

40 Days of Decrease: Speeding Past Sorrow

Matthew 14:1-14; 22-23

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Pastor E. David Streets

So what did you give up for Lent? Lent began Ash Wednesday. It will continue until Easter. Some of us have decided to give something up for Lent. We give up things like chocolate or candy, snacks, watching television, peanut butter, eating certain types of food or drink. Some will try to give up certain practices or behaviors. We call that “giving-up something for Lent,” but it’s actually called a Lenten Fast.

Lent is a season in the church year. Its purpose is to prepare us for Holy Week and Easter, to help us align ourselves with Jesus journey to the cross, and to enable us to be more and more like Jesus. Lent brings us closer to God.

In Lent, many Christians commit to fasting or giving up certain types of luxuries as a form of penance. Many Christians also add a Lenten spiritual discipline, such as reading a daily devotional or praying through a Lenten calendar, to draw themselves closer to God.

Fasting or giving up something is a form of penance. Penance is something that you do, or are given to do in order to show that you are sad or sorry about doing something. For us, giving up something for Lent is mostly about being sorry for the sins we have committed; for the ways we have disappointed God. It could also be an expression of sorrow for drifting away from God. We are all sinners. We sin every day. Practicing a daily act of penance reminds us of our sinfulness every day. It helps us to keep ourselves in perspective, relative to God.

Lent is a season to take time out, to pause, to reflect on who we are, and who God is. For some it is a time to be less outgoing and more reflective and introspective. It could be a time for some where they might be less social. In the tradition of Christianity, Lent was a darker time, a darker season in the church. Some churches choose to hold no celebrations, no baptisms, no new members, and no weddings.

Lent should be a time for us to intentionally draw closer to God and to deliberately strive to be more like Jesus. During Lent, we take an intentional step to be different from what we are, and more like the one Jesus invites us to be. Lent corresponds to that time in Jesus' life when he turned his face toward Jerusalem, when he became even more focused on his mission. It can be the same for us – a time to push the reset button, a time to refresh our relationship with God.

Lent is designed to be, Lent could be and should be, a time for us to pause in life, to slow down for a season, to take a breath, a deep, long, intentional, lung-filling, psychologically restoring breath. Those are always good for you.

You see friends we are too busy. We move too fast. We have too much going on. Once upon a time, the workday ended when we left our office or the place where we worked. That's not the case anymore.

Many of us are multitasking with the help of electronic devices throughout the day. Once our workday comes to an end we communicate with supervisors and co-workers while we make the long and maybe not-so-long drive home. Once we arrive at home, we continue to receive text messages and emails throughout the evening to which we are expected to be attentive and responsive.

Last week an article appeared in the Post Gazette titled, "Electronic Devices Leading to Increase in Stress." I wanted to read the article but I was too busy to take the time. Now, I've thrown it away. I can tell you one way electronic devices increase my stress: When I'm driving behind someone who is talking on their cell phone. They are less attentive to what's going on, they don't use turn signals, especially when they change lanes, and they don't keep up with traffic. Deep breath! Take it in! Let it out! I'm OK.

During this season of Lent I'd like our observance of this season to include a desire on our part to deliberately decrease certain behaviors and practices. During Lent some of us are reading the book, "40 Days of Decrease" by Alicia Britt Chole. The book focuses on a specific practice or behavior for each of the 40 days of Lent. The author encourages the reader to be intentional about removing these practices from our lives, and about how our lives might benefit.

In the introduction she writes,

“What might be the fruit of fasting stinginess? What would happen if our churches fasted spectatorship? What might occur if our families fasted accumulation?.Such fasts could trigger a spiritual revolution. *40 Days of Decrease* guides readers through a study of Jesus’ uncommon and uncomfortable call to abandon the world’s illusions, embrace His kingdom’s realities, and journey toward the cross and beyond.”

I think if you get the book and read it every day during Lent, you’ll be glad you did. It’s not too late. By the way, there are 40 days in Lent. What day is tomorrow? Tomorrow is Day 5. If you check the box on your Connect Card, we’ll get a copy for you this week and call you when it arrives.

Today we want to consider our tendency to speed past sorrow. I never gave this practice a second thought until I read this entry in the book.

