

SERMON

02-22-2026

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11
Psalm 32

Lent is a season of penance. Looking around the group, I'll wager that we have lived through a few Lenten seasons. So that proclamation is no surprise. But what I am wondering is if we might approach the Lenten Season a bit differently this year.

If you have, in fact, worshipped in a Lenten season before, you know that it is customary to associate this season with acts of sacrifice. The most popular trope is that of giving up chocolate for Lent. The idea is that giving up chocolate or something else that we hold dear causes us to suffer. And from there, we make the leap in our thinking to: "To suffer brings us closer to God."

I understand the theological basis for that statement. To suffer brings us more in communion with the suffering of God. After all in Lent we are moving toward the crucifixion of Jesus. So perhaps to deny ourselves joy or pleasure readies us for the persecution and suffering of Jesus

What I am wondering is whether we might approach Lent a bit differently this year. And my question to you is, does the season of Lent really encourage us to suffer so that we might be closer to God? Is that what Lent is all about?

Is the message of the Lenten season that it is through suffering we draw closer to God?

I once knew a very devout woman. She was kind and loving. Her Christian faith was deep. She attended church regularly and was committed to daily devotions at home. Her prayer life was unsurpassed.

She was born in Hungary in the late 1920s and, due to the geopolitical upheaval and ravages of war, she and her mother became displaced during WWII. At age 16, she and her mother escaped by hiding in a packed railway car with other refugees.

They were transported to various sites in Europe. There was very little food or water, but through human kindness and resource sharing, they eventually made their way to safe havens and then with sponsorship to Canada and eventually to the United States.

Still a relatively young woman, she was matched by her mother with a young man who, too, had fled Europe. They married and had many children. He wasn't a terribly good husband or father.

He was emotionally closed off. And the family bore the brunt of this. No doubt his difficulties can be attributed to the challenges of his early life.

When this woman and I would meet, I would listen to her stories and wonder how she endured it all. She told me that suffering brought her closer to God.

What I heard her say was I am closer to God because I suffer. I am more deeply faithful to God when I suffer. I thought that what she was expressing to me was that God expected suffering as part of her devotion.

But in rethinking all that she told me of her life and all that I knew of her, I have come to better understand what she may have meant.

And I think I misunderstood her relationship to suffering and her relationship with God.

Because **this** woman, who by all accounts suffered a great deal in her life, was filled with joy.

She saw beauty in life. And she chose to be **part** of making life more beautiful. She was remarkably playful and easily laughed. The shenanigans of her children were endlessly amusing to her. She was one of those people who could make you feel really loved. Just by being with her. And you see, that is how I know that I misunderstood her suffering.

Her life exemplified that by loving, not suffering, we are closer to God.

She did not offer suffering to those around her as a way to bring us closer to God. She offered love as a way of bringing us closer to God.

I came to see that she understood that suffering was eased by being closer to a loving God.

We do not choose suffering to be brought closer to God. But in our suffering, a Loving God is brought close.

In the Gospel of Jesus according to Matthew, we find Jesus in the desert fasting for 40 days and nights. He is tired, and he is hungry. Did he go to the desert for the sake of suffering? Or did he go knowing that God would be there in his suffering?

Well, we do know who did show up. Satan. In this story, the character of Satan is used to exemplify temptation and evil. Satan also represents the misleading force or voice in our head that tells us we are worthless, that we are alone, and that there is no God who will guide us or comfort us. Satan says, Come with me. It is I who will give you all that you need to feel whole.

Jesus does not join Satan. Rather, Jesus says to Satan,

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

Jesus does not engage in suffering or in evil to be closer to God. Rather, Jesus knows that in suffering God is with us and gives us the strength to endure. Through God, we rise with the fortitude to banish suffering and to banish evil.

In this story, after Jesus speaks, we read, "the devil left him, and suddenly, angels came and waited on him."

The angels herald the coming of God. A loving God is not found through our suffering, but in our suffering. God is drawn near when we suffer.

What I wonder is whether you might approach Lent this year not as a means of suffering for the sake of suffering, but as a means of drawing nearer to God.

When we choose what to 'give up' or abstain from in Lent, perhaps we might choose based on the question of "what is it that separates us from God?"

What is it in my life that keeps me from having a deeper relationship with God?

And as a sidebar, I can pretty much guarantee that the answer to that question will also answer why your relationships with God's people have gone awry.

Our relationship with God reflects our relationship with people. And our relationship with God's people reflects our relationship with God. They go hand in hand. If you want to know how your relationship with God is faring, check out your relationship with the people in your life.

I would like to finish by reading a Lenten message from Pope Leo XIV. He writes,

Pope Leo XIV on Lent, "I would like to invite you to a very practical and frequently unappreciated form of abstinence: that of refraining from words that offend and hurt our neighbor. Let us begin by disarming our language, avoiding harsh words and rash judgment, refraining from slander and speaking ill of those who are not present and cannot defend themselves. Instead, let us strive to measure our words and cultivate kindness and respect in our families, among our friends, at work, on social media, in political debates, in the media, and in Christian communities. In this way, words of hatred will give way to words of hope and peace."

In this season of Lent, may we repent our ways of sowing discord and seek to be bearers of hope and peace.

Amen