

February 18, 2018

Year B; 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9: 8-17

Psalm 25: 1-9

1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3: 18-22

Mark 1: 9-15

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**If you have decided to give something up as your Lenten discipline, say chocolate or red meat or coffee, but you are concerned you might slip up and indulge, my recommendation is that you share your plan with a 9-year-old boy.**

**I mentioned this phenomena in Bible study this week.....In my experiences at St. Christopher's School with Lent and the elementary age boys I ministered to.....there is nothing more demanding than a nine year old boy who has taken on himself the responsibility of making sure you stick to your Lenten discipline.**

**Weeks before Ash Wednesday the boys would begin to ask me what I was going to give up for Lent. If I had no answer, they would make suggestions.**

**If I explained that today, the church also encouraged people to TAKE UP a new spiritual habit, as well as or instead of giving up something, the boys rolled their eyes, as if this idea was just an excuse for getting out of the difficult, mystical work of not eating candy.**

**Besides, hearing that your chaplain had read a chapter of a CS Lewis book that morning, or had used a new Celtic prayer form....well...that was boring..... compared to grilling her as to whether she had faltered.....and eaten any mini candy bars.**

**As young boys they had very legalistic minds, and were drawn to clear disciplines that allowed them to know, without much thought, if their chaplain was right or wrong in her spiritual discipline, and to tell her in no uncertain terms!**

**As we gather today on this first Sunday in Lent, many of us may be considering, or have already accepted, the invitation to observe a holy Lent, in the simplest terms, to try a new path in our spiritual journey.**

**The tradition of giving something up for Lent, so loved by my boys, is of course rooted in our Gospel reading from Mark, of Jesus's time in the wilderness.**

**Mark's Gospel was the first to be written of the four Gospels and is the shortest and most succinct in its writing style. Consequently, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is told in just 2 brief sentences, elaborating only that he was tempted by Satan, companioned by the wild beasts, and cared for by angels.**

**The Gospels of Matthew and Luke include many more details as to what the temptations were, but Mark suffices to say that Jesus was tempted, much is mystery and we do not need to know more.**

**Our Lenten season is modeled after these 40 days in the wilderness, and the practice of giving something up for Lent comes from efforts to stand with Jesus in the wilderness, fasting with him, in solidarity and connection.**

**Now I have known many people for whom giving up something, fasting from a favorite food or activity, has been a thoughtful and deepening spiritual discipline. I have a dear Catholic friend who willingly and joyfully fasts every Friday in Lent, remembering Good Friday each week, walking that path with Jesus.**

**However, for many people, including me, a Lenten discipline of giving up something often devolves into the work of a 4<sup>th</sup> grader, more focused on the giving up, and thus more like a contest or a challenge, than a connection to Jesus in the Wilderness.**

**Many of the teachers at St. Chris would try to give up chocolate for Lent, often with a mixed motivation of spiritual growth and weight loss.....**

Only to end up in my office late in the afternoon, confessing to mindlessly popping a Valentine candy in their mouths while grading papers....

Worried now less about dieting, and more about “messing up” their spiritual discipline, even worried it was a sin....

telling themselves, if I cannot be perfect in my effort.....I have failed.....

We would talk about perfection and how it is the realm of only Jesus, about focusing less on keeping the fast flawlessly, and more on walking the way with Jesus.

As you can probably tell by now I have had a mixed relationship with fasting, with giving up for Lent, admiring it in a few others who could take it on with a right spirit, but seeing little in it for me.

That is, until a friend sent me a reading several years ago, a rule of life for Lent that invites us to fast, and, surprisingly, to feast, and both in ways I had never considered. The rule was written by The Right Rev. Arthur Lichtenberger, who was our Presiding Bishop from 1958 to 1964.

The rule reads:

“Fast from criticism, and feast on praise  
Fast from self-pity and feast on joy  
Fast from ill temper, and feast on peace  
Feast from resentment and feast on contentment;  
Fast from jealousy, and feast on humility;  
Fast from pride, and feast on love;  
Fast from selfishness, and feast on service;  
Fast from fear, and feast on faith.”

Each line of this rule challenges me to give up something far more tempting than chocolate, something far more enticing in the wilderness of my own heart...let go of my resentments? Let go of my selfishness? Let go of my fear?

And if I do, if I dare, will you be there, Lord, or will I be in the wilderness, alone?

**Lent calls us, invites us to risk, to go to the wilderness, and to trust that the God who has loved us since our birth, will be with us as we fast, and fail, and fast again....and to receive in the wilderness that feast that will never leave us empty.**

**At St. Christopher's I wanted to use Bishop Lichtenberger's rule of life with the boys, to maybe help them loosen their grip on being the Lenten chocolate police, and begin to hear a new way for their Lenten journey.**

**But like all of us, the boys could hear better and allow the words to sink in more, when they turned their eyes and hearts from the distractions and noise of the world and bowed their heads in prayer.**

**So I'll end with the Bishop's rule for life once more, but now in the form of a prayer, and an invitation to a fasting, feasting, and holy Lent.**

**Let us pray:**

**Dear Lord, help us to:**

**"Fast from criticism, and feast on praise  
Fast from self-pity and feast on joy  
Fast from ill temper, and feast on peace  
Feast from resentment and feast on contentment;  
Fast from jealousy, and feast on humility;  
Fast from pride, and feast on love;  
Fast from selfishness, and feast on service;  
Fast from fear, and feast on faith."**

**Amen.**

**The Reverend Megan Limburg**

