PREPARING FOR LENT, PREPARING FOR LIFE
a sermon by
R. Charles Grant, D.Min.
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On their way home from attending an Ash Wednesday service, little Johnny asked his mother, “Is it true, Mommy, that we are made of dust like the minister said tonight?”

“Yes,” his mother answered.

“And is it true that we go back to dust again when we die?”

“Yes, son,” his mother replied.

“Well, Mommy, when I said my prayers last night and looked under the bed, I saw someone who is either coming or going.” (Holy Humor 36)

We really don’t know what to do with lent. Is it just a religious relic from a distant past, something to learn about and perhaps admire, but certainly no longer relevant? Is lent simply the official reason for having Mardi Gras?

We think of lent as a time of preparing for Easter Day. The origin of the season suggests a different emphasis. Lent developed as a time of preparation for Easter, all right – but as a time for new converts to Christian faith to prepare for their FIRST Easter celebration. In other words, it was a kind of boot camp or spring training pre season for the main event that was to follow. Lent was a time to reflect and prepare for facing the challenges of daily living as a Christian. Lent was a time to prepare for life.

The model for lent was the forty-day retreat in the wilderness Jesus took before he began his public ministry. In the wilderness Jesus faced temptation. In the wilderness Jesus examined his own faith and his own life. In the Lenten wilderness Jesus prepared himself for what was to come. Jesus prepared for life.

The word RETREAT is a loaded word. Religious retreats, of course, are times of withdrawing from the ordinary to pursue extraordinary goals. Retreats are “treats” for the body and soul – a luxury of both time and expense for most of us. Retreats are special.

Retreat also suggests DEFEAT. As in the path of “Lee’s retreat” from Richmond and Petersburg to his surrender at Appomattox.

But even a military retreat carries a subtle but important different meaning. A retreat is NOT a defeat. A retreat is really a WITHDRAWAL from battle for the purpose of doing battle another day. A retreat is a going backward, or at least disengaging, in order to go forward again under more favorable conditions. George Washington and the colonial army retreated to Valley Forge to hold out during the winter before making another, and successful run at the British forces.

In football, a team punts, in order to have a stronger position from which to defend its goal line. In chess at times it is strategic to give up some of your pieces before launching a new offensive.

A retreat is a going backwards, or at least taking a neutral position, before going forward again.

If you can drive a stick shift car you know the meaning of retreat. When you drive a stick shift, you disengage the engine from the drive train in order to reposition the two in a more efficient relationship. You retreat into neutral before going into a different gear.
When you learn how to drive a stick shift – or teach another – you are reminded that the retreating part is usually EASIER than the RE-ENGAGING PART: putting in the clutch is a breeze - the tricky part is learning how to let the clutch back out.

This was the case with the disciples of Jesus, as in the Transfiguration story of last week: The disciples did fine while they were on retreat, it was when they re-entered life in the valley below that the trouble started.

But for most of us, the RETREAT STEP, the WITHDRAWAL in the first place is the hard part. We find it hard to let go, to disengage for a moment, to step back before trying to go forward. And withdrawal IS difficult to do. Withdrawal from addictive drugs is hard and often painful. But withdrawal is also the first step to becoming drug free. Withdrawal – retreat – is the first step of personal change.

Lent is an invitation to retreat, to withdraw for the purpose of going forward.

In his retreat, Jesus engaged in some spiritual disciplines. He fasted, he prayed, he withdrew from daily obligations and engaged in deep soul searching. Jesus examined his life up to that point, where he had been, where he was now, and where he was going. He took stock of his life.

And it is the “taking stock” of our lives which is the heart and soul of Lenten spiritual disciplines for us. It is not important what we “give up” for lent. It is not essential that we choose one of the traditional spiritual disciplines of fasting or prayer or study. These spiritual disciplines are valuable tools. But what is important is that lent invites us to a time of spiritual examination. A complete taking stock of our lives. Our spiritual lives.

We go regularly for health check ups. Through the Internet we take stock of our social and economic lives daily – sometimes checking our investments hourly or moment to moment. Should we not also periodically devote at least a little time and energy to our SPIRITUAL lives as well?

Politicians like to ask, “are you better off today than you were four years ago? Or one year ago?” I think the spiritual question lent poses for us is “Are you a better person today than you were during the last Lenten season? If so, why? If NOT, why not?” Are you happier today than you were last year? Is your life more fulfilling, or less fulfilling than a year ago? Are you more at peace, or are you in greater personal confusion and turmoil than you were last year? Lent is a time to take stock of our lives.

When Jesus was in the wilderness he faced temptations that express three of the fundamental temptations that persons of faith still face. When he was hungry, he was tempted to rely on his own power to satisfy his physical needs. When he was discouraged, he was tempted to turn from God and to do things his own way, not God’s way. When he was tired and filled with despair, Jesus was tempted to tempt God.

If you are not better off spiritually today than you were a year ago, perhaps those traditional temptations of Jesus may be temptations you are facing – and yielding to yourself.

Are you putting your trust in your own ability to financially and materially sustain yourself? Jesus said, we do not live by bread alone, but by the living bread of God’s word.

Where are your loyalties? Where is your FIRST loyalty? Quoting the first commandment, Jesus reminds us that faith begins with the worship and service of God and God alone.

And are you putting God to the test? That is, do you spend your time asking what God will do for you? Or do you spend your energies doing what you can in the name of God?
Lent is a time to take stock of our lives. To ask hard questions. To retreat, to withdraw, for the purpose of pursuing personal and spiritual growth. To step back for the purpose of moving forward. To take stock for the purpose of achieving constructive change in our lives.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus retreated to prepare for the life ahead of him. To get ready for the challenges he expected. To prepare for the crises he could predict. To be ready for the suffering he anticipated.

And so also, lent for us is a time to retreat, to prepare for the life ahead of us. The challenges we will face, the trials we will endure, the suffering and difficulties which await us. Lent is a time to prepare for life.

Today, at the table of Holy Communion, we are reminded that we do not face life alone. Jesus is with us. The old spiritual says, “Jesus walked this lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself.” We too, must walk this lonesome valley of life, but we do not walk alone. Jesus has gone before us and the living Christ goes with us now as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Today, as we gather around the table of Holy Communion we are not alone. We are here with each other. We are here as the people of God and the community of Jesus Christ. We who share the bread and the cup share also in the joys and sorrows, the mountains and valleys of life. Together.

And today, forty days before Easter day, we are reminded that we do not face the wilderness alone. The God who spoke through the prophets has spoken in a mighty and most powerful way in the raising up of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. This same God calls us by name and invites us to life with him and life in community with our brothers and sisters.

It is time prepare ourselves for life. It is time to prepare ourselves for life with God. Amen.

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.


1Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” 4Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” 
Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him,

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.