

Sermon 02-21-10 Lent 1

What does Lent mean to you? I remember when I was in high school, one of my friends who always headed after school together to the bowling alley, was a Roman Catholic, and he talked us into giving up bowling for Lent. As I look back, I don't think we ever went back to bowling after that! The point of that story is that you can tell how really high on our priority list was either bowling or Lent. We might just as well have given up Lent for Lent!

The arrival of Lent in the Church calendar has traditionally meant a call to a deeper and more disciplined approach to our spiritual life. But seldom has it been possible to gauge any real quantitative or qualitative change in actual practice for the majority of church people—who often feel mildly guilty for not having done more. This Lent can be different at St. James'. We have an opportunity for the whole congregation, not just a few of the faithful, to share in a new and refreshing focus that I hope we will all find welcome and helpful.

Downstairs in the undercroft Cindy will be leading five sessions on "Deepening Life Together—Praying God's way." The program runs for the five Sundays

of Lent. They gather for their sessions at 10:15 and come upstairs to join us for communion together at 11:15. There are weekday opportunities, and also the Adult Forum on Sunday, to look at different aspects of the one central theme of prayer, to have it come alive for us, whatever our age, in a new and more dynamic way.

Our regular services here in the church begin as usual at 8:00 and 10:30, where I will be preaching these five Sundays on prayer in the context of the bible lessons for the day. The bible lessons are always in the insert and I invite you this morning and every Sunday to take them home and use them as a resource during the coming week.

And speaking of resources during this Lenten series focused on prayer, simple and useful references are the psalms and the words to the hymns. You may be surprised to realize how hymn lyrics focus your thoughts as you pray. (Since the Gospel on Jesus temptations this morning gives major billing to the villain Satan-- go home and read Martin Luther's words to the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

Nothing could be more dramatic and intriguing as challenges to our prayer life, than the Gospel lesson

for this, the first Sunday in Lent. It always takes us to Jesus' three epic temptations by the devil Satan. Right after his baptism Jesus goes alone to the wilderness to pray, and there, who should he meet but the devil himself!

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this event which must have come directly to them from Jesus, since he went alone into the wilderness. When he is challenged there by the devil he is told that he might seek to show that he is the son of God by satisfying material needs or by wielding miraculous power. Or he could seek to gain and control allegiance through the pomp and might of a worldly kingship. But instead, being filled with the power of the Spirit in baptism, and fortified by his heritage of scripture and prayer, Jesus' response is to reject each attractive temptation, so that the devil must retreat—at least for a more opportune time. (“I’ll catch you later...”)

Now comedians have joked around about the devil, but I don't. If you don't believe there really is a devil, then read C.S. Lewis' “Screwtape letters”. In a fascinating and amusing way Screwtape, the devil, writes letters of instruction to his earthly deputy Wormwood, on many ways to deal with God. And one of the first things that must be done in the devil's

battle with God, Screwtape advises, is to convince us earthlings-- that there really isn't a devil!

"Screwtape Letters" was written in 1942, and all of us would learn soon after that, especially after the truths of the Holocaust in Europe became known, how real and powerful evil can be. We are faced over and over with the "why?" questions in life, now so horrendously portrayed in the deaths of tens of thousands in Haiti who are then buried in mass graves, or perhaps an expectant mother dying of cancer. "Why do bad things happen to good people?"--is one of the questions for all of us to take more seriously. That is what I hope we all will do as we consider the whys of prayer and ways of prayer during these Forty Days of Lent.

Now if the truth may be told, this may be a stretch for some of us. We talk about prayer and we go through the motions of prayer but underneath that may be some real questions about it. According to Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn once explored the effectiveness of prayer, but he found it lacking.

Huck says *"My teacher Miss Watson prayed but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day and whatever I would ask I would get. But it wasn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. I asked*

Miss Watson to try for me and she said I was a fool. So I had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why doesn't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back the silver snuff box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I, there's nothing to it."

I wonder how many people have, deep down, really come to the same conclusion about prayer as Huck Finn. "There's nothing to it." But the problem that Huck had, and the problem I suspect many people have today is that the thing they have rejected is not really prayer at all, but that their prayer didn't give them the answer they wanted. Maybe, like Huck, we're praying for the wrong thing.

It may not always be easy to know what prayer is, but I can tell you some of the things that prayer is not. Jesus answers to the challenges of Satan are illustrations.

Prayer is not magic. I remember the magician David Copperfield years ago on the Ed Sullivan Show. I have no idea how he could make the pretty lady in the box disappear. Many people think that if they pray "Lord, I need and want" and the magic will be done.

Well, it is true that God knows the innermost prayer of your heart, but he will not do **magic**.

And **Prayer is not a transaction** as the devil seems to suggest to Jesus as he prayed during his desert experience. God is not your personal ATM! Some of us would like to just go there and put our card in and push the right button for forgiveness or the one for salvation, or the next one for faithfulness-- you get the picture.

Just like Huck I can truly say “there ain’t nothing in that!” Prayer is not a transaction. What it is—and I will be saying more on that in the weeks to come- is connecting with the heart of God, and laying hold of God’s great willingness.

If that is your direction, like the keys on a piano there is no right or wrong key. Every single key is right at one time or another. A friend of mine learned that truth late in life when he was called to decide about a career change opportunity, when there was no actual right or wrong thing to do, but nevertheless a decision to make.

He writes that in an unusual way it was not just conversations with others but it was in fashioning his

own prayer that he finally found the answer for his next steps ahead. He hadn't necessarily expected he would be praying as he did, and so he writes that "I have learned a lot about waiting patiently for the Lord and listening for his voice."

These forty days of Lent boil down to a time to reconnect with who, and Whose, we are. These forty days of Lent boil down to a time to reconnect with what matters. Next Sunday we meet Jesus again as he describes in unusually colorful language his determination to move ahead on the road to Jerusalem. As we take that road at his side we learn some more what it is to re-connect in prayer with the heart of God. I'll see you then! AMEN