

Lengthening Love
Sunday February 14, 2016
Lent 1

Long, long ago, before Jesus began teaching and healing and telling people his good news of God's love being inside them and all around them, before he was even clear what he was supposed to do with his life, he went out into the desert to figure things out. Have any of you heard of people doing this? Native Americans call it a vision quest: you spend time by yourself without anything or anyone to distract you, so that you can see who you really are and what you should do with your life. The stories say that Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert, which really just means a long time, and wrestled with how to live. When he came out of the desert, he was clear on what he was supposed to do: tell people about the power of love; and he was clear on how he was supposed to do it: in loving, peaceful ways. He couldn't force people to do justice, love kindness, and walk peacefully on the earth.

Today, Christians around the world are hearing again the story of Jesus' time in the desert because today is the first Sunday in Lent and it's traditional to read one of the stories from the Gospels about that episode in his life. Did any of you come from traditions where you observed Lent? What was it like?

As a Unitarian Universalist, I didn't grow up hearing this story or knowing anything about Lent. Some of my friends talked about giving things up at this time of year, but I didn't understand why giving up candy would make them better people. I didn't give it much thought.

Then in my senior year in college, I went to a service in the college Chapel which made me think again about Lent. It was the first Sunday in Lent – just like today – and the preacher was Constance Buchanan, the director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School. I didn't go to the services in the Chapel often – they weren't UU – but I was applying to Harvard, so I thought it would be interesting to hear what she had to say. She talked about how traditionally people saw Lent as a time to punish yourself for not being the people we want to be and how that didn't help us change. Instead, of giving something up for Lent, she said that we should take something on. That we should think about who you want to be, and begin to do something that will bring you closer to being that person. So that year, for the first time ever, I tried observing Lent. You may not believe it of me now, but I was and still am a shy person. And when I was in school, that shyness prevented me from ever speaking in class. I could be in a class of 75 people or 6 people – it didn't matter – I would do anything I could not to talk. I knew that was getting in my way, but I hadn't felt I could do anything about it. Her sermon gave me a new view and I decided to try to take on speaking in class. I started slow – I think my goal was to speak in one class each day, and I didn't make it, but it was a start in helping myself to move out of the darkness of my fear.

And do you know what the word “Lent” means? It isn’t about lending something. It comes from an Old English word meaning “to lengthen.” In our part of the world, Lent comes at the time when the days are lengthening. The light is growing. And the word Lent reminds us that this season is about helping light to grow in and through us. As Jesus moved toward greater light during his time in the desert, that’s what Lent offers us each year. Now we could do this at any time of year, but there’s something about this season – when we know spring is coming, even under all this snow and cold, and we want to be lighter too. And there’s something about knowing that other people are joining with us in trying to let light and love fill us more and shine through us more.

So what might it look like for you to observe Lent this year? Where does light need to grow in you? Are you feeling the need for peace within you? Would a Lenten practice of taking a walk every day help? Or looking at the ocean? Or turning off the news and reading a book? Or staying off the internet and having a game night? Sitting in meditation? – there are great resources for kids and adults. Would you like to be more kind? Could you make a practice of reaching out to someone who sits alone at lunch? Or talking to someone standing alone at coffee hour? Do you need to clear clutter – literally or metaphorically? What about before taking anything on, making a practice of saying, “Do I really need this? Will this feed my spirit?” Perhaps a practice of saying “no” would help the light grow. Or are you feeling walled off – perhaps a practice of saying “yes” is what you need this year. I invite you now to take a moment to think about how you want to let light in. While you are thinking, Wendy Brown and Vicki Davis will pass out paper hearts and pencils to you. Just hold onto them for now.

Now I invite you to take your heart and write on it the word or a phrase for the way you need to let in light: peace, kindness, connection, generosity – whatever you came up with. Someone else will read this, so be aware of that. Do not write your name on the heart.

Now take a moment and think about what you will do to let the light in. Make it specific – I will walk three times a week. I will say hello to a stranger every day. I will stop buying candy and donate the money to Heifer. Whatever seems right for you this year. When you’ve settled on something, write it too on the heart.

Now fold your heart in half and stand up as you are able. We’re going to pass these hearts around. Please exchange hearts with at least four people. After the first time it won’t be your heart, but we’ll continue to exchange them. Please don’t exchange them with anyone in your family. Please make sure to exchange hearts with at least one person not in your age-group and with someone you don’t know very well. And don’t look at the hearts as you pass them on. If you’re not comfortable moving around, stay still and others will come to you. Once you’ve made four exchanges, return to your seat. Ready? Go!

Please put the Valentine you now have safely away without looking at it. When you get home, take it out and read it. Now you know how someone else in this community intends to open herself or himself to light in this Lenten season. I ask that you take on one more practice this season – every day remembering that person, whose identity you don't know, holding them in your heart, as you will be held by yet another person here. You will never know who is holding your intention – we're not going to do a big reveal at Easter – but this is what our First Parish Community is about – holding one another in love as together we help the light grow.

- Pamela M. Barz