

### “An Opportune Time”

Today we enter the season of Lent. We can do so with intention or lackadaisically. Just by being present for this Ash Wednesday service I believe you want to be intentional about Lent, but intentionality comes in different forms. For those who were raised in a liturgical church one way could be abstaining from something for the duration of Lent. The tradition was to give up eating meat for these forty days. More recently sweets and alcohol have been added to the foods from which one can abstain.

Of late some have pushed back against this ancient practice because they feel that depriving oneself of something does not necessarily improve our relationship with God. These folks advocate taking on a spiritual practice during Lent as a more positive way of marking the season. The practice could be attending worship services, praying, or spiritual reading. At the least it will deepen or improve our spiritual life for the 40 days of the Lenten season. What’s more, we might continue this practice beyond Lent enriching our spiritual life continually.

Others have advocated taking on an act of service such as working at a shelter, tutoring students, or assisting at food pantry as a more positive way of being during Lent. These acts of service are less centered on the self than either abstaining or taking on a spiritual practice. They are outward focused and for some those feel more genuine.

Whether we abstain from something or taking on something, if we do so grudgingly we have defeated the purpose before we have even started. That is why intention is crucial.

I think it is best to enter Lent with the attitude of opportunity rather than duty. Otherwise our Lent is like those drive by ashes events—all show and no substance. If we prepare ourselves for the entry into this time of reflection in the hopes, not of earning some brownie points in the afterlife, but rather for a closing the distance between ourselves and the God we are more likely to feel a sense of joy in this time. To make a crude analogy, Lent is kind of like cosmic couples’ therapy. We are hoping to mend the rifts between us and God, and revive a once deeply loving relationship. If we want it to work and we put our heart into it the potential is much greater than if we are just go through the motions.

Allow me to offer some alternate ways of looking at practices for Lent. For example, when I consider abstaining from food or a pleasure as a Lenten practice, let us not focus on being deprived. No one ever wants to be deprived of something they enjoy. Rather when I desire the thing from which I am abstaining it is an opportunity to reflect on God. I can consider how God has given me the ability to enjoy life. I can be grateful for that enjoyment and recognize that by fasting from it I have opened a place in my life into which I can welcome God more fully and freely. I am providing myself the prospect of

having a deeper spiritual relationship because I am turning my thoughts away from selfishness and onto the Divine.

New acts of spiritual discipline can obviously help to deepen my relationship with God. I am giving myself the gift to encounter God in new ways. Perhaps I am reading daily meditations that open me to seeing God through someone else's eyes. If I am adding prayer time or worship time, I have the chance to get beyond the rote prayers and actions to a place of silence and adoration that may not be there for me otherwise.

When I dedicate time in Lent to serving others I am giving myself the opportunity to see Christ in someone I might not ordinarily give a second thought to on the street.

Ironically, I think these acts of adding a spiritual practice or act of service, require us to abstain as well. Few of us have lives with loads of free time to give to a new thing. Therefore, we have to abstain from something to make room for the new. When you do so make sure that what you abstain from is not something old that has been serving you well. Adding prayer by giving up time with your family is not a good tradeoff. Attending more worship services at the expense of healthy exercise is not good either. Praying more only to end up eating fast food instead of preparing a nutritious meal is a false choice. Make room by taking time away from television, especially the relentless news cycle. Silence your phone instead of watching silly Tik Tok or YouTube videos. Shut down the computer instead of playing endless video games. I am picking on electronic media because it is so pervasive and intrusive, but there are other ways in which we use our time that are equally fruitless and could be abstained from in order to make time for a new practice or act of service.

Use Lent wisely. Have a blessed and holy Lent. Seek a deeper relationship with God during these forty days as Jesus did when he sojourned in the wilderness. Seek also the answer to the question that we all ask, "What is it you will do with your one wild and precious life?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of the last line from Mary Oliver's poem "Summer Night."