

Change One Thing Luke 4:1-13

An un-churched man said something that was both refreshingly honest and totally irreverent. It was a kind of stream of consciousness rant that went something like this: “What is the deal with Lent? I don’t get this whole thing about giving up something. First of all, Life is hard enough without making it any harder. Why should we do that - just so that we feel worse? Why would God, who supposedly is good, want us to feel bad? Secondly, why should we make life harder by giving up something like chocolate? Lots of people say things like: ‘I’m giving up chocolate for Lent.’ I happen to like chocolate. A lot! I’m not doing that. Why is giving up something that gives me joy; something that is essentially harmless – like chocolate – why on earth should that be important to God – or to me?”

Even though he doesn’t “do” church those are good questions. In our second reading this morning we heard: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” If that’s all we gotta do, then that’s all we gotta do. Not one word about chocolate or anything else in there.

Yes, but look at our Gospel passage from Luke: Jesus after his baptism is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for a forty-day struggle not just to forgo chocolates, but physical sustenance all together - and in the process to go head to head with the prince of darkness.

A couple of things about this story fascinate me: Interesting that this forty-day hardship came at God's initiative. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness." God started it – this time of hardship. And then the devil got in on it. And in the end, Jesus emerges victorious, but the text ominously says that the evil one "departed from Jesus until an opportune time." There are going to be more hardships for Jesus, and when those hard times hit, temptation is gonna be right there, too.

I think that is why this whole business of Lent is hugely important for us in our spiritual journey. This Gospel text hits the nail right on the head because it is all about TNT: Trial and Tribulation. Doesn't that sound like a pretty good description of how this life often is? Lots of folks think the Bible is some fancy fairytale myth that just doesn't describe or fit our world at all. But the honest – and frankly terrifying truth is this: The Bible is all too real. It does not mince words or pull any punches. At times I wish it was just a pleasant "happily ever after" tale. But the Bible is drop-dead – serious in telling it like it is, and the truth of this life is that all of us eventually will go through some hellish, hard times; times in which we are going to feel more dead than alive: More tested, than blessed. More like the devil's got us by the throat than like God's got us by the hand.

Whenever I enter the season of Lent, I feel a bit of hesitation in my body and spirit. Am I really up for this season of repentance and renewal? Wouldn't it be easier to just sit it out this year?

When I open myself to God's call in this way, something painful always rises to the surface. Martin Luther was familiar with this pattern and reminds us that the devil is a tricky creature who can't stand our faithfulness to God.

When we seek God and resist the lies of the world, we can expect those lies of Satan to fight back.

Today's Psalm, with its reminders of God's faithfulness, is a comfort for me as we enter this season. Take heart, dear one! Neither the lies of the world nor the painful truths you uncover can hurt you when the Lord is your refuge.

"Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name."

That truth – hard as nails – is, as the saying goes, the "reason for the season." We "do" Lent not to earn our way into heaven. That can never be earned by us. That is only given by God through Grace. No. We do Lent for a whole other reason entirely. We observe lent to strengthen and mature ourselves spiritually. We do it to grow closer to God. Because – not if, but when – all hell breaks loose – when the devil comes calling in the form of a pink slip, or a come on, or a cancer cell, or a funeral, then we will be able to stand with God in any trial against anything that this old world or that life or that the devil himself can throw at us.

Weight lifters will tell you: to lift, to bear a heavy weight, what matters far more than physical strength is proper form. If you know how to properly lift, how to properly bear a weight, and if you position yourself correctly, using the proper form, then, yeah, you are still going to grunt, sweat, and struggle with

all your might, but you will lift – and bear – far more than you thought you ever could.

Mostly, when it comes to Lent – and to life, all of us almost always are using improper form. We trivialize what lent should and could be by saying nonsensical things like, “Oh, I think this year I’m going to give up vacationing in the French Riviera. Of course, I’ve never vacationed there before.

Folks like artists and athletes and the saints, though, all tell us and show us something different. An artist - a true artist – does whatever it takes to create their art that they are impelled to create and give birth to, through their very life. Lots of artists literally starve to ensure that their vision comes alive. They take on the necessary hardships to bear and give birth to their passion.

