

Giving up ... or just Giving
First Sunday in Lent 2017, March 5
Rev. Alida Ward
Luke 4:1-13

Right after Christmas, as you know, I led a bunch of people from this church over to India for our annual service trip -- (and, by the way, you should definitely come back on the 26th to hear their stories and reflections.

It was an amazing trip.)

At the end of that trip, I flew with my group from India to Dubai, which is the hub for Emirates Airlines-- and then I flew back east to meet up with my daughter, who lives in Shanghai, and we visited Vietnam, and then I flew back to Dubai and got on the plane to New York.

So I spent all told 55 hours on Emirates Airlines.

Now, the cool thing about Emirates is that you have your own little inflight entertainment system with tons of movies and tv shows to choose from.

But even so, by the time I hit hour 50 or so, I had pretty much run through every movie I wanted to see -- neither *LaLa Land* *nor* *Moonlight* was available yet.

So, desperate for entertainment, I started watching some pretty random stuff.

Which is how I ended up coming across Shaquille O'Neal rappelling down a cliff face with Bear Grylls.

Shaquille O'Neal you presumably know.

Bear Grylls you might not know.

He's that crazy British guy who has been doing these reality TV shows for ten years or so now, all of which involve being dropped into the wilderness somewhere and left to survive.

Man vs. Wild was his first show.

He's been dropped onto ice floes, abandoned in the rainforest, tossed into the Sahara, and left to fend for himself in the Badlands ...

we've watched him climb glaciers, swim rivers, dangle from jungle vines;

he's eaten snakes, maggots, yak eyeballs.

And now he has a show where **he** not only does these things

but he drags a celebrity along with him.
So there was Shaquille O'Neal, hollering with fear while he and Bear Grylls rappelled down a cliff --
because it turns out that although Shaq is 7 foot 1, he doesn't like heights.
And then they had to eat some really beyond-gross dead animal...
and they had to dig a hole in the ground to sleep in to keep warm.
All of which I watched with fascination, in my 50th hour on Emirates Airlines.

So -- this scripture reading that Blake just read to you,
you know what it is, basically:
it's Jesus as Bear Grylls.

It's the story of the first thing that Jesus does after he gets baptized,
baptized at age 30 by his cousin John the Baptist.
So here he is, newly blessed by the Holy Spirit,
ready to begin his ministry as the Messiah --
'cause remember, we don't know anything about him before age 30,
this is the actual start of it all.
But before Jesus does anything, before he starts preaching and teaching and healing,
he decides to take himself into the wilderness.
Man vs. Wild.
Off into the desert he goes, off to the scorching heat and the scorpions,
and taking, it says no food or water with him.
Unlike Bear Grylls, however, Jesus wouldn't be looking for desert critters to munch --
the scripture says he went in order to fast. Not eat.
Fast and pray and be alone with God.

And it is **not** an easy forty days.
After a while, it goes from being man vs. wild
to being man vs. something much worse.
What Jesus runs up against is what the story calls Satan,
or, put another way, he runs up against something that's trying to keep him away from
God.
He hears a voice tempting him not to trust God, use magic to turn stones to bread;
he hears a voice tempting him to use his power to rule people, not serve them.

There's something trying to throw him off track.
But Jesus holds fast to his calling,
remains true to his God.

And in the end he comes out of the desert "with the strength of angels", it says,
comes out of the desert and begins to preach the kingdom of God to all who will listen.

In pretty much any Christian church you'd wander into this morning,
you would be hearing this same story told.

This story of Man vs. Wild, Jesus in the desert,
40 days of fasting and praying and drawing closer to God.

Because it is **the** traditional story for the beginning of Lent --
which is where we find ourselves today.

If you've ever wondered why people talk about giving something up for Lent,
it's because of this story.

The whole idea of challenging yourself to give up something you like
goes way way way back to the very earliest Christians,
who decided that one of the best ways you could draw closer to God spiritually was to
do what Jesus did, and fast for 40 days.

