

## Lent Top Ten

### Year A, First Sunday of Lent – Matthew 17:1-9

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 9, 2014*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

*Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting.*

Those of you that were here for one of the services on Ash Wednesday will remember that bidding that directly followed the homily and ushered in a period of silence, followed by the imposition of ashes as a reminder of our Baptism and our need for continual repentance and faith. I think that I've shared with many of you that, as your pastor, I always find that portion of the Ash Wednesday liturgy to be an incredibly moving moment, a thin place, if you will, where the holy just seems to come a bit closer than usual. But as our worship together continued the other day, I found myself somehow excited and enlivened by that, somehow *energized* by the idea of our life together moving into this time of self-examination and repentance, this season of returning to the Source of light and life.

A friend once confessed to me that Lent was actually her favorite time in the Church calendar. "Lent is such a wonderfully *focused* time," she would tell me year after year, "to prepare for the joy of Easter." That's pretty good, a lot better than the dull and dreary drudge we sometimes drag ourselves through. The traditions of the Church Year call us to shift our attention for Lent: We set aside our "Alleluias" for a season. We dress the Altar, and our priests, in a darker hue. We even trade our usual splendid adornment for a more stark beauty. But that doesn't mean that Lent has to be, nor that it was ever particularly *meant* to be, a time of gloom and deep darkness.

For the last several years a list of Lenten disciplines has circulated around the internet, this year I saw it on Facebook. I shared with some of you Wednesday – or maybe it was last Sunday, the week has kind of run together – I shared with some of you that I was planning to trot out this list at some point. So with my friend's idea of *focus* rather than gloom and doom in mind, and in the fine late-night tradition of David Letterman, let me offer my take on... the Top Ten things you could do to make this a holy Lent.

Number 10 – Go home, find it, and blow the dust off your Bible. How many of you know for a fact that you have a Bible at home? How many of you know where it is? Good, take it out and read the entire Gospel of Mark, preferably in one sitting. As the shortest Gospel, it is the most concise story of Jesus' life. And then, maybe thumb through there and see if you can find something else you can read – I think you can. Oh, and if you don't know where your Bible is, let me know and I'll loan you one – we've got a few of them around here.

Number 9 – Don't let the priest and the readers be the only ones who are prepared on Sunday morning. Make a commitment to reading the Sunday readings before you come to church on Sunday morning. In the same way that reading up on basketball players, opposing teams, and coaching strategies will help you experience a game more fully, familiarizing yourself with the readings ahead of time can allow you to experience them in a deeper way on Sunday. You can find the readings at [www.lectionarypage.net](http://www.lectionarypage.net), or you can just call Judy like I do.

Number 8 – Give up something that really makes a *difference* to you. I know I kid about my giving up chocolate, and I did again this year. But think about what you usually spend your money on. Do you buy a few too many clothes? Do you lay down more than a few too many bucks on iTunes, frothy coffee thingies, or eating out? Pick one thing that you'll *fast* from this

Lent. Be deliberate about your consumption for these few weeks. And then maybe give away the money you would usually spend on that one thing. Which leads me to...

Number 7 – Put your money where your mouth, eh, I mean where your heart is – and then put your mind there too. Our Gospel the other day concluded with Jesus reminding us that where we put our treasure, our heart will be too. As a part of your Lenten almsgiving, make a point to learn as much you can about a particular social issue – immigration, human trafficking, racism, AIDS victims, child poverty – learn as much as you can. And then make your extra giving count – to *you* – by putting your treasure where your heart *should* be.

Number 6 – Learn something, for pity’s sake. As it happens, though not exactly by coincidence, every Wednesday evening this Lent we are offering an opportunity to learn something about some of the social issues being addressed right here in our backyard. This week, for example, we’re going to hear from the folks at Matthew 25 AIDS ministries, about the work they are doing in our community, and maybe how you can put your heart there. The program starts at 6:30 this Wednesday, and every Wednesday in Lent. Or better yet, feed your body and your mind and come at 6:00 for a soup supper before the program.

Number 5 – Open the church doors more often. I know that I might be preaching to the choir (rim shot), but you know we have church every Sunday, don’t you. Lent might be a good time to improve your average attendance – and *ours*. Or open the doors of one of the other churches in our community with the Lenten Luncheon series. The first in the series is this Wednesday at noon at First Christian Church. And they even serve lunch! And when Lent is over, you do remember that we have a mid-week service right here as well, don’t you?

Number 4 – Pray. Almost seems too simple doesn’t it? How many of you are doing it? No, don’t let’s raise hands on that one. It *is* simple. If you’ve gotten out of the habit, might I suggest keeping it *simple*. Just yesterday, I was with a friend as Holy Name rang out the noon Angelus bells, and I was able to remind him of the ancient call to stop what we are doing, and to pray. Find a time in your day you can stop, and just offer a simple statement of thanks. Or maybe, as you are waiting to fall asleep at night, pray the ancient Jesus Prayer silently as a chant or a mantra: “Lord Jesus, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me.” Better yet, pray it aloud – it’s even *better* that way.

Number 3 – Think about somebody other than yourself. While you’re praying, pray for somebody that means something in your life. The fancy seminary word Larry shared with us Wednesday before last is “intercessory prayer,” but it’s easier to remember as “pray for somebody.” Pray for your family, for your best friend, for the person you saw in the paper or on the news. And then maybe as you’re walking the streets, driving the highways, sitting in your cubicle at work, or going to a movie, pick out a person who appears to be in need or have some burden, and pray for *them*.

Number 2 – Love your neighbor as yourself. Someone really smart once said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” That goes for your co-workers. That goes for your friends. That goes for your loved ones. Be kind – not because some smart guy said so, not even because it’s the “right thing to do,” but because you *love* them, because they are part of you, and you are part of them, and we are all part of one another in the love of Christ.

And finally... drum roll, please... the Number 1 thing you can do this year for Lent – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. Oh, that’s a whole ‘nother sermon, isn’t it? And I wanted to lighten up some this morning.

“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,” the Ash Wednesday bidding concludes, “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” “And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature...” rather than kneeling as we did that day, and since we’ve already offered our prayers and our confession this this morning, let us stand and encourage one another for this “wonderfully focused time of preparation.”

The Peace of the Lord be always with you.