

## **Lent 2021: What *More* Can I Give Up?**

Ash Wednesday 2021

Job 1:21

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

February 17, 2020

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It's Lent. I grew up in a largely Catholic neighborhood in Long Island, New York. (Okay, how many of you just repeated out loud or to yourself, "Long-Gisland"? Be honest. I know, it's hard to resist. It's almost instinctive!) But back then around this time of year, everyone would be asking, "What are *you* giving up for Lent?"

I think if we asked that same question today, the response from many would be, "What *more* can I give up?"

At this place-and-time, all of us have given up so much already! First, it was the freedom to go and come as you please. Then, for those of us with kids, it was the closing of schools. Then it was the imposition of wearing these face coverings - which was a double-bother to any of us who wear glasses! Then it was the closing of restaurants, gyms, movie theatres, bars, sports arenas, concerts, plays, museums, marathons, even Denominational General Assemblies, and even, *Disney World*! The biggest restriction for most, however, has been the restrictions against hospital visitation, funerals, weddings, basically any large family gatherings! Honestly God, what *more* can we give up for Lent?

Lent is about voluntarily choosing to forego a meal, or, to fast for a prescribed period, as well as possibly giving up certain luxuries. We do this in order to replicate and remember the sacrifice Jesus Christ made when he journeyed into the desert for 40 days. This is known as one's **Lenten** sacrifice. But what about sacrifices that are imposed upon us, involuntarily? *Actually, they should be greeted with the same response as those we choose. Really?*

Can you think of anyone who experienced more 'involuntary' loss than Job? I mean, he didn't just lose some precious luxuries; he basically lost everything. After losing his livelihood, riches, valuables, employees...he lost his entire family; he lost his public reputation and esteem; and he lost his health. He's the poster boy for experiencing the loss of all that one cherishes in life! And yet, how does he respond...which receives God's approval? We read in **Job 1:20-21**

*Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and **worshiped**.<sup>21</sup> And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; **blessed** be the name of the Lord."*

Astonishing reaction. But words that would serve us well in all circumstances.

I'd like to offer a suggestion as we enter the Lenten season. First of all, make a list. Count your blessings. If you're writing a list, thank God you can breathe, can

hold a pen or type, can think clearly (we do all of these by the gracious sustaining hand of God). But also, squarely face what you've lost, what you've missed, what God has "taken away". So, separately list what you've missed out on. I've never heard in church the encouragement to count your discouragements, but, I believe, in fact, that it's biblically accurate. The psalms are full of complaints! Faith takes these complaints to God alongside your thanksgivings. This is important. Look, this is not ultimately a philosophical discussion of primary and secondary causes, in Job's life there were natural disasters, there were evil perpetrators behind his losses....but Job doesn't split hairs and divvy out causation. Ultimately, God has the whole world in His hands and Job is telling God that through thick and thin, I will praise You no matter what.

Sixteen years ago, I was preparing for a youth retreat – I was preparing to speak but also preparing to lead the worship times. And there was a song I wanted to learn that fit my theme; so I was learning it in order to teach it to the youth group. When I agreed to do the retreat, little did I know that my wife would be pregnant with our first child and that the due date was precariously close to the retreat weekend. And little did I know that we would be in the hospital just three weeks before the retreat.

What I never anticipated was the night the baby's heart experienced SVTs, 'supraventricular tachycardia'. Basically, his heartbeat was twice as fast as normal. (We had one of those home fetal heart monitors, so we checked it each night before we went to bed). So, we knew when his numbers were out of whack – and, it was *twice as fast* as we had ever seen it before. We had just watched an hour long show on SVTs the week before, so we knew that there were only 3 outcomes possible: 1) the heart stops because it can't maintain that rhythm, 2) deliver the baby and the heartbeat rights itself; or 3) wait and see if the heart rights itself (self-corrects). We were only 30 weeks pregnant, but the doctors prepped the baby for delivery, and the doctors tried through steroid injections to prepare the underdeveloped lungs of the child to survive on its own prematurely. I stayed with Julie in the hospital the entire night, until one of us realized early the next morning that Sasha, our Bichon Frise, who was home alone, would need to be walked so as not to mess up the house. It was while walking Sasha on our customary trail that I not only learned that song, but *learned* that song.

The chorus goes: ***You give and take away. You give and take away. My heart will choose to say, "Lord, blessed be your Name!"***

We lived across the street from a cemetery. So, there I stood waiting for Sasha to go; and I spoke to God.... "Okay, You know that having my own son has been like a dream come true to me. Having my own family, has always been a high-item priority. It seemed that you had given me my wildest dream. Have you blessed us, only to take it away?

I liked the tune and the truth of this song, but I'm not so sure I could sing it myself at that moment, "*You give and you take away; but my heart will choose to bless you anyway....*" Not feeling that right now. But, as I stood early that morning, with

a light drizzle falling on us, I came to grips with accepting whatever God had for me was okay, because He loved me no matter what, Jesus and his sacrifice proved that to me.....beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I returned to the hospital with a resolve to worship while open to any outcome. After 11 hours Caleb's heartbeat calmed down to its normal rhythm. He was born 11 weeks later, full-term plus a week past his original due date for good measure.

Somethings we might choose to do without this Lenten season. Should you choose to forgo something, each time you miss it, say to yourself, "*I will choose to say, Blessed be Your Name.*" Many things have already been taken away from us. Each time you're aware of one of these losses, whisper to yourself and to your ever-present Savior, "*Blessed be your name!*"

Jesus' self-imposed fast at the very beginning of his ministry prepared him to stay faithful for when at the very end of his earthly ministry everything would be taken away from Him:

- *his good name*, becoming the victim of character assassination and false accusations;
- *his right to a fair trial* with an impartial judge or an advocate who saw through the jealousy of His opponents,
- *his freedom* as he was unjustly tried and convicted,
- *his dignity* as he was stripped of his robe,
- *his life* as he was exterminated in sadistic style of crucifixion

He learned to bless God through receiving blessing **and** through experiencing loss.. Through the harrowing experience of the cross he blessed God by his obedience....

*<sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.*

*<sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return;  
when he suffered, he did not threaten,  
but continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly.*

*<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,  
that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.*

*By his wounds you have been healed.*

*<sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep,  
but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

**1 Peter 2:22-25**

*The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; **blessed** be the name of the Lord."* Maybe that becomes our instinctive response to whatever circumstance of hardship comes our way, as well as whatever blessing. Whatever we choose to forgo, whatever restriction comes our way imposed from without. That reaction will serve us well. Come what may, "Blessed be your name."