Serious athletes commit themselves to spring training and off-season workouts and passing up Krispy Kreme donuts to make sure that they are at peak physical form, to compete and succeed. They sacrifice to secure those gains and victories.

Saints, too, give up things and take on things to grow closer to God. Some take on self-imposed times of trial in order to strengthen themselves spiritually. They do not give up the trivial. Rather, they take on the penultimate, to grow their relationship to the God who is life.

And guess what? Like the golf pro Arnold Palmer used to say, “The harder I practice, the luckier I get.” In other words, practice makes perfect. It pays off. Dame Julie Andrews – gifted, talented, and wonderful – says of her artistry, “Most people shun discipline. But for me, discipline is a kind of freedom. It allows me to fly.”

What if, this Lent, you didn’t give up something? Forget about that. Instead, what if you took on something? What if you challenged yourself to make one change – one – that would deepen your life in God? If you did that for forty days, you would reset your baseline. You would change.

Someone once told the anecdote about an amazing story about he did during Lent. By his own admission, he is perpetually messy; so much so that it started to cause problems in his marriage. So, one year, during Lent, he made the commitment to spend thirty minutes each day cleaning, organizing, and decluttering.

He didn’t do it haphazardly. He knew it would be tremendously hard for him. So, he organized it all up front. He got forty large, brown bags. And he meticulously timed himself each day: thirty minutes – not one minute more, not one minute less. He made the commitment that everything he touched – everything – would go to one of three places: Either cleaned, fixed, and put in its place or sacked and thrown away or sacked and given to Goodwill.

In doing that forty-day discipline, he committed to working not just to declutter, but to simplify his life in order to give more: More sanity to himself; more harmony to his marriage; more blessings to others. He promised himself that he would not tell his wife what he was doing. He was just going to do what he was going to do and allow her to discover it for herself.

When he began it was incredibly hard. Not only was he a natural, life-long “messy,” but also there were mountains of stuff. He also had to fight his life-long tendency as a hoarder. But, by grace, he prayerfully stayed with it.

Early on, he had to fight the daily impulse to give up. But as he stayed with it, the easier it became. As he began to give things away, the easier it became to share. About twenty days in, he said that his wife, who is a total neat-nick, seemed to be happier. He smiled in telling how overjoyed he was to discover his wife’s delight as the house mysteriously went from the disorder of a college dorm room to clean, simple, and functional.

He said, “I not only gave away a bunch of stuff that others are now able to use, I also found that I reset my baseline. I changed how I do things now. I didn’t at all expect this, but I discovered that I don’t need so much anyway. Now, I’m not buying as much. That has made a real impact on our family’s finances, which were also stressing our marriage. But now that stressor’s gone now, too. It’s a miracle!”

In short, a cascade of good things – both expected and unexpected – came, by grace, out of one person’s determination to make just one change happen. Imagine what God may accomplish through you if you made one change. What could you do? What could you take on? In terms of Bible study, prayer, fasting, neighbor service, meditation, or worship? What could you take on; what could you toss out that is blocking your best self from having a better, deeper relationship with God? What change in you would delight God?

What change in you would make your spouse or your family light up with joy? What one thing could you do to deepen your relationship to Jesus Christ so you could be filled with greater life, faith, and joy?

Here’s the hard part: If you are willing to do something that is truly challenging, that will require real discipline, it will be difficult. But here’s the good part: If you do commit yourself to do the difficult, necessary work to change, then not only will you get the benefit of that change, but also, not if, but when hard times happen or when temptation comes, you will be one, tough nut to crack. It will be harder for trials to uproot you and more difficult for temptation to derail you. You are going to be more resilient, closer to God, and a whole lot happier with yourself.

If that sounds good to you, here is your chance. Right now. This Lent. This is your time. It is your life. Commit to making one change. See, if by grace, that changes your life for good.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, come to our aid. Give us courage in the face of the tasks you've given us to do, and protect us against the forces or situations that would keep us from you. We trust you, we really do. Amen.