

The Road Less Traveled-February 16, 2018

On Wednesday, we joined with millions of Christians around the world in setting off on our Lenten journey. Since the fourth century, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this six-week period of spiritual discipline and repentance as a way to prepare themselves for the Easter celebration that ends it. Unfortunately, I fear the season of Lent has become one of the more misunderstood aspects of our Christian journey, a fact that tends to cheapen the season and ultimately our celebration of Christ's resurrection.

I remember one Lenten season many years ago that really drove that point home for me. The town where I lived right outside of Chicago was a huge Catholic community. One Friday I went to a Chamber of Commerce luncheon, and apparently some wires got crossed with the caterer. When lunch was served, it turned out to be roast beef sandwiches. Catholics around the room began looking at each other in confusion, as they traditionally fast from eating meat on Fridays during Lent. The Chamber president jumped up and made a quick call. Stepping back to the microphone he announced that he had spoken to the Bishop, who had granted a special dispensation to the Catholics in attendance, which would allow them to enjoy their lunch without "officially" breaking their fast.

I remember it really bothering me at the time, but I couldn't quite articulate why. As my own faith journey progressed, however, the reason for my discomfort began to crystalize. That day the concern seemed to be whether those present would follow the rules. Would they keep their word? Would they honor their commitment? The Bishop's ruling allowed them to go about their day without fear of running afoul of what the church expected from them.

But that's not what our Lenten journey is about.

The reason we observe the season of Lent is the same reason we observe the season of Advent. We are preparing ourselves. We are getting ready. In the case of Advent, we are preparing ourselves to receive the Christ Child once again. In the case of Lent, we are readying ourselves to follow Jesus to Jerusalem and, ultimately, to the cross.

Let me invite you pause for a moment and let that sink in.

Five weeks from now, during Holy Week, we will be beckoned to follow Jesus into Jerusalem, to sit with him at the table as he celebrates his last meal, to look on as he is arrested, tried and convicted of a crime he didn't commit. We'll be invited to join the crowd watching as he is beaten within an inch of his life, as he is mocked and spit upon. And finally we'll follow behind as he struggles to carry a Roman cross to the outskirts of Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. We'll watch as he struggles for several hours and finally gives up the fight – and dies.

And with every step, we will be reminded that he did it for us.

And that is the key. The Passion of Jesus Christ is not simply an historical event that we remember, it is a story that unfolds for us and into which we are invited to step. We have to. Otherwise how can we fully celebrate the miracle of the empty tomb?

But the truth is it's an ugly story. And that's why we prepare. It's why we spend 40 days (excluding Sundays) trying to draw closer to Jesus, immersing ourselves in Scripture and prayer and devotion, so that we can truly join Jesus on this journey. Truthfully it's a story that is painful and that most of us would just as soon avoid. But we can't. Not if we are to truly follow Jesus.

That's what the Lenten season is about. Steeling ourselves. Preparing ourselves. Drawing as close as humanly possible to Jesus so that we can faithfully follow him those last, painful steps. For some of us that means giving up something that we truly enjoy to create time and space to draw closer to Christ. For others it means taking on a new practice, a new spiritual discipline, such as fasting. For all of us it should mean becoming more deliberate and devoted to prayer, Scripture and devotion.

Following in the footsteps of Christ is not easy, particularly on this final leg of the journey. So let us prepare ourselves. And let us do it together. It's not about following the rules. It's about following Jesus.

See you Sunday.