

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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## DIOCESE OF GRAND FALLS

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we begin our Lenten journey, I would like to reflect with you on the three disciplines we are invited to undertake: Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving.

These three disciplines are ancient in religious practice: first among the chosen people of Israel and now among Christians. But the purpose for undertaking these disciplines has changed and developed over the millennia of our relationship with God.

At first, these disciplines were demanded by ancient prophets in order to convince God to change his mind about an impending punishment that God was about to unleash. Here, the people realized that they have acted sinfully and abandoned God and deserved punishment. But they believed that by demonstrating remorse through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, God would change his mind and relent. There is a certain selfishness in this notion of the three disciplines in that they are undertaken to spare themselves.

As the relationship between God and the people developed, the understanding of a vengeful and punishing God slowly grew to an understanding of a 'just' God. God was seen as compassionate towards those who lived upright lives but was also punishing to those who truly deserved it. Here people undertook prayer, fasting and almsgiving as a way to show God that they were the 'upright' and deserved his mercy and favour. It is hard not to see this understanding of the three disciplines as self-preservation.

Eventually, we see another development in the practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. As God continued to reveal his true nature to the people, the notion of a 'vengefully punishing' God or 'justly punishing' God became inconsistent with the understanding of God as loving and merciful. People acknowledged that, in God's judgement, they were sinners and deserved punishment, but through their prayer, fasting and almsgiving, hoped that God would see their acts of repentance and that they deserved forgiveness. People believed that it would be for God's good that they be spared judgement since it would bring shame on God if they were not shown the mercy they earned.

In Jesus, we have seen the definitive self-revelation of God. Jesus reveals that God does not need to be convinced by our actions to be merciful – God is mercy. Nor does God need to be convinced that our weakness and sinfulness can be healed – God is gracious. Nor does God need to be convinced by our actions that we can change and grow – God is our Father. Nor does God need to be convinced by our actions that we are capable of love – God is love.

In Jesus, we see the true meaning of our Lenten Disciplines of Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving. Our Lenten Disciplines are an exercise of our discipleship. As disciples of Jesus, we are learning and growing every day to become more Christ-like, and our Lenten Disciplines are one way we learn.

Prayer is essential to our relationship with God, but prayer takes discipline. Praying is a choice we need to make every day. It is not enough that we hope to **find** time for prayer, we need to **make** time for prayer. It takes discipline to be still in the presence of God, and to work through the distractions.

Fasting is self-denial; choosing to do without things that make us comfortable – a favourite food or drink, a favourite activity, or a habitual weakness. These things do not come to us naturally but require discipline.

Almsgiving is putting the needs of others ahead of our own needs and wants. Almsgiving goes beyond acts of justice and are acts of love. These choices are not always easy to make – sometimes they are not even easy to recognize they are needed. We need to learn through discipline.

Lent is a time to learn from the example of Jesus. Prayer was the foundation of his life. Acts of self-denial shaped every action and choice he made. And giving of himself completely – putting the needs of others before his own needs and wants – was the hallmark of his life.

The Lenten season is a season to learn to be a better disciple of Jesus and discipline is the way we learn. Let us pray for one another.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Anthony Daniels". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend R. Anthony Daniels  
Bishop of Grand Falls.