So why not do the 40 days before Easter, and make yourself spiritually ready for the
joy of the resurrection.

The earliest Christians actually really did fast for 40 days, we think. Like **not eat**.

But the practice kind of morphed over time,
and eventually it turned into the idea that you might have grown up with:
that you just give up something you really like for Lent.

So maybe you fast from -- chocolate.

I saw on Facebook a list of the most common things to give up for Lent;
ironically, the list *included* Facebook.

Other things on the list were alcohol, coffee, candy, meat --

Stephen Colbert announced on the Late Show on Friday that that's what *he'd* given up

--

and, also on the list: Twitter.

I'll leave that one alone.

And all of that -- whether giving up social media or sugar -- all of that of course is fine to do, **if** ... and this is the big if... if while you're doing it you are *remembering* WHY you're doing it. And why you're doing it isn't to drop a few pounds or get your caffeine addiction under control. Why you give something up for Lent is to draw closer to God. Why you give something up is to remember the guy who took himself out in the desert to get himself ready to be Messiah. You give something up in order *in some small way* to feel like you're walking in his footsteps, and to carry on the tradition that Christians started up 2000 years ago.

But I think for an awful lot of folks, that connection has kind of faded, to be honest. So I want to kinda shake things up a bit. Here's what I think you should give up for Lent:

None of that.

Seriously, none of that.

Hey, by all means, if there's a habit you want to kick, and you want a nice concise timeframe to do it in, these 40 days could work really well for you.

David used Lent to give up pipe-smoking a while ago now, and it worked. So don't let me stop you from that.

But in all honesty I like better what the Pope suggested a couple years ago. He said he wasn't so interested in people giving up chocolate, or coffee, or alcohol, or whatever.

He said -- and this was powerful -- he said what he really wanted people to give up was *indifference to their neighbors*.

What he really wanted was for people to help one another.

Here's another way of saying that:

instead of giving *up* something,

give something:

give your attention to the ones right around you who need you,
give compassion, give time, give your presence.

Which is why, this past Thursday at our high school youth group,
I had one of the kids stand up and read Matthew chapter 25 as our Lenten meditation -

The part that goes like this:

*At the end of it all, when all people come before their Lord and Judge,
Christ will say to the blessed ones:*

Come, Inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you.

For I was hungry, and you gave me food,

I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink,

I was homeless, and you gave me a place to stay,

I was in prison and you visited me,

I was sick, and you comforted me.

And the blessed ones will say:

*when did we ever see you hungry, or thirsty, or homeless, or sick or in prison,
and do something for you?*

And Jesus will say

*Whenever you did one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or
ignored, that was **me**—you did it to **me**.*

So young Will Richards read that to the 80 other kids who were at SPF,
and then I said,

"that's what I want you to do for Lent."

Look for people who need kindness and give it,

look for people who need compassion, and give it.

You don't need to give something up;

instead **give** something every day to someone who needs it.

Try an act of kindness every day in Lent.

Because if the point of Lent is to renew our acquaintance with Christ ... and it is;

if the point of Lent is to draw closer to him ... and it is;

then the best way to **find** him is exactly where he **told** us we'd find him.

In the face of our neighbor.

Whenever you do something for someone, he said --
that's me.

That's me you're encountering.

In the face of your neighbor, that's me you see.

So try this.

Try this, this Lent.

By all means give something **up** if you want.

But for the health of your spirit, and the strengthening of your faith,
try **giving** something each day instead.

Give compassion, give patience, give hope,
give kindness, give time, give attention.

I can guarantee that what **God** will do, to help you in the process,
is to give **you** an opportunity for your giving every single day.

Every day in Lent there will be a chance for you to meet Jesus in another person,
guaranteed.

Every day in Lent there will be someone to help, to show compassion to.

Which means that every night in Lent, as you close your eyes to sleep,
you'll know that one of the faces you saw that day was Christ's.

May these 40 days be blessed days for each of us. Amen.