My very first experience with death occurred when my uncle died March 15, 1963. I was not quite 12 years old. My dad’s family was large. We gathered at the funeral home on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The service was Monday morning in the funeral home. As the service was about to begin, a recording of the Old Rugged Cross played overhead. I sat next to my dad. He cried. It was the first time I’d ever seen him cry, so I cried.

The neighbors brought in food to my grandmother’s home where we gathered after the service. Before the service, my grandmother had instructed all of the women in the family, my mother included, how to dress for the funeral: black dresses and no jewelry except wedding rings.

We lived near my grandmother so I visited her often in her home. For the 30 days following my uncle’s death, my grandmother kept the shades pulled on all the windows in the house. Why? “We are in mourning.”

It’s different today. Funeral home visitation is much shorter. Some choose no visitation at all. There may be a service in the church, or the funeral home, or only at the graveside, or no service at all.

Some of us are entitled to time-off from work for bereavement, but only if they are a close family relative. It may be 3 days, which is nice, but not nearly enough. Then we are expected to be back to work functioning on all cylinders. And to be honest, we expect the same of ourselves. Even if we're the boss, even if we are high-up on the organizational chart, we push ourselves to get back at it because we believe it's time to get back to normal. When someone we love dies, we shouldn't be so anxious to speed past sorrow.

In our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, we read of specific events that surround two of the greatest miracles in the life of Jesus. The miracles are where Jesus feeds 5,000 people from 5 loaves of bread and two fish, and when Jesus walked on water.

The feeding of the 5,000 is preceded by the beheading of John the Baptist. John was a prophet, a forerunner of Jesus who traveled across the countryside announcing that the Messiah had come and was on his way. John the Baptist was a first cousin to Jesus.

Way back when Mary the mother of Jesus was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, Mary went to visit her sister Elizabeth who was pregnant at the same time with John, who would come to be known as John the Baptist. John's prophet-nature appeared early in his existence

“At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”
Luke 1:39-41

John and Jesus were cousins. They grew up together, played together, and attended family functions like weddings and funerals together. And they were linked forever by this understanding of who Jesus was and the role each of them would play in ushering the ministry of Jesus Christ into the world.

After John was beheaded and once Jesus received the news, scripture records in a way that almost goes by unnoticed what happened next.

“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”
Mt. 14:13a

When John the Baptist died, Jesus withdrew to pray, “to be alone with God.” He wanted to be alone; he needed to be alone with his thoughts, to dwell on the life of his cousin, to reflect on John’s impact on his life, to bask in his sense of loss, to grieve.

But as happens with us when we must get back to normal, a crowd discovered where he was, followed him, and forced him to get to being the Jesus everyone knew, the Jesus everyone wanted to see.

That led Jesus to healing the sick of the large crowd who had pursued him and, because people stayed so long and had no food, he performed a miracle to feed them; 5,000 of them.

As the events of day drew to a close, Jesus made the disciples get in a boat and go on ahead of him to the other side. Again, back to the text:

“After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

Mt.14:22-23

Jesus needed more time to be alone, time to think about John, time to dwell on who John was to him, what John meant to him, the things John had done for him. Remember, it was John who baptized Jesus as Jesus embarked on his ministry. And Jesus needed to pray. He needed to talk to his heavenly Father about John and Jesus’ own grief.

From this point forward, Jesus intensely taught upon and demonstrated the revolutionary nature of His “upside down” kingdom. Consequently, the religious tension that eventually nailed him to the cross dramatically escalated. Alone on that mountain, as Jesus grieved John’s death, He anticipated his own death as well.

The example of Jesus encourages all of us to sit with our sorrow. Instead of moving forward as if nothing had happened, Jesus sent everyone away and carved out time to be alone, time to pray.

When we lose loved ones those are defining moments in our lives. We'll remember the date forever. Some of us will say a piece of us is gone. This person touched our lives, helped to shape us and make us who we are. Maybe they gave us life, or gave our lives meaning. Our lives are richer because of them. We are who we are because of them.

When we lose loved ones, when we lose people who matter to us, we should sit with our sorrow and not allow their passing to go quickly into the night. We should be in less of a hurry to get back to normal. We should realize that now there's a new normal for us, life without them, but they were such an essential part of our lives that to try to get over their loss quickly is almost a sign of disrespect.

As time passes, go back and think about how you miss them, how much they meant to you while they were alive, and how your life is so much richer because of them. Every once in a while, sit with Jesus and with your sorrow and let loss do its eternal work in your soul.