

“Doing Lent”

First Sunday in Lent – Matthew 4:1-11

“Hey, Alida, are you doing Lent this year?”

That was the question from one of the teens at youth group this past Thursday.

He had called me over to where he was sitting because he said he had a question. And this was it.

“Are you doing Lent?”

I knew what he meant, of course:

his question was whether I was giving something up for Lent.

And him asking me that made me flash on a memory that I hadn’t thought about in a long time.

Fourth grade.

My best friend Charlotte and I were hanging out in her house after school, as usual,

and out of the blue, she said “what are you giving up?”

I had literally no idea what she was talking about.

Was this some kind of shakedown?

“What do you mean?” I aid “Why do you want me to give something up?”

“You know,” she said, “for *Lint*. What are you giving up for Lent.”

I was no closer to understanding. I did not know what lint was, other than what my mother cleaned out of the dryer.

“Lent!” said Charlotte. “You know, before Easter.

You’re supposed to give something up. They told us in church.”

If they had told *me* in church, I clearly hadn’t been paying attention, because I didn’t know anything about this rule.

But I already knew that I did not like it.

“What are they making *you* give up?” I said.

“Candy,” Charlotte said.

“I don’t want to do that,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “you have to give up *something*. From now until Easter. And it has to be something you really like.”

I walked home from Charlotte’s house thoroughly depressed.

I didn’t want to give up anything.

And I definitely didn’t want to give up candy.

As soon as I walked in the door, I went and found my mom.

“Mom,” I said, “Charlotte says I have to give up something I like, all the way from now until Easter.”

My mom was very reassuring.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “You’re Presbyterian.”

Phew. Talk about relief.

And that was how it was, in the 1970’s, in Virginia.

Protestants like us didn’t do things like Lent or Ash Wednesday or any of that.

Catholics did, and Lutherans like my friend Charlotte.

But me, I didn’t do Lent.

And, given what I was hearing about it, that was just fine with me.

So here I was, decades later, standing in our youth Barn, and there’s the question, coming at me again,

“Hey, Alida — do you do Lent?”

So what did I say in response?

I gave what was really quite the convoluted answer:

“Yes,” I said, “we do Lent here,

but not necessarily in the manner of giving a particular thing up, it's more about really focusing on the spiritual journey that we are each on, and using the time between now and Easter to grow our connection with God. “

“Huh,” said my young friend.

“*Okaaaay*. Well, I gave up sweets.”

Which somehow sounded like a lot more reasonable answer.

So this morning, I'm using this sermon time to spend a little more time with this question.

Do we do Lent?

Do we, a centuries old Protestant church descended from grumpy Puritans,

do we DO Lent?

And what does it mean to say that we do?

First of all, where's this whole Lent concept come from, this idea of forty days of spiritual intensity and giving things up? It all has to do with the passage that [Evan/Elijah] just read to you.

This scripture tells the story of the very beginning of Jesus being Jesus. He's emerging from years of being a carpenter with his dad, at least that's what we figure he's been doing.

We have a lot of great stories about how Jesus was born, but we actually don't know a darn thing about what happened in the years between then and when he turned 30.

All we know is that one day Jesus showed up at the Jordan river where his cousin John the Baptist was, well, baptizing – and Jesus walked out into the river and asked to be baptized.

And when he walked out of the river,

nothing was the same.

From that moment on, he was healing and preaching, challenging people and loving them, on what would be a three year journey toward Jerusalem.

But first, *first*, the story says, before his ministry started, Jesus decided to fast for forty days.

He took himself out into the wilderness, it says, to fast and pray be alone with God.

And it was not an *easy* forty days.

It wasn't just the hunger, it wasn't just the thirst.

The wilderness was a real spiritual battlefield for Jesus.

Because out in the wild he runs up against 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 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 --

It's where, as I said, the Lent idea comes from.

Early on in Christianity,
the very earliest Christ-followers 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.

