

Sermon Preached on
Second Sunday in Lent
(February 21, 2016)

"The God of the Belly"

Okay, time for a little honesty. What did you give up for Lent? As you know, Lent is a time when we traditionally give up something - or at least think about it. Generally, that means we give up something that we know we can live without anyway - although one year I did give up coffee, so that was brutal...

But this year, I confess Lent slipped up on me so quickly that it was here before I even thought about it, and I still haven't come up with something that feels right. I haven't given up on it though - still thinking what to give up.

Now, I know, it's just a tradition. God's not going to love me any less if I don't give something up for Lent. But I do value it.

And before anyone says, "Why don't you take on something, take on a discipline, rather than give up something meaningless?" I'll tell you why.

Because there is power in stripping things away.

As a friend of mine shared in one of his Lenten meditations, "We don't need to increase our goods nearly as much as we need to scale down our wants. Not wanting something is as good as possessing it." Lent helps us think about scaling down our wants.

For me, it's important to remind myself that essentially everything I take for granted is unnecessary and frankly can get in my way.

That's why, we start the season with words of death; to remember that someday everything we hold dear will be stripped away. It's helpful to get used to the idea. Maybe one year, I'll give up speaking for Lent because that's something I'm not sure I could live without. Sorry, that'll likely have to wait till I retire.

Seriously, we strip away the inessential because it leaves us with the absolute essential – God alone.

And this terrifies us. Not God, but the idea of nothing but God.

Paul, in his own inimitable way tells the Philippians much the same. He tells them to imitate him (of course) in his example of essentially owning nothing more than is necessary to do the work God has given him. His ministry is everything, and all the possessions in the world are nothing. Worse, those possessions kill. "Their end is destruction, their God is the belly...their minds are set on earthly things."

It's very simple. When our focus is on stuff - and let us remember that everything, every skill, every person in this world that's not God is stuff - then we lose our way.

Stuff is important inasmuch as we need it to do the work of knowing God and spreading God's love. When people told Jesus to run for his life because Herod wanted to kill him, he said, "I've still got work to do for now. When I've finished, then I can let go of this life." He kept ahold of life here until his work was done.

So stuff. Can we look at the god of the belly and renounce it - not just with words but with a change in how we live? After 2,000 years, you'd think we would have perfected it.

Of course, if we had, especially with the worldwide influence Christianity enjoyed over the past thousand years, then there would be no poverty because there would never have been hoarding of resources or exploitation of the poor. There'd be little pollution because we'd be living so simply. There'd be little crime because we'd have little desire for stuff. At least among Christians, right?

But that's not how it is or likely ever will be.

There's a lot of pressure in the world to focus on acquiring more, regardless of the cost to others - a lot of pressure to making your god the belly.

So, we use these forty days as a reminder. And a hope. Perhaps if I can live without one thing, then maybe I can live without another. Each thing I strip away brings me a little closer to the kingdom. It's worth a try.
Amen.