



A Pastoral Message at the Start of Lent 2021

A Pastoral Message from Bishop Lull at the Start of Lent

One of my spiritual practices is to do a slow read of the Bible each day. In January I started reading the Gospel of Mark afresh. Recently, I read again the story of the man living among the tombs in Mark 5:1-20. It is a story of the first venture of Jesus into non-Jewish territory, strange demon possession, community exclusion, and great human suffering. At the end, when the man's life has been made whole again, he begs Jesus to let him accompany him on his travels. St. Mark concludes the story in this way – *"But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.'"* (5:19)

In reading that I recognized how much I long to be able to travel again. I bet you do, too. As we mark the beginning of Lent and round the corner into a full year of living under COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, we are itchy for the world to open up again. Though our social exclusion has not been as severe as the man in Mark's Gospel, we miss seeing family and friends, gathering in person for worship and coffee hour in our congregations, going to a restaurant for a casual dinner, and packing our bags for a time away from home.

But this Lent we will be staying home, just as Jesus sent the man he had healed back to his own family and friends. While some congregations are opening up for in-person worship with safety protocols in place, most of us will continue to worship from our homes. The rampage of the COVID-19 pandemic is not over, and we need to stay vigilant and masked for some more months.

Part of our Lenten discipline this year will be to practice the behaviors that continue to drive down the infection rate even as we weary of those restrictions. We don't even need ashes this year to remind us of our mortality. The news accounts and grim realities of the deadly power of this pandemic have taught us that life is fragile, and no one is naturally immune.

This Lenten season I invite you to follow the mandate Jesus gave to the man at the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. *"Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."* And to "friends" I would add "neighbors" – those living around us in their own social isolation this year.

I invite you to join me in three Lenten practices this year:

1. **Reach out to friends and neighbors with an embodied word of good news.** What do you have to offer that will encourage, cheer, or befriend someone just as weary and isolated as you? A shoveled walk, an afternoon phone call, a card in the mailbox, an offer to help a senior book an online appointment for their vaccination, a prepared meal for a working family with kids schooling at home, or any other practical help speaks volumes about our compassion for one another in this crisis.
2. **Pray daily for those you do not yet know in your community.** These past months we have seen the divides and disparities that isolate us from one another just as surely as this pandemic has kept us apart. Fill the heart and mind that God opens through prayer with learning from the stories of those who seem so different than yourself. There are books, podcasts, films, and Zoom conversations aplenty to broaden a sense of our common humanity.
3. **Examine your own life for its outward orientation.** Lent is traditionally a season for examining our life as a Christian. We might ask, is everything about me? The traditional disciplines of Lent – prayer, fasting, Bible reading and almsgiving – are designed to draw our focus away from self, and through God’s intervention, toward others. This is to live a neighborly life.

The very last word in the story from Mark’s Gospel is the declaration that the man did return to his community and told others all that Jesus had done for him. People were amazed. May it be so for us, as we lean into a deeper love for God and neighbor this Lent.

Yours in Christ – Bishop Patricia Lull