

## Sermon

Lent IV, Year A

March 30, 2014

How is your vision? I mean how well do you see? If I take off my glasses, I don't see very well. I can make out who is sitting on the front and who is sitting on the second row, but the third row gets fuzzy and back beyond that, I just know you are humanoids. So my vision is not very good. Thank goodness I look good in glasses.

Vision is a serious issue for some of us as our vision is more than an inconvenience—it actually affects how we are able to live. Like my father. He had macular degeneration which means you cannot see straight in front of you. You still have peripheral vision, so you can get around and function pretty well. But you cannot read and you cannot drive. So two things that were very important to my father were taken away—the pleasure and knowledge gained from reading and the independence in our society that comes from driving. That was hard.

Dad being from the “greatest generation” was able to adapt. Mom drove them for errands and trips and social visits. And when Mom eventually could not drive, they adjusted by moving into assisted living. As far as reading, Dad found out about a government program from the Library of Congress that provides audio books to people with vision impairment. That supply along with tapes of the Bible provided Dad with great joy for several years.

Things like loss of vision happen. Sometimes there is a cause and effect that is apparent. But often things just happen. When they do, we often ask “Why?” When they do, we wonder “What will we do?” The first question, the “Why?” question, is hard to answer. The second question, the “What will we do?” question, is an area where we can do some fruitful work. The Gospel for today informs us that things like being born blind—unexpected things, tragic things—can be a showcase for the works of God to be displayed.

So how can we be prepared for the losses that we experience in life? One way is to wait until it is our turn in the barrel, so to speak, and then just do the best we can with God's help; and hopefully with family and a community of faith to support us. But there is a way to practice for when things are hard in our lives. That practice occurs during the season of Lent.

That statement may surprise you. If we think of Lent at all, many of us see it as a time to give up chocolate or coffee (no small task!); or perhaps a time to try something spiritual, like reading the Bible every day. And those are fine things to do in Lent. Some of us may feel that by

doing these activities, we are scoring points in our heavenly ledger. If that is what we think, I can assure you that is not what Lent is about. Whatever we do in Lent, ultimately it is about learning to follow a path that brings us humility about life and trust in God about living.

So Lent can be a way for us to experiment with life changes; even though it is only in an artificial way and for a short season. Our Lenten experiments can help us to be better prepared - with God's help-- for when our life changes for real. We will all have our world rocked one day—illness, job loss, divorce, death of a loved one; and with God's grace, that life change can help us to grow as people and as Christians. But even with God's grace, it is very hard. So it helps if we can practice rocking our world even in little ways during the season of Lent.

So what can we do to be prepared? Well, first of all, it is important to realize what life outside of Lent is like-- it can be boring, fun, fast paced. It can be many things, sometimes all at the same time. But there are two common characteristics of our non-Lenten living, at least for many of us—life tends to be all about me; and I like to be in control (and those are not just my issues). So for Lent to help prepare us for when our world will be rocked, our Lenten practices need to help us redirect our focus away from self; and help us to control our need for control.

So if those are our goals, what would that Lenten experiment need to be for you? It does not need to be something extraordinary, like fasting twice a week. But it does need to be something that helps you to remember there is life beyond the passions and concerns of self.

So for example, during this season of Lent, I have disturbed my routine of eating and fitness. I was in a rut—a decades long rut! I often justified my decisions and did what I wanted to do. I liked eating Ritz crackers and I was content with the lifestyle they represented (because it really isn't about the Ritz crackers). But for Lent, with the bishop's prompting, I decided I wanted to try a change. The change for me was not only about trying to be healthier physically; but it was also about being more engaged with life and fullness of living.

Okay—that's fine. But how can this Lenten plan help me be prepared for when my world will be rocked (again) with some life changing event? One of the first things that happen to you when you are very ill is that doctors tell you what you need to eat and how much you need to exercise. Some of us hear that when we are not well and we still don't want to give up what we enjoy. We may think the doctor is mean and life is unfair. Or we may want to change, but feel stuck so that we are unable to change even if we want to. So we often keep doing what we have always done and we don't get any better. For me, this Lenten plan is training me not only to be healthier now but hopefully more flexible no matter what happens in the future.

But that's just one aspect of life—eating, exercise, and health. For some of us, it could be our relationships. A day may come that will rock our world of important relationships. For

some of us, that day has already come. So what is a Lenten practice that can help us in this important area?

Well, when our relationships get rocked, it often begins with someone saying, “We need to talk.” So instead of dreading those words, a Lenten practice might be having a conversation with someone you love during Lent. Have minimal expectations (this part can be tricky!) but work hard to listen and be engaged with this person you love. Treat them like you are going on a first date or meeting with a famous person you admire. Try that Lenten practice so you know how to have conversations with people you love if one day one of them comes to you and rocks your world by saying, “We need to talk.”

Whatever Lenten experiments you are doing right now or any you might be inspired to take on in the future, we need to realize our practices are not a matter of will power alone. To make our practice a helpful preparation for what may come that is hard in life, it is important to include two things: first, pray and reflect on what you learn from what you do; try keeping a journal of your reflections from your experiments. Then talk with people you trust about your Lenten journey. That’s why it is important that Lent happens in the context of church. What better place to practice prayer and sacred conversations than right here?

Life is hard, like the story of my Dad or of the man born blind. But even when it is hard, God’s works can be revealed. Lent can help us be prepared for those challenges of life. And I am grateful that we are on this journey together, not only during this holy season, but throughout our lives. Amen.