

Sermon for Ash Wednesday  
by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones  
March 6, 2019  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

It's a sign of the season. As we have been approaching Lent, you may have overheard somebody talking about what they will give up, you know, "I'm giving up coffee" or "I'm giving up chocolate," or "That's nothing, I'm giving up *Facebook*."

Lent, as we will hear in the invitation from the prayer book, invites us to leave behind certain habits or take on practices that help us mature in our faith.

You have come to a service this evening that can be a great help here.

Perhaps in the silences or in the prayers or the music, you will be encouraged and challenged to think about your Lenten practices.

Now, some of the classic disciplines do have to do with things we give up—sweets, for example.

A friend of mine one year gave up bread. Yes,  
bread. That's harder than you might think.

Another gave up the news media. (I'm not sure  
how much of a sacrifice that was!)

And we hear about such practices and disciplines  
in the service this evening. Isaiah spoke of fasting.

Jesus of fasting and almsgiving.

And the exhortation for this day in the prayer  
book speaks of fasting—skipping a meal once a  
week, say, or going a whole day without a meal.

The exhortation you will hear also uses the  
language self-denial:

some enjoyment that you voluntarily forgo. That's  
an obvious and common starting place for Lent.

The service also suggests another kind of Lenten  
discipline, something we *take on*, like, as it  
suggests, giving alms, or praying more, or  
spending time “meditating on God's holy Word.”

So some of you add weekly attendance at our  
weekday Keenan chapel services. Or taking

advantage of Lenten devotional, including ones that you sign up for online, like we are offering.

All of these examples represent practices we choose. And I hope you will give prayerful thought today to what disciplines you can take on that will make you more focused, more open to God, more humbly dependent.

Paul did. In our Corinthians reading, in his nine-fold list of challenges he's facing, he talks about disciplines as he strives to live a holy life. He lists a number of things, but three in particular have to do with such practices: specifically labor, sleepless nights, and hunger.

Now, if we read the original Greek behind this line, we see that these are things Paul *chooses* to do. Scholars suggest that when Paul uses that word labor, he's talking about his hard work on behalf of those entrusted to his care. He chooses to work in a sacrificial way.

Same with sleepless nights. The way that phrase is constructed suggests voluntarily giving up sleep. Perhaps to free time to pray, or to serve others.

Same with hunger. The construction of the original Greek suggests that Paul may well be speaking here of fasting. Not just giving up caffeine, but more costly fasting.

But much of what Paul describes here has to do not with what he chooses but what chooses him.

Paul speaks not only of practices he voluntarily adopts that help him mature and get more focused, but also realities of life he would not choose.

And there is growth possible for us  
this Lent here, too.

How we greet the hard circumstances of our life can also be part of our Lenten devotion.

Especially when doing so draws us closer to God.

Paul speaks of, after all, afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments.

These are realities of life that simply come.

He gives us some more details later in his letter:

Five times, he writes in a later chapter, “I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters.”

I want to add another hardship that underlies Paul’s ministry. It’s all over this letter he writes the church in Corinth: the way churches can be tough on its very members.

Some of Paul’s grief has to do with people in the church making his life difficult.

But here is the amazing thing. Paul sees all those hard things, whether hard things chosen by him as disciplines or hard things thrust on him by circumstances beyond his control, as an opportunity for growth.

Rather than experiences to resist, he sees in them reasons to rejoice. That is both remarkable, and possible. I want to suggest that Paul can help us with both as we stand on the threshold of our Lenten practices: As we strive and try, and as we do our best to negotiate life's hard things that we simply find coming our way.

The last verse of our reading from 2 Corinthians helps here. Paul speaks of being sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.

This verse is strange and beautiful. Yes, it's possible for life to be both:

Sorrowful but also a time for rejoicing.

Hard and lovely. We discover a joy that is more profound and deeper than setback.

*"Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."*

I think if we were to understand what Paul is getting at here, we would realize how hard living a vital Christian life can be.

And we would realize that whatever the costs, there is nothing

more worthy of our longing and desire.

This is a way of living that takes seriously our hardships and heartaches, but that also reminds us how much joy is possible, even when you feel locked in or caught or stuck or just sad.

We can resist our circumstances, or rejoice no matter what. Talk about a great Lenten discipline—to choose joy.  
Not to resist but to rejoice.

Last year a woman named Margaret Geary made the news. (And I'm grateful to my friend Kevin Miller, for both this story and some of the insights in this sermon.) She's 85 years old, a nun in a convent near Baltimore. All of the other sisters in her convent were going to a three day conference and she had to stay behind.

So for three days she was left alone in her convent. Shortly after they left, she came down from her room to the kitchen to get a snack. She went to the refrigerator, pulled out a jar of water

that had celery sticks in it, and walked back to elevator, got on and pressed the up button.

Well, the elevator went up about two feet and then it stopped. She went, "Uh oh," and she tried to pry open the doors, and right then the electricity went out. Then she realized, "Oh, don't worry about it, I have my purse with me and it's got a cell phone." So she rummaged in her purse, pulled out the cell phone, and realized, "I can't get a signal inside this elevator shaft."

At that point she started to panic.

Then she realized, "You know what, I can either panic or I can pray. And it looks like I'm going to be taking a three day prayer retreat and I didn't have to reserve the space." So she sat on the floor of the elevator and ate some of the celery sticks *and prayed*, and then she drank some of the water *and prayed*. And then she rummaged in her purse and pulled out some of the cough drops down in the bottom and sucked on those, *and prayed*. And when she got tired she curled up and used her

sweater as her pillow and put her purse in her back to keep that from hurting as much, *and she prayed*. And when the sisters finally got back three days later and got her out of the elevator, they said, "What was it like for you?"

She said, "Well, I finally realized God had provided for me an opportunity to draw closer to him."

Maybe you are in a tight spot. Living through something you didn't choose. But in a situation nevertheless wherein God invites you to choose to trust and rejoice.

You might even feel like you're in an elevator that's not going anywhere.

You can't pry open the doors.

You're thinking, "Would somebody come and get me out of this thing!" But you can choose to see it through the lens of growth and faith and trust.

In moments we will wear on our foreheads the  
signs of our mortality, which facing is also a  
discipline of sorts.

If you will allow God to bring into your life a joy  
that transcends what happens,  
this can be a profound Lent.

So take on a discipline. Choose to do without.

It's good for you.

And decide to choose also the discipline of joy.