

# What Are You Giving Up for Lent?

## First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 10, 2019

*I invite you, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent,  
by self-examination and penitence,  
by prayer and fasting,  
by works of love and generosity,  
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.*

Using this traditional language from the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, these words of Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline were spoken at our Ash Wednesday service a few days ago.

But what, then, does observing a holy Lent entail? That's what I want us to explore this morning. For those of you who have remarkable memories concerning my previous 10 sermons on the First Sunday of Lent, you'll notice something not quite right with today's sermon title, "What Are You Giving Up For Lent?". Any ideas why? Throughout my years as a pastor I have taken the stance that Lent should be more about taking something on than on giving something up. Perhaps it's just the typical Protestant over-reaction to traditional Catholicism that asked people to engage in self-denial and self-sacrifice, to give up things like meat, or chocolate, or anything else that seemed to bring joy. That always seemed like nothing more than a short-term New Year's resolution. And we know how those usually turn out. Therefore, I have always promoted being conscious of doing whatever it is that draws you into a deeper connection with the Sacred Presence of God in our midst.

For reasons I'm still trying to figure out, I've had a change of heart this year. Not that we shouldn't pursue adding or doing whatever it is that draws you and I closer to God, but that perhaps we need to reevaluate the benefits that can come with giving something up for Lent.

So, let's start with an exploration of the story known as the Temptation of Jesus, which appears in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In turn, instead of seeing this simply as a story that happened once upon a time a long, long time ago in a land far, far away, we will see it as something that continues to happen, to each of us, to this very day. This is often referred to as a pilgrimage or journey through the wilderness, a wilderness experience. In the Bible, the wilderness is nearly always a place, literally or metaphorically, of struggle and of being tested. Think of Moses and the Israelites wandering for 40 years in the desert before entering the promised land. The wilderness, then, becomes a place where Jesus' (and our) core commitments will be tested.

In the first confrontation, the devil – or, the 'tempter' or 'tester' – attempts to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself by turning stones into bread, rather than

trusting God to satisfy his need. Yet, **Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain.** Question: How often do you and I want the power to make things as we wish them, to turn stones to bread, turn this to that, to have the world as we desire, not as it is?

The second temptation attempts to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige, if he were given all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Yet, **Jesus will not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem.** Question: How often do you and I want to manage what others think of us, to have authority, status, prestige, the kingdoms of the world?

The third test focuses on Jesus' vulnerability and need for safety, were he to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Yet, **Jesus will not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.** Question: How often do you and I want the security of freedom from pain, from risk, from sacrifice, as if we could leap from a height and be unhurt? Through this biblical story, we learn the scriptures call us to see **God alone as our power, our belonging, and our security.**

What else can help us develop our mental, personal, and spiritual health? Here are a few more ideas. And believe me, I'm looking into the mirror myself when it comes to these suggestions. I'll list three. A blog article released just this week on the patheos.com website is entitled, *How to Make the Most Out of Lent*, by Dr. Gregory and Rachael Popcak. They write:

- **Give up trying to do everything by yourself.**  
Self-sufficiency and independence can be great qualities to have, but there is true beauty and humility in acknowledging when we need help from others. And when we are always trying to do everything by ourselves, and we're constantly taking care of others without letting them take care of us, resentment often grows without us even realizing. So this Lent, take a step back, give up stubbornness, embrace humility, and reach out to others when help is needed. Or simply allow others to help if and when they offer.
- **Give up overthinking and jumping to conclusions.**  
This can be a hard one. When something, usually small, occurs, it can be all too easy – even automatic – to obsess over the situation, overthink, and come to negative and often unrealistic conclusions. This can not only ruin our day, but also impact our relationships. To keep from doing this, take interactions and situations at face value. Don't add ideas, put words in others' mouths, or create outcomes that aren't based in facts. Also, switch from thinking about the worst possible outcome to the best possible outcome. That can give us hope, rather than simply wanting to give up. Hope gives us joy and helps us grow closer to God.
- **Give up over-scheduling and overworking.**  
That's right, I said it. And yes, I'm still looking directly into the mirror myself. We live in a society that is extremely focused on achievement. Especially because of social media, we constantly feel the need to be doing something. Sometimes it almost becomes a competition to see who has the busiest schedule. Being this busy leaves very little time for fun, for enjoyment, for relaxation. We lose touch with who we are as individuals, as a couple, or as a family because we are so focused on getting to the next activity or

working on the next project. Give us this over-scheduling and overworking habit this Lent by setting aside time to do something that gives you joy and brings you peace. Make time to relax and spend time together as a family or with friends. Schedule a date night, just hang out at home, take a day trip. Or do what I love to do, take a nap.

Perhaps those of you who follow me on Facebook and/or Instagram noticed what I posted last Friday. On each of those sites, using a black and white photo I took of the front of the sanctuary after our Ash Wednesday service as a backdrop, I added the words, "In recognition of my addition to Facebook/Instagram, I'm going to take a break and give it up for a time during Lent." For those of you who know me well, you know that this is a huge thing to give up for Lent. But I have already used that extra time to focus on my mental, personal, and spiritual health.

Along those lines, I briefly want to mention something that I rarely talk about – **addiction**. In the context of this season of Lent, I **invite you to make a commitment to abstain from something you may have a compulsive relationship with**. Whatever it is you give up, you might discover you like your life better without it, and gain a real willingness to let it go. And if you don't manage to stay stopped, you will have learned an important lesson – that this 'habit' is maybe something more; that it has some measure of control over you. **Part of the point of Lent is to heighten our awareness of, our attachment to, and our dependence on things other than God.**

And remember, the purpose isn't to give something up just to give something up. It's to produce time and energy to do something else – like some of those things I suggested above. The end result is to experience God's Presence more often and more deeply throughout your wilderness journey through Lent.

Amen.

Resources:

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Temptation*, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net), 3-7-19.

Dr. Gregory Popcak and Rachael Popcak, *How To Make the Most Out of Lent*, [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com), 3-5-19.

Phil Fox Rose, *What Are You Giving Up for Lent?* [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com), 2-7-13.