

Giving... Up!

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First Sunday in Lent
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Text: Luke 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and I want to talk to you about giving... up. And I'm putting a pause in between those words deliberately, because there is more than one way to understand that expression "giving... up." One of those ways puts the focus on ourselves, our temptations, and our frailties. That's how we're accustomed to think of "giving up" something for Lent, or New Year's, or for any other reason at any time of the year. But there is another way to "give... up," one that puts the focus not on us, but on God's incredible gift of love for us in Jesus—and that's the "giving... up" that I want to invite us to take part in today.

We all know what it means to "give up" something. In the 2000 film *Chocolat*, chocolatier Vianne moves into a small French village governed by the puritanical mayor, the Comte de Reynaud. The mayor denounces the newcomer for setting up her shop at the beginning of Lent, which he sees as an unacceptable temptation to the people. Vianne makes connections in her new home, though, and wins friends and allies, and by the end of the film, the mayor breaks into her store, intent on smashing the place up. But the joke is on him, because he finally succumbs to his own temptation and gorges himself on chocolate, before passing out exhausted in the front display window of the store, where a gracious Vianne discovers him and wins a sheepish apology and the mayor's grudging respect.

Giving up, in this kind of story, means setting aside what you deeply want, and using that choice to convince yourself and others of your moral strength. It can lead to self-righteousness and tyrannical behavior, to say nothing of self-deception and humiliating lapses. Now, there are things worth suffering and sacrificing for—Jesus himself showed us that—but this kind of giving up seems to be a story about human power, and how it gets in the way of authentic relationships and love. The Comte de Reynaud had been giving up more than chocolate, and it only made him and the people around him all the more miserable.

Let's be honest. If this is the kind of thing Lent is about, then a lot of us are going to opt out altogether. Spring is waiting in the wings. In a few weeks there will be flowers poking through the ground. There are plenty of life-affirming and enjoyable things we can do with our time. Will God really love us any less if we forgo six weeks of war against ourselves? I don't think so. But I think we miss out on a chance to grow as disciples if we pass on Lent.

Jesus didn't go out into the desert to test his mettle or to punish himself. He went out into the wilderness and fasted because doing these things made his choices clearer. The voice of the devil, which usually whispers subtly to us, sounded loud enough for him to respond, and so Jesus was able to reject the power to feed, the power to rule, and the power of personal security that the devil offered him. He mastered these temptations by *remembering* the story he carried with him, the story of God's people--he answers the devil with the words of the book of Deuteronomy. And after Jesus had

faced these temptations, he came back from the desert with a message of Good News to share.

We don't go into the wilderness alone. In any dry time in our lives--a time of grief, loneliness, or the voluntary wilderness of fasting and prayer--Jesus has already been there, and he goes with us. I think it's arrogant for us to pretend that we need to go it alone in any wilderness. Jesus himself went into the wilderness right after his baptism, with God's words ringing in his ears: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We share Jesus' baptism, and so he shares our wilderness with us. We don't go into the wilderness alone.

Nor do we go into the wilderness ignorant of our destination. I think it's a mistake to plow through Lent as though Easter never happened, as though Easter is a surprise that comes at the end, and not the destination we're expecting during the whole journey. Jesus remembered the story of God's people as they traveled through their wilderness, and it helped sustain him as he faced his temptations. In the same way, we know that Jesus' march to Jerusalem goes through Good Friday into Easter. We know where we're headed, and I think it's a mistake to observe Lent as though we didn't.

So today I want to take us back to our Hebrew scripture lesson, because I think it shows us a way to observe Lent faithfully. It's about giving... up for Lent.

