

Lent: Our Journey Back to God

First Sunday in Lent

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 Mark 1:9-15
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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At our Ash Wednesday Service of the Imposition of Ashes a few days ago I asked those who gathered the following question: **What does the season of Lent mean for us today, especially for progressive Christians who do not hold as tightly onto church tradition?**

I answered this way: **Lent basically means the same as it always has. And I added: And that's a good thing, for we must be cautious about not throwing something out just because it's traditional.**

So on this First Sunday of the church season of Lent I want to begin with an admonition from the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* that I shared during our Ash Wednesday service.

*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.*

In order for that invitation to be meaningful for you and me, perhaps it's best to begin with some basics about this liturgical season of Lent. Much of this may be familiar to many of you, but I have learned not to assume that, especially in our day and age when people come to a particular church from a variety of different faith traditions, many of which do not follow the liturgical church calendar.

The word "Lent" comes from the Old English word *lencten*, meaning "**springtime**" – the time of year when we notice new birth and new growth due to days with more sunshine – more light! The season of Lent is the 40-day period of time (not counting Sundays) prior to Easter.

Somewhat similar in purpose to the season of Advent that precedes Christmas, the Christian Church uses this time for the purpose of preparing to celebrate the meaning of Easter. It does so by taking stock and a good hard look at our lives and journey of faith – as individuals and as the church. For when we do, we will hopefully see how God has been, and is, actively working in and through our lives, and in and through the lives of others.

In the process, however, we come to realize the reality that **living the Christian way of life doesn't make our life any less difficult, or any freer of temptations.** That's why every year on the First Sunday of Lent the assigned lectionary gospel passage is Jesus' 40-day struggle with temptation in the wilderness. As Lent begins, **we are to focus on the wilderness experiences that we face, and the temptations that we struggle with most.** Ultimately, then, Lent is meant to be a time of honest self-examination and most

importantly, **a time of returning to God and to the ways of God – which Jesus summarized as loving God, and our neighbors as ourselves.**

This is put into perspective with the following Old Testament passage from the prophet Joel, which is also a traditional reading at the start of this season.

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. (Joel 2:12-13)

Our hope, then, is that we *rediscover* (or perhaps discover for the first time) that God's love and grace is indeed sufficient - even if we find ourselves in the midst of very difficult life situations. The burning question for each of us, therefore, is how do we do that?

Historically, Lent has been a time of self-sacrifice, of giving up the luxuries, and even some of the necessities, of life. This approach was taken as a way to relate better with the sacrifices that Jesus made during his 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism. The purpose of this self-denial was to help people focus more on their dependence on God. But for many years now, **I have advocated not so much the “giving-something-up” method of drawing nearer to God (unless that works for you), but rather the “taking-something-on” approach.**

So perhaps the real question for you and I to ponder, and then respond to is: **What could you add to your daily or weekly routine that would lead you to spiritual renewal? What would it take to revive and energize your spiritual life?** The answer depends entirely on you. What works spiritually for one person doesn't necessarily work for another. For example, evangelical hellfire and damnation revival meetings don't work for me, but they do for many people. The traditional list of spiritual practices includes things like:

- Reading more of the Bible, or a meaningful literary work.
- Study, like in a church school class or worship
- Conversations with others about spiritual matters.
- Prayer
- Mission work, such as putting in volunteer time at a local non-profit organization and spending time serving and helping others.
- Long peaceful drives in the country – that always works for me when I want to draw nearer to God.
- Doing something artistic or creative, like photography or drawing or music or working with your hands – all the while reflecting on how God has blessed you with this talent and ability.
- Journaling – writing about your struggles, your accomplishments, and taking stock of your life and your relationship with God. I once kept a daily journal for nearly 7 years, and it was very helpful to my spiritual life during that moment of time in my journey of faith.
- And yes, it may mean the hard work of confessing a particular sin or struggle with temptation, then, with God's help, turning away from that harmful or destructive practice or attitude. We call that repentance.

So regardless of the path of renewal you take, the point of Lent is simple: Whatever works for you in order to draw you nearer to God, do it! Perhaps another helpful guideline is looking at the words of the apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23, where he states that the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Through self-examination, are you currently struggling with any of those in your life? If so, perhaps the question to ask this Lent is: What may be blocking my ability to love, to experience joy, to be at peace, to exhibit patience, to be kind, generous, faithful, gentle, or to exhibit self-control.

But here’s a confession I need to share. **The further I delve into what is called progressive Christianity, with its questioning and oftentimes turning away from traditional church doctrine and dogma, many of those traditional spiritual practices simply don’t quite work for me like they once did.** I wouldn’t be surprised if many of you have found the same to be true in your spiritual life.

Herein, then, lies the cutting edge of progressive Christianity for me and, I believe, for this congregation. For decades this congregation has been **socially and culturally progressive**. In the past several years that has been extended to becoming more **theologically progressive**, as we question traditional biblical interpretations and even the understandings of the nature and character of God. Now, I believe that **our new frontier is how to understand and develop a more progressive spirituality**.

Traditionally, we Presbyterians have most often lived out our faith in our minds and through our service. But as our concepts of the nature and character of God progress, grounded in new theological understandings and biblical interpretations, we also need to concentrate more in how to live out the spiritual side of our journey of faith – our connection with the Sacred/Divine in our midst. That is one of the things I’ll be working on during my sabbatical later this spring and early summer.

In the meantime, let me close with a remarkable reflection on the meaning of Lent by the renowned Catholic author on spirituality Henri Nouwen.

I have come to realize the need for returning over and over again. My life drifts away from God. I have to return. My heart moves away from my first love. I have to return. My mind wanders. I have to return. Returning is a life-long struggle that is renewed each Lent...God's love does not ask any questions. God is glad to see us home.

During this season of spiritual renewal, I invite you, I invite us as a congregation, to observe a holy Lent. Let us journey back to God.

Amen.

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Returning: God's Love Calls Us Home; Reflections for the Days of Lent*, 1989 by Creative Communications