



Dear Immortal Beloveds The Rev. Eun-sang Lee, Pastor

I remember a movie called "Immortal Beloved" that came out in the 1990s. It was a fictional movie about Ludwig von Beethoven based on his historical letters written to his mysterious lover he

called his "Immortal Beloved." The movie weaves in and out of Beethoven's tumultuous life and musical career as a friend of his tries to track down the secret lover after Beethoven's death. Toward the end of the movie is the scene of the premiere performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. As the performance moves into the final movement and the "Ode To Joy" chorale, Beethoven, by now totally deaf, walks onto the stage and stands there, his head drooping. The imaginary scene takes him backward to his teenage years. He flees from his drunken, abusive father and runs to a pond in the woods, takes off his clothes, and wades into the water. As the chorale hits its climax, Beethoven's eyes gaze into the night sky filled with stars. Slowly he drifts upwards and is lost among the myriads of stars.

Once again the season of Lent is upon us. The season of Lent is the forty day journey, not counting Sundays, beginning with Ash Wednesday (February 17) and leading up to Easter (April 4). This reflective season recalls the time Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. The in-between time from Palm Sunday to Easter is called the Holy Week. Many churches re-enact the final events of Jesus' life during this time which includes Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Many Christians think of what to restrain from, what to deprive themselves of, out of penance. I want us to think of what immortal beauty we embrace despite our broken memories and life contexts unbecoming of the divine images we all are. We might have to do some shedding and taking off of clothes, but always the aim is to reclaim the bone-chill joy and beauty of our being.

I welcome this season. I'll seek to deepen my relationship with God and my dedication to ministry, to you and to our neighbor. May God bless your Lenten journey.

DIANA BUTLER BASS: GIVING UP LENT FOR LENT

This week, Christians around the world begin Lent – the 40-day period of fasting, prayer, and repentance leading to Easter.

In seminary, one of my friends eagerly awaited his yearly celebration of Lent, calling it his "favorite church season." Since Lent starts with a morbid reminder of human mortality – "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return" – I always wondered if he needed therapy more than ashes on his forehead. As Christmas faded into fond memory, I dreaded Lent's approach. Only it stood between Easter and me. Forty days of guilt whenever I ate chocolate.

A few years ago, I stopped struggling with my bad attitude toward Lent. I gave up Lent for Lent. I skipped Ash Wednesday, made no promises to God, and instituted no rigorous prayer schedule. I wanted to enjoy one March with no onerous spiritual obligations.

An odd thing happened, however, during my Lenten non-observance. I began to understand and

experience Lent in new and deeper ways. When freed from expectations and requirements, sermons and scriptures spoke to my soul. By the end of Lent, I found myself willingly attending extra services, including two Good Friday liturgies. On Easter Sunday, the resurrection broke over me with unexpected power – with love joyfully overcoming the intense introspection that built during my non-Lenten weeks.

Giving up Lent for Lent taught me a paradoxical principle found in many faiths: that which we give up returns to us. When we cast our bread upon the water, it comes back multiplied. Jesus taught that to save our lives, we must lose them. The last shall be first in God's Kingdom. The meek shall inherit the earth.

Scoffers and believers alike have often misunderstood these teachings. For a secular person, giving up to gain might appear as either reverse self-centeredness or stupidity. And believers sometimes treat this paradox as a magical cure-all, a kind of spiritual excuse to avoid practicing justice. (After all, the poor can look forward to heaven; why help them now?) But both miss the point. When we cling tightly to our own desires, we struggle and suffer. When we let go of these desires, God can move us toward deeper spiritual understanding and compassion. Our desire melts into God's desire for shalom.

This spiritual paradox was enshrined by 19th century evangelicals – and later borrowed by Twelve Step groups – as "Let Go and Let God." When I was younger, I heard this spiritual catch -phrase in church and thought it superficial. Through the years, however, I have learned the essential truth expressed in this oft-repeated mantra.

To give up, to surrender to God, is neither popular nor easy. And you cannot make someone else do it – that is oppression – and has often been misused to control others. But surrender is a truthful way of life, the way that Jesus preached and modeled, the way that he called his followers to. Buddhists have sometimes enacted this principle better than Christians, teaching that attachment is the source of human suffering and detachment is the path to fulfillment.

