

I don't believe that life is just a series of problem solving situation. I also don't believe in predestination- that our life, our choices, our existence, is predetermined by the creator and we are just living out what has already been determined for us. I do believe that God calls us to life. I believe that we all have abilities that we can use to reflect a God of creation that is good. We are given the freedom to make choices that affect our life and the lives of those about us. Maybe, for me, it goes as far back as the creation stories in Genesis - specifically the story about Adam and Eve having the freedom to choose. To me, the whole of the biblical account as we see ourselves as the people of God always relates to the way we choose to live in that image of a God who is good, kind, merciful, forgiving and always welcoming us home – no matter how far or where we have wandered from our purpose to reflect this image of God.

The psalm lesson today in psalm 91 is a reminder that we live our lives in the shelter of the most high, that we abide in the shadow of the almighty.

God knows, and we know, that often our actions, our thoughts, our words do not reflect the kind and loving nature of the God who created us. We can, and do decide to live our life outside ways that build us and our community. They become destructive ways in our families and in our communities.

One call of lent is for us to examine our relationship – our relationship to God and to our family, friends, neighbors. I do believe that to love God means we love our neighbor and it is in community that our living ultimately pleases us and God. Lent gives us a time to reflect, to honestly step back and look at ourselves and our relationships.

The gospel lesson for today from Luke revisits the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. We may bat around the theological question, "Does God Test us?" Luke understands the temptations in the wilderness as testing. Satan placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple and challenged him to jump off to test God's promise that the angels would bear him up. The temptation was to take the promised protection of God into his own control. Jesus saw that as a way to test God, not as testing trust in God. Real trust does not seek to test God or to prove God's faithfulness. For those who would follow Jesus, many times the going is rough. Love bears within itself some test, some commitment that calls forth a testing of our limits. It is not that God is putting us into a situation to see how we will react. That is a game that neither us, nor God can honestly play.

It happened in the grocery store at the check out counter. You know that space that every parent would like to avoid if you are with a young child. The lady in front of a friend had a young boy in her shopping cart. There in the check out line, amid all the candy, batteries, gum – lots of items to tempt a child, the boy was making in known in a loud voice that he wanted some candy.. "No, you can't have candy. We are giving up candy for lent." Then she sheepishly turned and said that he was not her child. He was not even a catholic. "I just figure if it is good for us it is good for everybody." Giving up!! Is that what lent is about? Depriving yourself? Six weeks of hitting yourself over the head with a hammer so that when you stop it feels wonderful!!! I don't want to minimize the importance of putting things out of our lives – giving us – not only chocolate, soda, - but also giving up hurtful words toward others, selfish ways. But if all we do is concentrate on the single element of fasting in the readings for Ash Wednesday and lent, we can get pretty much stuck in the "if it doesn't hurt, there must be no merit in it." Kinda like the old adage I grew up with for medicine –"The worse it taste, the better it is for you."

I'd like us to consider Lent as time to practice discipleship. We know what practice is – to do or perform frequently, customarily, habitually, to exercise some profession – as that of law or medicine.

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Maybe during lent, we can be especially sensitive to our practice of discipleship. The Ash Wednesday texts call us to prayer. But prayer is not just giving God a "to do" list every day. Prayer has to do with our adjusting our will to God's will, to this image of dwelling in the shadow of the almighty. It is one thing to pray for the hungry. It is far better if that prayer causes us to bring our food for the food pantry or to cook food for the homeless at the shelter. Ash Wednesday tests call us to give alms. Alms are not just gifts of money to others. Alms are acts of love. I know they fly in the face of a culture of independence. But the practice of acts of love call us to life in the shadow of the almighty during this season of lent.

I was at the state basketball tournament last year. It was about 2 and the game I was watching was really over. One team was clearly superior and they were just playing out the last quarter. I decided it was a good time to get some lunch. I walked up and out into the concourse and got in the line for food at the concession stand. There were several kids in front of me. One child, who could barely see the top of the counter reached up and placed coins on the counter and wanted a candy bar. Well, prices as they are, his few coins were not near enough for the price of a candy bar. I watched as the guy selling the food hesitated briefly. Then he said, "Sure thing. What kind of candy bar would you like?" Alms giving. Practicing discipleship. I couldn't tell if the man took it upon himself to be kind to the kid, or if he really was practicing his discipleship. The counter was sponsored by a church group. I did not only thank him for getting me some food, but also for being kind to that young boy. He seemed pleased that someone had noticed his act of kindness.

It is lent. I see that as call to us who dwell in the shadow of the Almighty. Dwelling in that shadow calls us to practice our discipleship.