

Meister Eickhart said that “Life has a lot more to do with subtraction than addition.” This is a truth that is not easy for us to learn. But it is the essence of Lent. It has a lot more to do with subtraction than addition. Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving are the 3 traditional methods of approaching this day, all of which are to prepare us for the great feast of Easter and the renewal of our baptismal vows – or for the catechumens, to be immersed in the baptismal waters.

I have 8 suggestions for how we might keep Lent this year – we can use any of these – or any others that you may care to pursue. The point is to DO SOMETHING so that Easter is an authentic feast of renewal, for our rising is only as authentic as our dying.

1. MAKE SOMETHING ABOUT THESE 40 DAYS UNIQUE TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY OR CLOSE FRIENDS. This can be done in the old ways (which have a lot of wisdom). By giving up something. In our crowded schedules it might in fact be better to cut something out than to add something. Eat meatless meals several times a week – it is REQUIRED on Fridays – but try maybe adding Wednesdays or another day as well. Refrain from sweets or alcohol. Turn off all devices for at least 2 hours every evening. I promise that NO ONE will die and the world WILL survive without us. Limit activities and outings. Don't go shopping during the entire Lenten season.
2. It is also possible to make the 40 days of Lent a unique period by doing something extra. Read a book which has something to do with our faith – the one we just gave you on Sunday could help. Read the Bible every day, or use your AT HOME WITH THE WORD books. A Lenten guide can be helpful with readings and reflections. Each day, put \$1 or more aside to feed the hungry. Don't write a check at the end of Lent; the key is to make the effort to put the money every day because it reminds us of 2 things: it's Lent, and there is a real person out there who is hungry TODAY. You could donate the money in our Holy Thursday collection, which is given entirely to the poor.
3. Make Lent a communal experience. One of the real needs we all have today is to feel connected to the larger community. Do something spiritual with others. Be in a small group, go to daily Mass, attend the stations of the cross, come to SOUP & GROUP, find a time at least once a week (other than Sunday) to go to church with your family or friends. Find a group of friends or set aside a time with your family each week for some sort of communal prayer or discussion. Again, the AT HOME WITH THE WORD books are very helpful here.
4. Make some time each day for personal prayer. Most of us were taught to pray each night before we went to sleep. A lot of people seem to give that idea up when they become teenagers. But do it. 5 – 10 minutes each night is a good start. Anything less will not do much good. Get a copy of the church's night prayer – a great way to end the day. It's available free online – you can even get it on your cell phone at iBreviary. It's a free app. Commending everything we do during the day to God the first thing each morning is also a great idea. Spend a couple of minutes thanking God for waking you up for another day of life, even with its difficulties and trials – it's still LIFE!
5. Celebrate the sacrament of Penance. A fearless searching of our lives during Lent is helpful in outlining where we need to go in our relationship with God. Our Penance Service will be at St. Mary Magdalene on Thursday, March 12th. The penance services around the deanery are listed on our website and in our bulletin. Please plan on going to one of these – it is impossible for me to hear all of your confessions on Saturday afternoons.

6. Focus on one virtue. Resolve to be kinder each day to some person with whom we are in constant contact. Resolve to be more honest at work. Get serious about almsgiving, one of the three foundations of this season. Examine honestly what we give to the church and to other charities. The Bible says we should tithe 10% of our income. See how you are doing and take a 1% step toward that goal during Lent. Find a way each day to bring your faith to bear on the little things you do. At the end of each day, examine yourself. How did the day go? How was Christ brought to life in my actions.
7. Plan to participate in the Triduum. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. These are the heart of the year for us as Catholics. If you have never experienced the 3 days as a unit, then you really have no idea what this whole baptized life is really about. It's THAT critical! THAT foundational! Living through those 3 days by attending the liturgies and keeping them as prayer days will help cherish the liturgy of the church and strengthen our faith.
8. Turn the 40 days over to God. Lent is not a self-improvement exercise. In the end, it is the opening of our lives to the work of grace. It is possible at the beginning of Lent to pray: "God, in your goodness you give us these 40 days of renewal. Lead me, guide me along your path. I give you my life and I want you to work with me. Help me to know that life has a lot more to do with subtraction than addition."
This is a dangerous prayer. I have no doubt God will gift us with something, lead us somewhere, open opportunities of service and faith. (Adapted from Rev. George Szews, CELEBRATION, February 21, 1996, p. 79-80)

A story to conclude. He could hardly remember a day when there wasn't at least some pain; and this should come as no surprise. For you see, this man – and all his people – lived on a bed of nails. It was a rather prickly existence. Yet, they had all gotten used to the particular limitations of their world. They accepted a certain amount of pain and discomfort as normal, and they had developed clothing and footwear that insulated them mostly from the effect of the nails – although some were better at ignoring the pain than others

Now, for a long time our friend accepted things as they were. But then something in him began to grow restless, and he became convinced that life had to be more than just managed discomfort. One day he decided something had to change or he was going to take all his clothes off, jump into the air, and end it all. As he pondered this choice, he thought he heard something. "Get small." "What?" he said. The words were out of his mouth before he had time to remember he was alone. "Get small." There it was again. A voice. He was sure of it. Sort of. Something or Someone was talking to him. And since he was out of other options at the moment he decided to talk back. "Who are you?" "Get small." "What do you want?" Obviously, he wasn't asking the right question. He decided to address the advice directly. "What do you mean, 'get small'?" "Get small." Apparently this was all he was going to get, and his next response came mostly out of a sense of frustration. "I can't get small," he said through clenched teeth used to gritting it out. "I can make you small," the voice said.

Well, there it was then. If he accepted that the Voice was real, the only thing left to do was to trust what the Voice had to say. "All right," he said, "make me small."

The first thing he noticed was that his clothes got big. Then the nails got big. Then the space between the nails got big and he found himself between the nails. Then the space between the nails got so big that there was more space than nails. Then there was so much space it seemed as if there were no nails at all. Then he was surrounded by people. They brought him clothes to wear that were light and airy, and wonderful food that was as rich as the ground was smooth. It was a strange feeling, but it seemed like he had finally come home.

Once a week he and all the people between the nails gathered together to sing. They lifted their voices to the heavens and sang with all their heart the 2 words the Voice had taught them all. "Get small," they sang. (WEAVINGS, Sept-Oct 1995, p. 43-44)

"Life has a lot more to do with subtraction than addition." HAPPY LENT!

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