

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The First Sunday in Lent: February 21, 2021

“Lenten Practice”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Morning and welcome to the first Sunday in Lent. We continue to struggle with a pandemic, and I am sure you, like myself, feel we have been in a Lenten sacrifice for a year - as we continue to worship through digital means, and miss the in-person contact.

In 2002, I went to church on Ash Wednesday prior to my work day as a dog groomer and listened to the priest explain the meaning of Lent. I was still new to the liturgical seasons but so wanted to grasp the significance of Lent.

The priest informed the congregation that during Lent they **will** fast, they **will** repent, they **will** work on their forgiveness, all with the purpose of deepening their relationship with God. He actually phrased it, “to deepen your love affair with God.”

Well, I sat in the pew and thought to myself, I have never fasted and that kind of seems silly; I don’t know what I should repent of, and after surviving a grueling divorce, the thought of forgiveness didn’t hold much weight. But little did I know what would happen next.

Shortly after that Ash Wednesday sermon I was asked by that priest if I would like to help supervise the congregation’s teens on a trip to Mexico to build houses for the poor. Still a little naïve, I said yes. I still have those pictures of the young

adults, in our van, one showing a football being shoved up someone's nose, a street vendor Mexican guitar rattling out music, and the memory of the pop song "Mexican Radio" still vivid in my mind after all these years. But that's not the Lenten story.

Sitting around the campfire, the question came up, "What are you doing for Lent?" I didn't know what to say, so I quickly stated I was giving up meat for Lent. Little did I know that this would be the beginning of a lifestyle change that continues today, and just as the priest promised, it began and continues to deepen my love affair with God.

Trust me, in that moment, the decision was not well thought out. I was in Mexico working with teenagers who had brought in no short supply: hot dogs, hamburgers, and a vast array of dried bacon strips, sausage links, and other various meat-containing snacks. Thankfully there was another supervising adult who gladly shared their veggie burgers. But back in 2002, meatless choices were rare to come by.

"I can do this for 40 days", I thought to myself. I will model my sacrifice as a gift to God to these teens. I will do what the scripture says and not complain; but rather be proud of my reminder that all good things come from God. To be honest, I think the kids did not even give it a second thought, or even notice, but I certainly did. After the first week, I began to realize that I was existing without taking another creature's life.

The second week, I realized the connection I had with God's creation, which, having worked on a farm I was well aware of, but not that respectful of. The third

week, I realized the prejudices people have when you have different dietary needs, and then the fourth and final week came with Easter.

On Easter morning, just as the church had planned, our vans pulled up in front of the church with our very stinky, dirty, and tired group - glad to plan a hot water shower and a nap in a real bed. We had an early morning service and showed pictures and shared our Mexico experience.

My boyfriend at the time had a very special surprise planned, so after a really good shower and changing into some clean clothes, we drove off to a restaurant. One of my favorite restaurants.

As we walked in, I went past the fish in the tank. I could see the lobsters in another tank toward the kitchen. The two of us sat down to order what my boyfriend thought would be the best meal I had experienced in a long time, after a grueling stay at a Mexican camp ground, and the end of a silly promise to give up meat.

I looked at the menu with every thought of ordering my usual lobster tails and steak, commonly known as “surf and turf”. Then I looked at the fish tank, then at the lobster tank. I got up and walked over to them and something in my brain broke. I could no longer participate in taking a life that was so innocently swimming in that man-made water pool. Something inside me had changed. The hard wall I had put up between myself and others had begun coming down. There were and still are many moments of grace experienced by my own sacrifice and also the kindness of others. Maybe the priest was right.

Being a vegetarian in America is not an easy feat although it is getting easier and there are now more choices. But after that day in the restaurant where I ordered pasta amid the seafood, I now had to consciously think about what I ate and where it came from.

That Lenten period, that 40 days, had changed my life and continues to do so. Yes, I think it started as a fad. I think it was a personal challenge. I think the decision was in part, to contest that the priest had suggested fasting would bring me closer to God. I am not sure the actual decision was a very spiritual one. But since then... what a difference.

The first few years were hard, with the smell of barbecue, and the smell of Thanksgiving turkey cooking. Eating pasta and salads in a world of bacon and steaks, being the odd one out a gathering. But this Lenten practice, this being in the world but not of it, this mindfulness of where my nourishment comes from, this connectedness to God's creatures, has continued, and it has been humbling, which is the very essence of Lent. To be humbled before our Creator.

I tell you this story, not to convince you to be a vegetarian. It is definitely not the right thing for everyone, and does have some health concerns about nutrition you need to heed. But I tell you this because, in a way, almost 20 years later, I am still practicing Lent, and I am still humbled by my Creator. I am still in a sacrificial stance on appreciating the "gifts of God for the people of God," since 2002.

So I know 2021 seems in a lot of ways to be not so different than 2020 as we continue to be restricted in almost every part of our lives. And I am not so sure everything will ever get back to the old way of what was considered normal. But I

offer up to you, my story of a continued Lenten practice that really has nurtured my love affair with God.

It is almost ironic that the world is now turning to meatless products as a way to help our environment. Globally we are actually asked to be in a Lenten practice for the good of the world in so many ways. We are asked to be aware of our resources and where they come from: are they renewable, sustainable?

My Lenten fast continues to challenge me, change me, and bring me closer to God. My Lenten practice has informed my life, not for just 40 days, but for years. We are in strange times. I ask you, what do you no longer need in your life? What practice could you try that might continue beyond a simple month of time? What will allow you to strengthen your love affair with God?

My vegetarianism has led me to be mindful, repenting ways that are not appreciative of God's gifts. It has led me to forgiveness in many avenues of my life, and to be humble to those who are different. What started out as a silly promise became a lifestyle of noticing God's gifts to humankind. This may or may not be your experience this year as you chose a practice to deepen your devotion. But I ask you to maybe give it a try.

As for me, just don't take away my chocolate. Amen