



March 2016 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

Throughout 2016 I invite you to reflect with me on the theme of “Practicing Our Faith” as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group, choir rehearsal and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Dorothy Bass has edited an excellent resource published several years ago by Jossey-Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, which I will be using as a primary resource. Together with Don Richter, Dorothy Bass has also edited a second book, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, published by Upper Room Books, which is also an excellent resource. Each article will include a Scripture reference, thematic reflection, questions for consideration, and a prayer. Portions of this article were also used in the February 2013 Monthly Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders and the March 2014 edition of the *Canada Lutheran*.

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*I want a fast
from gluttony of nations, systems, policies
that feed some well others starve for grain,
for bread,
for dreams,
for peace.*

Jan Richardson, *Sacred Journeys*

“giving something up for Lent”

I’ve often struggled with the notion of “giving something up for Lent.” Now don’t get me wrong; I am all for spiritual practices and discipline. I’m just not sure that the act of giving up chocolate or TV or texting for Lent can draw us closer to God in and of itself. Laurence Hull Stookey puts it well when he writes: “Lenten disciplines are not temporary deletions or additions, but spiritual exercises that permanently alter us....The fuller Lenten discipline is a self-examination that seeks greater conformity to the mind of Christ, and more effective ministry on behalf of the world” (*Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 82).

The concept of a period of penitence and preparation for the celebration of Christ’s resurrection through spiritual exercises such as fasting originated as a way of preparing new converts for their baptism, which would occur at the Easter Vigil. As Christianity gained a foothold in the culture and infant baptism became the norm, this time of preparation was extended to include those who had already been baptized.

Within our faith communities' "giving something up for Lent" is frequently heard. "Giving something up" as a reminder of what Christ gave up for us in his incarnation, his life on earth, and his death. But while we may have the right intentions, I wonder if our practices truly alter how we view the world around us; our relationship with Christ; or our relationship with one another.

This Lenten season I encourage you to think deeply about your Lenten observance. Instead of asking what you can give up for Lent, consider what stands in the way of a closer walk with God. Do you need to turn the TV off in order to spend more time in prayer and Scripture reading? Then by all means limit your TV viewing and replace it with devotional time. In other words, whatever we choose ought to bring us closer to Christ himself.

But there is more. Christ gave himself up for others, and through our baptism into Christ we are called to do the same. During Lent, consider what practices will help bring about Christ's kingdom here on earth. Are there people with whom you need to be reconciled? Is there a way to promote justice in your community? Are there opportunities to serve the poor, the widow, and the orphan? Asking these kinds of questions will lead us to practices that result in the deep change intended by Lenten observances.

This year, rather than simply "giving something up for Lent" I challenge you to give more of yourselves to Christ by finding one or two ways in which your life can more fully emulate his. Perhaps these will become habits that don't end with Easter but continue to sustain you throughout the year.

Read and Reflect: Psalm 136

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, "I wonder about...", or, "I noticed..."

What memories does "the season of Lent" evoke for you?

How have your patterns of "giving something up for Lent" changed during the course of your lifetime?

Comment on the following: *This year...I challenge you to give more of yourselves to Christ by finding one or two ways in which your life can more fully emulate his.*

Pray together: *Spirit of God, Life and Life-giver, Root of all life, Enlivening Wind, washing away sin, anointing each wound, You are True Life, alive with Light, worthy of praise, awakening the heart from death to new life. Amen. (Hildegard of Bingen)*

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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