

# The Season of Lent: Our Journey Back to God

## First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
March 1, 2009

On this First Sunday of Lent, I want to begin with a line from the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship that I used in our Ash Wednesday service a few days ago.

*I invite you, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent,  
by self-examination and penitence,  
by prayer and fasting,  
by works of love and generosity,  
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.*

In order for that invitation to become meaningful for you and me, let's begin with some **basics about this liturgical season of Lent**. Much of this may be familiar to many of you, but I have learned not to assume that, especially in our day and age when people come to a particular church from a variety of faith traditions, many of which do not follow the liturgical church calendar.

The word "Lent" comes from the Latin word that simply means "**springtime**" – the time of year when we notice new birth and new growth due to days with more sunshine – more light! (I always like when I can work the words 'more light' into a sermon.)

**The season of Lent is the 40-day period of time prior to Easter that the Christian Church has set aside for the purpose of taking a good hard look at our lives and journey of faith – as individuals and as the church.** For when we do, we will hopefully see how God has been, and is, actively working in and through our lives, and in and through the lives of others – especially those closest to us.

In the process, however, we come to realize the reality that **living the Christian life doesn't make our life any less difficult, or any freer of temptations.** That's why every year on the First Sunday of Lent the assigned lectionary gospel passage is **Jesus' struggle with temptation in the wilderness**. The reasoning behind this is simple. As Lent begins, we are to focus, individually and as a congregation, on the wilderness experiences that we face, and the temptations that we struggle with most.

Ultimately, then, **Lent should be a time of honest self-examination and most importantly, a time of returning to God.**

During our Ash Wednesday Service, we read a biblical passage that the lectionary always assigns to that day, words from the Old Testament prophet Joel:

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. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

(Joel 2:12-13)

**Our hope is that we rediscover (or perhaps discover for the first time) that God's grace is indeed sufficient** - even if we find ourselves in the midst of very difficult situations and struggles in life. The question for each of us, then, is how do we do that?

**Historically, Lent has been a time of self-sacrifice**, of giving up the luxuries, and even some of the necessities, of life. This approach was taken as a way to relate better with the sacrifices that Jesus made. The purpose of this self-denial was to help people focus more on God and their own journey of faith.

But here's a question I've always had: **If the purpose of Lent is to get us to focus more on God and our spiritual journey, is the "giving-something-up" method always the best way to do that?**

Many people find that the problem with this approach is the same problem most of us have with making New Year's resolutions. We try to give up a harmful or bad habit or two, but often are unsuccessful after a short period of time. Or, we intentionally go right back to it once Lent is over. Not much is really gained.

**So for many years now, I have advocated not so much the "giving-something-up" method of drawing nearer to God, but rather the "taking-something-on" approach.** Instead of just focusing on the negative side of *subtracting* something from our lives (even though that's not bad advice for those stuck in bad habits and harmful/destructive behaviors or attitudes), we can also look to the positive side by *adding* something.

So here's the real question for us to ponder and then respond to: **What could you add to your daily or weekly routine that would lead you to spiritual renewal? What would it take to revive and energize your spiritual life?**

Well, if you're looking for me, or anyone else, to give you a simple answer, you're going to be disappointed. That's because, in all actuality, **the answer depends entirely on you.** What works spiritually for one person doesn't necessarily work for another. For example, Evangelical revival meetings don't work for me, but they do for many people.

That being said, here are a few things that many folks have found useful in focusing on God and their spiritual life:

- **Reading** more of the Bible, or a meaningful literary work.
- **Study**, like in a church school class or worship
- **Conversations** with others about spiritual matters.
- **Prayer**
- **Mission work**, such as putting in volunteer time at a local non-profit organization and spending time serving and helping others.
- **Long peaceful drives in the country** – that always works for me when I want to draw nearer to God.
- **Doing something artistic or creative**, like photography or drawing or music or working with your hands – all the while reflecting on how God has blessed you with this talent and ability.
- **Journaling** – writing about your struggles, your accomplishments, and taking stock of your life and your relationship with God. I once kept a daily journal for nearly 7 years, and it was very helpful to my spiritual life during that part of my journey of faith.
- And yes, it may mean the hard work of **confessing a particular sin or struggle with temptation**, then turning away from that harmful and destructive practice or attitude.

This last one, by the way, is the simple definition of “repent” – the act of turning around and changing direction. That involves not only a change in behavior, but sometimes the harder work of changing our mind. **Lent is certainly meant to be a time of repentance, which is a primary means of turning back to God.**

So regardless of the path of renewal you take, the point of Lent is simple: **Whatever works for you in order to draw you nearer to God, do it!**

Time and time again in the Scriptures, when Jesus wanted to draw near to God and to understand God's will, he went away to spend some time alone with God. And he often invited his disciples to join him and do the same. That's one reason why I am so excited that our **All-Church Retreat** this coming Saturday comes during the season of Lent. And that's why the theme for this particular retreat, taken from Mark 6:31, is so timely, “Come away to a quiet place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

Actually, that's only the first half of verse 31. It continues with the explanation of *why* getting away is so important, “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” Who among us can't relate to that! So for those who are “too busy” to come to this retreat, I would suggest that we are all too busy *not* to get away for a while.

Before Jesus began his public ministry he had a profound wilderness experience. The same was true for Moses, Elijah, David and others in the Old Testament. I wouldn't be too surprised if many of us found that to be true in our own sense of calling to minister to other.

You may have noticed that in Mark's version of the story of Jesus' temptation, that there is no mention of the specific temptations that Jesus faced, like as is recorded in Matthew and Luke. Perhaps Mark's primary concern then, isn't on the temptation itself, but the fact that there was an extended time of being alone in the wilderness – a time that helped galvanize Jesus' understanding of the work and ministry that lay before him.

But let's be honest, **the wilderness can be a lonely and desolate place, a place where we often feel tested, or even may feel abandoned by God. And like the unique and different ways each of us draw near to God, each of us face unique and different wilderness experiences and temptations.** What tempts you, for instance, may not tempt me; what tempts me may not tempt you.

The challenge of Lent is that we spend the time that it takes to ponder, examine, reflect upon, and wrestle with our faith and where we seem to be headed in life. **For it is often in the wilderness experiences of life that we are drawn closest to God.**

The wisdom behind this season of Lent, then, may have been to recognize that one of the best ways to draw near to God may be in a self-imposed wilderness experience, whether that means giving something up, or taking something on.

Therefore, throughout this season of Lent over the next 6 weeks let us diligently seek both personal and congregational renewal – **our journey back to God.**

I invite you, therefore, and us as a congregation, to observe a holy Lent.

Amen.