

“Things I Love About Lent”

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

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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

Today’s readings speak of journey and, specifically, journeying to unknown places. Abram—this is before God renames him Abraham—is told to leave his home and journey to an unknown place: *“the place I will show you,”* God says. 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. Our Bishop, Thomas Bickerton, ends his letters always with, *“The Journey continues....”* So it does. Lent is a time for reflection and inner journeying. Many of us associate Lent with “giving up” something or doing without—more on that shortly--although sometimes it seems to me some of us have given up Lent for Lent.

In my spiritual journey I’ve come to love Lent. So load up your backpacks and walk with me. Here are the things I love about Lent:

1. Lengthening days for traveling

The meaning of the word “Lent” isn’t religious at all: it refers to Spring, and to the “lenten” or “lengthening” of the days as we begin to leave the cold, dark days of winter. Gil Simmons, Chief Meteorologist of WTNH Channel 8 has been reminding us for weeks that meteorological Spring begins today, March 1. And, like it or not, you will lose an hour of sleep next Saturday night so you can gain an hour of daylight from now until late June.

Longer days mean more light and an illumined spirit. Throughout the Gospel of John is the interplay between light and dark, day and night. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, not just because he risks his reputation as an esteemed teacher by being seen in daylight with this itinerant preacher

from the backwater of Nazareth, 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. Pancakes, anyone? But it’s a party with a simple purpose: to blow off steam before a season of simplicity and doing without. The problem is that 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 it doesn’t work. So Lent helps us....

3. Give up things and lighten our 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 reminds 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 is \$13.24. (1) Let’s say you smoke a pack a day. That’s \$4,832.60 a year. Quit, put the money in your pocket and send some of it to the American Cancer Society or the church. Not a smoker already? Make your own list: alcohol; foods contributing to diabetes, high blood pressure or obesity; pornography, gambling, narcotics. Stop. Or don’t start.

Just to be clear: in the category of “Physician, heal thyself,” it is no secret to anyone with eyes that I weigh too much for my 5’11” frame, notwithstanding the ability of long, loose black robes to cover a multitude of sins. At the start of the year I consulted with my doctor and began a weight loss regimen using one of the GLP-1 medications to jump-start the process. Having been down this road several other times in my life, I know what I need to do and the supports I need to do it. But I’m happy to report that I’m halfway to my goal of losing 40 pounds. What’s the point, Pastor Brian? The point is that I know the struggle and am trying to live the practice that I profess.

(1) www.tobaccoinsider.com

4. Take something on

This is the companion piece of #3. Nature abhors a vacuum. The problem with deprivation is that, unless we substitute something positive to replace what has been removed, we are at risk of returning to old habits. Or we stay the course and it becomes masochism, suffering for suffering's sake. Jesus dies on the cross for our redemption, not because he wanted to suffer or God wanted him to suffer.

“Taking something on” can be as traditional as the charitable giving, fasting and prayer Jesus describes in Matthew 6. Or it can be “doing a good turn daily” as I suggested in my February 8th sermon. Or one of any of the ministries in your bulletin today. Or something beyond the church.

For me, one of the things I could do was participate in last Wednesday's “Faithful Witness for Immigrant Justice” event in Washington, D.C. Not everyone could take three days in the middle of the work week, but I could. So in addition to practicing my own convictions, I went representing many of you who would have gone if you could. It was an honor to be there with United Methodists and others to call for more humane and caring immigration enforcement. I thank all of you who prayed for me and Rev. Hibbard and the 2,000 people who were there, as well as those who were able to watch the live-stream. A District observance is planned for March 8 and we'll provide details as we receive them. Be the change you want to see in the world. We can easily come up with things that will make our world better. So do.

5. Confession

It's good for the soul, they say. 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. That's meanness.

But Lent, and the confessions that attend it, is about being honest with God, ourselves and our neighbors. I served on the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry for a dozen years, the credentialing body for clergy in our denomination. I remember the year I read a sermon by a candidate in which she wrote about “unconditional forgiveness,” by which she defined as forgiveness without any thought of the circumstances that led to the need for forgiveness. She should have known better. By that definition forgiveness is never unconditional. “Forgive and forget” is often spoken in self-interest and certainly not consistent with the truth of Christianity.

God in Christ forgives precisely because God remembers and chooses to forgive. **We forgive** because we remember and choose to forgive, often at great cost. Sometimes the cost is confession, the wrong doers admission of responsibility and, insofar as it is possible, making restitution, making things right. Sometimes the cost is on the part of the offended party, to let go of the wrong, despite no guarantee of restitution (perhaps even in spite of **no** evidence of confession or restitution). Certainly the latter was the forgiveness Jesus gave, a forgiveness that cost him his life. It was not unconditional forgiveness but unconditional love that brought Jesus to his sacrifice. In my Ash Wednesday sermon I quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was martyred for his work in the underground resistance to the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer wrote: *“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance...cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”*

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

The grandchild through about this, then asked, *“Which wolf wins?”* The grandparent replied, *“The one you feed.”*

What part of our journey are we feeding this Lent? Good? Or bad? Christ assures us forgiveness. Does it bring a changed life? And holiness? It depends on what we feed.

6. It's only seven weeks

An old proverb says, *“A journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step.”* All 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 start. Lent is only seven weeks, and 11 days of that is already past! 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, promises spiritual growth and a deep sense of the presence of God.

Six things I love about Lent. Hmm...that doesn't seem quite right. In Biblical numerology, "six" is an imperfect number. Seven is a perfect number. And after all, there are **seven** weeks in Lent. Okay, last one:

7. Lent leads to Easter

The journey is not only about arriving but about going somewhere. Easter is that somewhere. Easter is what Lent prepares us for: the new life, the resurrected life. The church seasons are eminently practical. Really important days need a time of preparation. Advent is four weeks of preparation before Christmas. Lent is seven weeks of preparation 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 Lenten journey worth taking.