When I gave up Lent for Lent, it became clear that I needed to give up the idea that certain religious disciplines would bring me closer to God. This belief had plagued me since I was an evangelical teenager struggling with my congregation's expectation for a "daily quiet time." Never able to maintain this program of spiritual rigor, I felt like a Christian failure. When I finally admitted that I could not do it, I experienced a new freedom in prayer. Giving up led me to a richer and deeper connection to God in prayer, and led me to practice prayer in ways that resonate with who God has made me to be – unique, meaningful, and transformative. Not a program, but a way of being.

Lent tempts Christians to try to fulfill other people's expectations of what spirituality should look like, usually related to some sort of religious achievement of self-mortification. But Lent is neither success nor punishment. Ultimately, Lent urges us to let go of self-deception and pleasing others. These 40 days ask only one thing of us: to find our truest selves on a journey toward God.

Giving up Lent for Lent meant giving up guilt. Although I have been back to church for Ash Wednesday many times since I gave up Lent for Lent, that year freed me from spiritual tyranny and helped me understand Easter anew. The journey to Easter is not a mournful denial of our humanity. Rather, Lent embraces our humanity – our deepest fears, our doubts, our mistakes and sins, our grief, and our pain. Lent is also about joy, self-discovery, connecting with others, and doing justice. Lent is not morbid church services. It is about being fully human and knowing God's presence in the crosshairs of blessing and bane. And it is about waiting, waiting in those crosshairs, for resurrection.

"Lent: Forty Days of Devotion and Discipline..."¹

In his book *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, Laurence Hull Stookey asserts that "[t]o be deeply Christian is to know and to live out the conviction that the whole human family dwells continuously at the intersection of time and eternity."

The abiding conviction that history and eternity continuously intersect is grounded in the most basic of Christian affirmations. For our Scriptures insist that in the days of the emperor Augustus the eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, born in Bethlehem when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Further, our creeds affirm that this Christ – "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God" – was crucified in the time and under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate and rose from the dead after three days. To take these assertions seriously is to be bound to the conviction that God and human history are intertwined...

Hence, as Christians we ought continuously to be aware that we live at the intersection of time and eternity, but often we are not; for... as the poet Wordsworth complained... "the world is too much with us, late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Since his day nothing has changed to decrease our penchant for ignoring God in the face of life's pressing demands...

Id. at 17.

As we approach the time of year when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, however, we pause, during the season of Lent, to consider our human condition, including sin and its deadly consequences, the new possibilities offered to us in Jesus Christ, and their implications for practical living. We begin on Ash Wednesday by stressing penitence: "an acknowledgment of our rebellion against God and our alienation from God's whole creation;" and we move on "to the fruits of repentance: the amendment of life that results when we turn around and, by God's grace, head in a new direction. Id. at 80.

Here at FUMC, the theme for our Lenten devotions is *Transeamus!* which means: Let us be transformed! and we focus on the three objectives outlined by Stookey in *Calendar*: (1) preparing converts to the faith for baptism; (2) reassessing and renewing our own faith commitment; and (3) restoring those who have fallen away from the faith, to full and active participation in the life of the congregation. Id.

While some Christian congregations observe the season of Lent by "giving up something" as an exercise of Lenten discipline, the people of First Church prefer to be proactive – endeavoring to grow in

From Laurence Hull Stookey, Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church (1996) pp. 79-103.

faith instead. Our goal during the Lenten season and beyond is a "self-examination that seeks greater conformity to the mind of Christ, and more effective ministry on behalf of the world." Id. As our Lenten theme suggests, rather than temporary deletions or additions to our daily routines for a six-week period, we seek nothing less than spiritual transformation, by eliminating the distractions that prevent us from hearing and knowing the will of God for our lives, and prevent God from working freely in and through us for the transformation of the world.

With the observance of Ash Wednesday, we begin this process of transformation by hearing the plaintive cry of the Prophet Joel:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 Sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near--
 a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!...
 Yet even now, says the Lord,
 return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.
 Return to the Lord, your God,
 [who] is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-13. The Ash Wednesday observance confronts us with the reality of death, as we say, with the imposition of ashes: "Remember, O mortal, that you are dust; and to dust you shall return." But the ashes are placed on the forehead in the sign of a cross, which transforms the message to one of hope: "Live in Christ and discover Christ's new life, which conquers death."

Please plan to join us in the sanctuary on Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010, at 7:00 p.m., as we begin our transformational Lenten journey together.

Transeamus!
 Pat Christensen

