *“from above.”*

Journeying is why I love the things of Lent. It is a time for reflection and inner journeying. Many of us associate Lent with “giving up” something or doing without, although sometimes it seems people have given up Lent for Lent.

Still, as we were reminded in Ash Wednesday’s scripture, Jesus encourages his followers to observe the disciplines of prayer, fasting and charitable giving; and to do so *“in secret so that your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:4)

As I’ve journeyed spiritually I’ve come to love Lent. So load up your backpacks and walk with me. Here are some of the things I’ve learned to love about the Lenten journey:

1. Lengthening days for traveling

The meaning of the word “Lent” isn’t religious at all: it refers to spring, to the “lentening” or “lengthening” of the days as we begin to leave the cold, dark days of winter. Longer days mean

more light and an illumined spirit. Throughout the Gospel of John is the play between light and dark, day and night. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, not just because he risks his reputation being seen with Jesus, but because John wants to make the point that Nicodemus is in the dark about things of the spirit.

2. Mardi Gras: a party before the trip starts

Mardi Gras, “fat Tuesday,” is over now, of course. But it’s a party with a simple purpose: to blow off steam before a season of simplicity and doing without. The problem is we—especially Americans, with our disproportionate consumption of world resources and our insatiable appetites for everything—tend to live as if Mardi Gras were a year-round event rather than a once-a-year happening. It’s like eating chocolate at every meal. Hmm...okay, bad example. It’s like eating only chocolate at every meal. Tempting, but we know it doesn’t work. So Lent helps us.....

3. Give up things and lighten your backpack.

Lent reminds me that my life is very full—too full, to tell the truth: too much to do, too much stuff, too much distraction. So in Lent I pray more, not less; set Sabbath time more, not less; and reflect more, not less. I’m usually healthier and more spiritual with fewer things, material or otherwise, in my life. Christ thought so, too. Lent is a season to remind me to practice a simpler life.

Just to be clear, Lent is not a season for giving up stuff I shouldn’t be doing anyway, unless our desire is that the change is permanent, one day at a time. In that case, Lent is a great time to start a new life. Don’t just give up smoking for Lent, give it up for life. The average cost of a pack of cigarettes in Connecticut, in 2012, was \$9.30. Let’s say you go bargain brand and smoke a pack a day. That’s \$3,285 a year. Quit, put the money in your pocket and send some of it to church or the American Cancer Society. Make your own list: alcohol, various foods contributing to diabetes or high blood pressure, pornography, gambling, narcotics. Stop. Or don’t start.

4. Take something on

This is the missing piece of the previous. The problem with deprivation is that, absent something positive, it becomes masochism, suffering for suffering's sake. Jesus died on the cross for our redemption, not because he wanted to suffer.

Some of you know that about a dozen of us are in a fasting covenant group during Lent. We are covenanting with ourselves, God and one another to not eat food for a set period. Those unable to do this for medical reasons are abstaining from something that causes them to consider more closely their relationship with God.

But that's not all. A part of the covenant is to decide what we will "take on" for Lent. Those who were here Ash Wednesday heard me say "nature abhors a vacuum." It is not enough to "give up." We must "take on" some new behavior or, as one sage has said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Many options exist, too numerous to name. Choose one. Lent invites us to "take on" even as we "give up."

5. Confession

Confession is not the same as remorse. We may feel remorse for things we've done we wish we hadn't, or things we didn't do we wish we had. Certainly Lent is not about other people making us feel remorse, or we, them.

But Lent, and the confessions that attend it, is about being honest with ourselves, our neighbors and God. I remember the year I read a sermon by a candidate for ministry in which she spoke about "unconditional forgiveness." She should have known better. Forgiveness is never unconditional. When someone chirps "Forgive and forget" it is often in self-interest and certainly absent the truth of Christianity. We forgive because we remember and often at great cost. Sometimes the cost is confession on the part of the wrong doer; and the responsibility for restitution, to make things right. Sometimes it is cost on the part of the wronged, to let go of the wrong, despite no guarantee of restitution (and perhaps

even in spite of evidence to the contrary). Certainly the latter cost Jesus his life. Not unconditional forgiveness, but unconditional love, brought Jesus to his sacrifice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who fought in the underground against the Nazis and was hung for his fidelity to the Gospel, said it well: *“Forgiveness without confession is cheap grace.”*

Some will be familiar with the story of the elder Native American who told her grandchild of the battle that goes on inside people. Said she, *“My child, the battle is between two wolves. One is evil. It is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, hate, superiority and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”*

The child thought about this, then asked, *“Grandmother, which wolf wins?”* She answered: *“The one you feed.”*

What part of our struggle are we feeding, during Lent and throughout our Christian journey? Our assurance in Christ is that we will be forgiven. Whether that forgiveness brings a changed life is up to the part of us we feed.

6. It's only seven weeks

Chinese proverb says “A journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step.” All that I've spoken of is a lifetime project. That's what Methodists believe and call it: sanctification. We don't accomplish it all at once, if ever. But we can make a start. Lent is only seven weeks! Come on! We seek so many shortcuts to wholeness. Here is a program that delivers what it promises. The seven weeks of Lent, when we simplify our lives, give up a little, take on a little, confess our faults and forgive the sins of others, promise spiritual growth and a deep sense of the presence of God.

Six things I love about Lent. Hmmm....doesn't seem quite right, it being seven weeks and all. Okay, last one:

7. It leads to Easter

The journey is not only about arriving but about going toward somewhere. Easter is that somewhere. Easter is what Lent is all about: the new life, the resurrected life. The church seasons are eminently practical. Really important days need a time of preparation. Four weeks of preparation, Advent, before Christmas; and seven weeks of preparation, Lent, before Easter.

By the way, the reason there is a longer season of preparation before Easter is because it's more important. Christmas is important because Jesus was born, but everybody has a birthday. Easter is important because Jesus died and was resurrected. Not everybody does that!

But Jesus did. And by his sacrificial love we are redeemed. And that, most certainly, makes the journey worth taking.