

Lent begins Wednesday and lasts for 40 days (not counting Sundays) so after Emily spoke on the thinking behind the elements of our service last Sunday, I thought I'd follow up something on the church seasons, lent, in particular. What we call the church calendar features three special seasons, of which Lent is one, evolved from the sacred calendar of ancient Israel, which in turn developed as an alternate approach to time as an act of cultural, political, and spiritual resistance.

That history is helpful as background. The Hebrew Bible was gathered in written form as a collection of sacred writings during the time of the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian exile was a time of collective trauma—the Babylonians invaded Israel, destroying the temple, killing, pillaging. They selected mostly members of the elite in Judah and Jerusalem for exile, with a forcible march to Babylon. That's the context for the effort to gather their writings into a compendium: the law of Moses, the Wisdom Writings, and the Prophets, what we call the Hebrew Bible. The process continued when many of the exiles returned to their homeland 70 years later. These writings functioned for them as a theology of resistance, including an *alternate approach to time*.

For example, In Babylon, every seventh day was called an “evil day” in which certain things prohibited; only one of four evil days was a day of rest. In Babylon, on this day, sacrifices were offered to placate one or another deity—to keep the deity off their backs. So the exiles utterly rejected this understanding of sacrifice—their word for sacrifice meant “draw near” as an act of friendship. The idea of calming an enraged deity was pagan to them. Someone should tell Christians that, but I digress. The Jewish 7<sup>th</sup> day was a blessed day, a day of rest in which God and the people together took delight in each other and the world God created and filled with God's presence according to their origin myth.

You can imagine how oppressive the Babylonian approach to time was for the exiles.

Oppression always involves psychological and spiritual torture along with threats to physical safety. We shouldn't be surprised when our indigenous brothers and sisters don't hop on the Thanksgiving bandwagon.

So the Jewish exiles in Babylon were enacting an alternative approach to time as a **brainwashing antidote**, an act of political-cultural-personal-spiritual resistance.

**And that's how the church calendar, at its best, can function for us.** As the church morphed over 400 years from a movement within ancient Judaism to movement run by non-Jewish Gentiles (the Jewish term for “the nations”) the three major multi-day feasts of ancient Israel were replaced by the three major multi-day seasons of the church calendar, focused on the life of Jesus. The church year begins in late November with Advent and runs up to four weeks until Christmas, the first special season. The second special season begins 40 days before Easter (not counting Sundays in the 40 days).

Confession: I like LENT and Easter better than Christmas because it feels more subversive to me since it's mostly off the consumer machine radar. No, no, no, I love the tree and the lights and all that, it's just not as spiritually moving to me. Also, as a Michigander, one gets a little funky inside the head over the long winter, all the more in a pandemic, and Lent is for me, a harbinger of Spring, for which I am always desperate, this year more than ever. I see only to reveal my subjectivities not impose them.

The 40 days of Lent is patterned after the 40 years of wilderness sojourn depicted in the book of Exodus as the emancipated Hebrews took the wandering, circular route to the promised land. Lent is patterned after the preparation Jesus undertook, removing himself to the Judean wilderness outside of Jerusalem for 40 days, to get his mind clear immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan when the Spirit alighted on him.

Lent can be, if we want it to be, a **season of reflection, focus and connection**. A time to focus on connecting with God, ourselves, each other, wide world. Making more room for life-giving connections. If we have the luxury, disconnecting from time-sucks, like Fb on your phone (I know, showing my age) or however else the 28 year old white male Stanford grad algorithm writers have grabbed our attention without our intention.

#### FOCUS ON FORMING OR REINFORCING ONE NEW CONNECTION-ENHANCING HABIT

Takes extra focus to start a new habit or strengthen a languishing one and the brain can only handle one habit formation focus at a time. Once you put in the initial energy-effort to establish the habit, the brain finds its groove, and that body just does it without much fuss. OK bragging (artistic bed making) So a fine approach to Lent is to pick a new habit that scratches an itch you can feel – that aids and abets you in forming a more life-giving connection: to God, yourself, others, or the wide world. That's a big connection playground. No need to get all religious about it. Trust to the Spirit in you to nudge in a good for you direction, and look for a sense of "Oh, I'd like to do that!"

A meditative practice? Reading a novel you've been neglecting? Starting a bedtime ritual that includes a little prayer? Starting a terrarium and tending it? Sending a sweet text to someone every day? Writing a poem or a song? Sitting down, lighting a candle and listening to some music for 10 minutes? A daily walk? Something that will get you into a groove that you like to be in, for your well-being. I have a narrow range of ideas (not being the Spirit who brooded over the waters prior to creation).

Thing is: It takes about 6 weeks to establish a new habit. And it takes intentional focus for those 6 weeks. Perfect! Lent! 40 Days!

## Two Suggestions for How to *Approach* Lent

1. Focus on intention rather than will power for a new habit formation.

Some form of spirituality put a lot of stock in making promises, resolutions to do better—fosters lots of self-talk in the stern lecture format. Tried it, didn't like, doesn't work so well.

Hebrew imagination for our internal intention setter is the **heart**—the heart is what aims us in a particular direction. Emily spoke of that opening statement for Sunday, as something by which we state our intention for the time we are together.

It turns out if before you go to sleep at night is a good time to set an intention for the coming day: “I look forward to \_\_\_\_\_” increases your chances of doing that thing. But intention needs to be stated compassionately and positively. Not, “I should go to gym” or even “I promise to go...” intention is a non-binding, gently stated, but clearly focused function of imagination wrapped in the language of desire. If we take the time to set an intention, our brain naturally organizes around it and it's more likely to happen.

## 2. CONNECT YOUR INTENTION TO THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS

The ethic highlighted by Jesus, Paul, and James in various ways, is “love your neighbor as yourself.” It's from Leviticus 19 and the preeminent scholar of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom says, this is the “ethical pinnacle of all of Scripture” Love God is not the ethical pinnacle, but it's combined with the ethical pinnacle. And the genius of “love your neighbor as yourself” is the way it creates synergy—loving others helps us love ourselves (“why do I treat myself like I would never treat a good friend?”) and loving ourselves helps us love others. It frees psychic energy that we can use to love others.

I learned this from Headspace, but consider others when you set an intention for yourself—imagining how your intention can have a side benefit for others around you “I want to take 5 minutes a day to mediate for myself and to benefit the people around me with less wound up version of myself”—it makes it a stronger intention.

Oceana interviewing Gaffer about his core values. Spirituality, going to church. Talking about why go to church, Oceana was talking about what she gets or doesn't get out of it and Gaffer offered this gem: **Why go to church? Not just for what you get or what you may feel, but also for the blessing others receive from you (often unbeknownst).**

Applies to many other places where we “show up”—like a 12 step group, maybe on a given day we don't go for ourselves, but we go for others, and it ends up helping us.

Of course! Our brains are wired to care about others. We mirror others, are affected by others. Our brains know the well being of others is tied to our own well being. So this love your neighbor as yourself synergy is a key to our internal motivational system

#### QUIET REFLECTION

Our Quiet Reflection time today will last 3 minutes and have three parts: (offer focal point, as distracted return to focal point).

1. A minute to center yourself, be present her now (focus on weight of your body on chair, feet floor; focus on any sounds around you; focus on your breathing)
2. Focus on someone you like, and feel kindly disposed toward. Picture them, call them to mind, focus on the feeling you have for them.
3. Ask your heart (as though it's not obvious) what one new habit you'd love to have established by end of lent.

End: IF SOMETHING SEEMS CLEAR WRITE IT DOWN ON 2 3X5 CARDS; DROP ONE IN BASKET, KEEP ONE