

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard G. P. Kukowski at Grace Church, Silver Spring, Maryland on February 21, 2021; it being the First Sunday in Lent (Year B).

Texts: 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. But what is Lent really all about. In the Ash Wednesday liturgies, the prophet Joel said, "Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing ...."

So the first task of Lent is repentance. "Return to the Lord, your God ..." We are invited to bring our sins and lay them before the throne of God. What a gift that invitation is, because so often we carry around so much guilt.

Immediately after the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, a number of children were seen in a counseling center. One child's problem was that he absolutely refused to close any door whatsoever. He had been told many times by his mother not to slam doors as a maneuver which had been very successful in gaining her attention. The last time he had slammed a door, the earthquake struck and the ground began to shake beneath him. The habit of door-slamming was forever broken because the negative response was much greater than the child had bargained for. It was as if he had gone too far in his bid for attention, "over manipulating" the environment, which then struck back with all its might.

Guilt is irrational, but so real. Sometimes we are troubled and we don't even know why we are troubled. The issue is unresolved guilt. Lent is a time of repentance. It is a time for confession of our sins and the beginning of a new life.

More importantly, Lent is also a time of absolution. "Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . . ." It does no good for us to confess our sins if we keep beating up on ourselves. This may be the chief reason why so many people fail to truly repent and begin new lives. They never experience the absolution of God. An old Scottish clergyman once said that the devil has two lies he uses at two different stages. Before we commit a sin, he tells us that one little sin doesn't matter as no one will know. The second lie is after we've sinned when he tells us we're hopeless. Remember, Lent is a time for absolution – for forgiveness.

Lastly, Lent is also a time of renewal. "Who knows," wrote the prophet, "whether God will not relent, and leave a blessing behind him . . . ?" Lent is a time of renewal and refreshment. It is a time of turning our burdens over to Jesus and allowing him to carry them on our behalf. If we have repented of our sins, we can experience the absolution of

God, and we can turn over the burdens of our hearts to Christ who is far more able to bear them than we are. So, return to God this morning. Lay your sins at God's altar. Experience God's absolution. Turn your burdens over to the Lord and begin a new life. Again, in the words of the prophet Joel, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing."

Now, all of that was pretty lofty language, if I do say so myself. But, let's face it, lofty language is fine but we do need practical suggestions for the keeping of Lent so that we can reattach ourselves to the great 2000 year old Christian tradition of prayer, study and service that is Lent. Lent provides a teachable moment for all of us. Lent is something we need to get through the darkness of winter and, even more, in the darkness of a pandemic. The word itself comes from the Anglo-Saxon "Lencten" which means to lengthen -- lengthen the day from darkness into light. And if that sounds pagan, primal and pre-Christian -- it is!

God has operated before we Christians came on the scene. God has been at work in creation since the time God created the world Christians have always taken the customs of the people and made them their own -- adapting those customs to the practice of our faith.

So, I am going to give you three practical and useable ways to keep Lent. They are the three "S's" --- Silence -- Study -- Service.

The first is the hardest -- Silence. Not just the absence of speech, but the allowing for the presence of God. We abhor silence. Think of what happens if we put silence into our celebration of the Eucharist. If it goes on too long, we get nervous and we wonder who forgot what they were supposed to do.

So I am saying that we need to carve out regular seasons of silence for 15 minutes a day -- Monday through Saturday. Times of not speaking or thinking of what we need to do next. Times of allowing our systems to shut down so that what we tend to shut out can come in. This is the hardest thing to do -- 15 minutes at the beginning, middle or end of the day -- wherever and whenever you can fit it in. And I guarantee you, the more you do it, the more you will want to do it for the world is so terribly noisy and we humans need silence.

The second "S" is much easier -- study. Find a book about the spiritual life or decide to read one of the Gospels. Take part in our Lenten program at 11 am on Saturdays. Tune in to our Sunday morning forums at 9:30 am. Check out our Sunday Lenten Lunch with Wade In The Water at Noon. Join in a three hour session on contemplative prayer on March 21. Take art in the family offerings at 6 pm on Friday or the Quiet Day with the Daughters of the King this coming Saturday. Read the Gospel of

Mark along with a good commentary. That's the Gospel that our Sunday services will use all this year. Read the Psalms. They are filled with all the emotions that we humans experience – joy, sorrow, happiness, despair.

Finally, service -- service is as old as Lent itself. From ancient Christian times, Lent was meant to be a season of visible, charitable works by the faithful -- a time of demonstrated, applied charity. You probably know of someone who is in need of physical, spiritual or psychological support and Lent is the time to reach out to them. Take part in our upcoming food drive, Send a note or a text or make a call to someone who is alone in this pandemic. Look forward to our upcoming fundraiser for our refugee family, the Faridulleh's. The opportunities are many. For Service this Lent.

So,     Silence in which to contemplate  
          Study in which to learn  
          Service in which to do.

That formula will make this Lent different from all others that you have tried to keep before.

Now, I hear you moaning -- Rich is crazy, I can't do all that. I have tried better schemes than this and failed.

Well, of course, we all fail -- that is the human condition -- we are fallen -- we are miserable offenders as the old Prayer Book put it. I am saying do not use the prospect of failure as an excuse not to try and succeed. What you need to succeed are the three "P's" and they are Prioritize – Persist -- Pray!

Prioritize: you can't do everything so pick two or three and if you fail in one, you can succeed in another.

Persist: don't give up. You will stumble, you will fall, you will get angry, you will be uncharitable -- but carry on. And remember, the 15 minutes of silence is where your persistence will be renewed.

Pray: say your prayers. Use the Prayer Book, it is a wonderful resource and it is available online and in print. Remember, someone more talented than you or me wrote it all down. How do I talk to God -- there it is. Check out the daily devotions on pages 137 - 140. There it is -- prayer four times a day -- morning, noonday, evening and night and they are short and easy to pray.

Is it a lot to do? Yes! But remember you are only to do these things from Monday to Saturday. Never on Sunday. Sunday, you tune in here to rejoice and celebrate your successes and your failures. For remember Sundays are never Lent. The Prayer Book

calls them Sundays in Lent -- not Sundays of Lent. Sundays we gather to celebrate the resurrection and to prepare for the great high feast of Easter.

But, remember, you must start

- for if you haven't done anything, you won't get anything;
- if you haven't gone anywhere, you won't arrive anywhere;
- if you haven't expected something, you won't receive something.

Go for it! Silence, Study, Service! Prioritize, Persist, Pray! Walk with Christ so that at the end of the Lenten journey, you and I and the whole Church will say AMEN! ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN! THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!