And if you're going to fast for forty days, they figured, then why not
choose the 40 days before Easter,
and make yourself spiritually ready for that holiest of days.

Those 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.

Or desserts in general or caffeine or meat, or,
as I have seen on several lists this year, screen time.

And all of that -- whether giving up social media or sugar --
in theory 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.

The idea behind giving something up is *in some small way* to feel like
you're walking in Christ's footsteps.

So do we do Lent?

If the idea of Lent is to re-dedicate ourselves to walking in Christ's
footsteps,

in all honesty you could say it's what we try to do here
 not 40 days a year but 365 days a year.
 Every day, *every* day we talk here about what it means to strive for
 Christlikeness,
 to pray and think our way into the way of Christ.
 So do we do Lent? Every day.

It's like the conversation I had with the FedEx guy at the church office on
 Tuesday, the snow day.
 I asked him if he had plans for Valentine's Day,
 and he said "me and my wife, we're not really that into it, y'know?
 Because we figure every day should be Valentine's Day for us."
 Well, same thing here.
 Every day here at Greenfield Hill should be Lent for us,
 and by that I don't mean no chocolate from now to eternity.
 I mean that every day is a day for us to think and pray about what it
 means to follow Christ's way.
 I mean that every day is a day for us to try *our* best to live into God's best
 hopes for us.

Back to the FedEx guy on Tuesday, though.
 Every day should be Valentine's Day, he said –
 but on his way out the door he said
 "don't get me wrong, I'm still getting her flowers tomorrow!"
 He was still going to honor the day.

Valentine's Day, ironically, was of course also Ash Wednesday,
 which led more than one person to say to me,
*I don't know what to do – am I supposed to eat chocolate today
 or give it up?*
 Here's what I'd say.

Have your chocolate. Have your coffee.

But honor the day.

Honor the days of Lent.

Do Lent.

Do Lent by doing what God calls us to do all the time:
following Christ's footprints and seeking his way.

Creating space in our heart for God's Spirit,
and time in our lives for God's presence.

One way that we offer in this church to help you do Lent
is through the words of our Lenten Devotional.

Most every morning in Lent,

if you're on our mailing list,

an email will land in your inbox at 6 a.m.

and it will be words from someone sitting around in these pews.

Someone else who's doing their best to do Lent,

to seek out Christ's path and walk in his ways.

Four days ago, on Ash Wednesday

the devotion that dropped into our inbox was written by Adam Snyder.

*(whose son is standing up here with me now) (who was at the 9:00
service)*

Adam, as it happened, wrote his devotion on today's scripture:

Jesus in the wilderness, facing his temptations.

And Adam reflected on the truth that all of us, all of us at some point,
also face situations that test our endurance and our faith.

"There are moments," he wrote, "when it seems things cannot get any
worse, and then they do."

"So how do we persevere," he wrote, "when we are confronted with our
forty days and forty nights of adversity and challenges?"

How do we make the right decisions when we are at our lowest?"

And then Adam asks the question
that is central to what we believe here at Greenfield Hill,
the question that guides us toward Christlikeness:
“Well, what did Jesus do?”

What did Jesus do to there in the wilderness?
He leaned on God’s word.
He relied on scripture, Adam pointed out.
And he remembered who he was.

What would Jesus do?
To ask that is, really, what it means to Do Lent.
To use these forty days to focus on that question
of what it means to be like Christ,
what it means to *do* what he would do.

How you do that — well, that’s up to you.
Reading devotions along the way is one darned fine way to help you do
Lent.
Adding a minute, just a minute, to the start of each day
to be still, and to be grateful.
And if giving something up helps you to feel Christ’s nearness,
then by all means, use *that* to do Lent.

Most of all, use these forty days, and the next 40 days after,
to remember that you are loved —
and to seek Christlikeness in all that you do.

And when someone asks you
“Hey, do you do Lent?” all you have to say is Yes.

Yes, I do.

Now, and forever, yes I do Lent. *Amen.*