The setting of this text is the plain of Jordan. The Hebrews have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. The promised land is just across the river, and the people are preparing to enter it. Moses is dying--he won't be crossing the river with them--but he has enough strength left to remind the people about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, their wilderness wanderings, and God's constant care for them. He teaches them about how they are to live their life, once they receive God's gift of land. If you look at the text, you'll see that every time the word "land" is mentioned, it's immediately followed by "that the Lord your God is giving you," or else it's clear in some other way that the land is God's gift. Once the people enter the land, it will be very easy for them to forget that everything they have received is God's gift. Moses wants them to remember where their land came from. In our lesson for today, Moses teaches the people that they should offer the first fruits of their harvest to God, remember their story, and celebrate God's gifts together.

Carrying their first fruits in a basket, the people come to the sanctuary and they say, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." They have to acknowledge God's gift out loud. They have to give words to the blessing they enjoy. Not only that, but they have to remember that God keeps promises. Then they tell the story of their deliverance, the story about Jacob and his family settling in Egypt, becoming a great nation, suffering slavery, crying out to God, being rescued from oppression, and settling in the rich land God had given them. After they have acknowledged God's gifts, made their offering, and remembered their story--then and only then they are invited--no, *commanded*--to celebrate!

This Sunday, at the start of Lent, we remember the story that leads toward Easter--that's our promised land. But we've already entered that land. Here we are, a community gathered in Jesus' name, worshiping God on the first day of the week--the day of resurrection. We've entered the land. We've received a great gift of forgiveness, of new and lasting life, of hope in the future that God is creating. We've begun to harvest our first fruits--acceptance and welcome as part of God's covenant family, a sense of peace and purpose in our lives, transformed hearts and minds. Even an awareness of our sin, an awareness of the ways that we fall short comes from knowing who God is. A longing for wholeness and transformation is God's gift as well. Let me

tell you what I think Lent is about. It's about that moment Moses describes in our text today, when the people bring their basket of first fruits to the sanctuary: "You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. *Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.*"

Lent isn't so much about giving up as giving... up! It's about acknowledging God's good and rich gifts to us and offering back something of ourselves. It's about remembering the story God gave us--the story of salvation in the scriptures. It's about preparing ourselves to celebrate at Easter by discovering and remembering the reasons for our celebration. Self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, reading and meditating on God's word--these are the traditional Lenten disciplines, and they all have a place in giving... up. I'd like to invite you to deepen your faith and your commitment this Lent by giving... up, by seeking out opportunities to practice these disciplines--not as a way of punishing yourself or testing yourself, but in order to appreciate the gift you've received; not in a gloomy or dreary state of mind, but seriously and thoughtfully; not so that God will forgive you at Easter, but because what God has done in Jesus has already reconciled you to God. Lent is about giving... up. It's about being grateful and accepting the new life God has given us.

Do you know what that new life looks like? Would you like to discover the meaning and extent of God's gift to you? That's what "reading and meditating on God's word" is about. Bible study meets on Thursday mornings, if you want to join us there, or you can use the Lenten devotional I told you about in the newsletter this week.

What do you do with the gift you've received? "Almsgiving" is one way of giving back to God. God doesn't need anything we have, but we can show our gratitude for our gifts by giving to those with whom God identifies most closely--the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and the sick. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has put out an emergency appeal for help dealing with the humanitarian disaster caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are any number of ways to help here or with other neighbors near and far.

Have you accepted God's gift? Have you swallowed it whole and allowed it to reshape you? That's what "self-examination, penitence, (and) prayer" is about. It's about praying for and pondering ways that your life can say more clearly to *whom* you belong. Are there broken relationships that you have the power to transform? Are there habits in your life--not just addictions, but ways of expressing anger or consuming resources--are there habits in your life that make it harder to see that you are God's beloved child? Penitence is about making an intentional change--it means understanding your brokenness, talking to someone else about your struggle, and doing your best to put the broken pieces together. It's not a gloomy exercise, but a joyful practice of embracing the new life God gives us.

This Lent I'd like you to consider how these disciplines might help you to accept God's gift. I'd like you to try giving... up. Not giving up chocolate. Not giving up on Lent. But giving... up, giving something of yourself to the one who gave everything for you. Amen.