

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

Please be seated.

Good morning! Welcome back to Lent!

There's a story going around – maybe you've heard it – about a certain minister who “parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: ‘I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses.’

“When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note ‘I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation.’”<sup>1</sup>

We pray this prayer, “lead us not into temptation” but isn't that just what we ourselves do every year at Lent, when we pick up a spiritual discipline? We give up smoking or drinking or television or chocolate or Facebook for Lent, only to bring us face-to-face with temptation. We fast, and we think about food all day long. We follow Jesus into the 40 days of wilderness, where we are tempted by the demons of our creation.

There seem to be a lot of questions about spiritual disciplines, like fasting or giving something up, this time of year. Do we have to fast on Fridays? Does that mean no meat? A friend, who'd moved here from the Bay Area a few years back, noticed the other day how in our area, you can have advertising in the paper and on the radio for restaurants and grocery stores talking about “Your Lenten menu,” and “Friday Fish specials.” He pointed out that in the San Francisco area, where there is in his words, “no religion” these ads just wouldn't have made any sense to people there.

We live in a culture, where there's a dominant religious group, the Roman Catholic church. In fact, so many of us this morning, grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, that we've become accustomed to hearing stories about it at coffee hour. *What, then, are the “Episcopal rules” about Lent?* The short answer is that there aren't any. Oh, there are a lot of traditions, and some real invitations, but no requirements that you have to follow. On Ash Wednesday, the church invites you “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.”

The tradition of the church is that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are fast days. So if you wish to take the church up on fasting, you might start with these days. Older tradition holds that “all Fridays in Lent” are fast days. Some people fast Wednesdays and Fridays. Some fast Monday through Saturday. Some fast for a particular day or series of days in Lent. Some fast until sundown. Other fast until the following day. Sundays are always feast days; we always celebrate the resurrection on Sunday, making it a mini-Easter celebration, and so whatever you've given up for Lent, you're allowed to break your fast on Sunday. Just as you are not required to fast, however, you are not required to stop on Sunday.

What is fasting? It's self-denial around eating. Eating's obviously one of the most very basic human needs, so intentionally not doing it is to interrupt a basic habit. Now fasting originally meant not eating at all (although one should always drink water), but now it can mean fasting from one or more particular kind of food – like meat, or desserts. The point is self-denial. I must say, seeing some of the “Lenten menus” from restaurants around town, I'm not sure how much of a sacrifice giving up meat on Fridays always is.

Why do we do this? Or any of the other Lenten disciplines, for that matter? *What's the point of these sacrifices?* Well, of course, the first reason is that we are seeking to live in imitation of Christ, who – as we just heard – was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and nights where he was tempted by Satan. So, are we seeking perfection? Only slightly. No, I think we're supposed to be

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<sup>1</sup> This joke was posted on <http://www.eca-sj.org/text/humor.htm>, and came from Bev Dunn (ECA - San Jose, California).

tempted. The point is that we are indeed supposed to crave that food, or smoking or drinking or television or chocolate or Facebook or whatever compulsion or habit or physical need we're trying to engage. We're not expected to be perfect, but rather to be flawed. Whenever we find ourselves craving, we're invited to remember God. We're invited to remember that our life and all life stems from God and not from our passing pleasures. We're supposed to have cravings, and each time we do, we can ask God's help to carry us through. And if we fail, if we slip, we are invited to ask God's forgiveness, to strengthen our resolve, and maybe the next time we'll manage to make a different choice. In any event, we're going to have a heightened awareness of this habit.

Along the way, we are invited to see that in the end the place where we ought to put our trust is not in ourselves, but in God. This is the point of our spiritual disciplines. It's not to lose weight or get physically fit or to look better. *The point is to reconnect with God on a deeper level.*

When we codify these practices – when we create laws to guide our spiritual journey such as “You will fast on Wednesday and Friday!” or what have you – the spiritual discipline becomes something else. It may be useful, it may even be a good thing to do, but is it of God? What does it say about freedom when free will has been caged in practices that have been hardened into rules?

And, finally, I invite you to remember Jesus' warnings about those who practice their piety in public. Whether we fast or not, whether we challenge ourselves with a new Lenten discipline or not, our spiritual practices – at least among adults – are always between us and God, and they are really nobody else's business. We are explicitly told *not* to talk about them.

So, my friends, I wonder how it sounds to God's ears, when in Lent we pray “Lead us not into temptation.” I guess we get brownie points for praying as Jesus taught us, but it's odd, don't you think?

*Let us pray: Heavenly Father, creator of all, lead us to you. Help us to see in you alone, our health, our joy, our salvation. Give us the courage to entrust you with all that we value, especially our lives. In your holy name. Amen.*