

“FIRST STEPS”  
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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Ash Wednesday

Amos 7:7-8

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A few weeks ago, Steve turned thirty and when I was talking to him that day I offered some words of wisdom. I told him to watch out, because before he knew it he would turn around and he'd be fifty and wonder where those twenty years went. It goes by in the blink of an eye, doesn't it? I think back on the day I was ordained, 31 years ago, and bam! Here I am, 31 years later and I wonder where it all went, and how fast it all went!

Life is like that, isn't it? I don't know if it's always been that way, but it sure is now, and one of the reasons I think it is, is because we're all so busy – all the time. The pace of life is frenetic, in large part because of the state of the world these days.

Twenty-four hour news, social media all over the place, electronics in all parts of our lives keeping us connected – probably too connected, because if we're not careful, we never shut off. It's way too easy to stay on the busyness treadmill, and never get off. So day goes into another day, and week into another week, and

year into another year, and we go and go and go – and in the blink of an eye, time passes.

Unless, of course, we choose to make it otherwise. Unless, we do something that breaks the endless cycle of going and doing and connecting.

We in the church have a gift to help us do that – and it's called the season of Lent! Lent, as you probably know, is the liturgical season preceding Easter. It lasts for forty days (plus Sundays) in honor of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism by John in the Jordan.

It was a time, in the early Church, when converts to the faith had their “new member class” if you will. It was a time of learning and preparation for that day when they would profess their faith – which usually took place after sundown on the night before Easter – the Easter vigil.

Somewhere along the way, the rest of the church decided that Lent would be a good time for everyone else to do much the same thing – to spend these forty plus days growing in faith, focusing on the state of one's soul and how one might draw closer to Christ and to others. Thus began the practice of prayer and meditation, of

fasting and service, of honestly looking at one's life and making changes. It is a holy time, and can be a very fruitful time.

But, to be honest, it can also be a frightening time, because it takes courage to look honestly at yourself and admit that you're a sinner in need of God's grace. Which probably explains why this service is one of the least well attended services in the life of the church – a lot of people just don't want to go there, they want to "feel good" at church, not do the hard work or risk "feeling bad."

It's interesting that the world has sort of adopted Lent and made it its own. Take a look at social media today and you'll see all sorts of people letting the world know what they're giving up for Lent. (Never mind the fact that in the Gospel lesson Jesus warns against making public your piety!)

Just today, I've found out that some are giving up drinking or sweets, others are going to try to give up cursing or gossiping, others are giving up television, and last night, some posted that they were signing off of Facebook until Easter. Now, I know some of those people are people of faith, but a lot of them aren't – they've just sort of culturally grabbed on to the "Lent" thing to feel better about themselves.

That's not bad, mind you, but Lent is more than just feeling better about ourselves. It's strengthening our connection to the One who created us and sent His Son to die for us. It's about faith and discipleship. It's about striving to become the person God wants you to be.

To that end, the church encourages us to do things during these forty days – things that will focus us, and get us off of the “busyness” treadmill if you will. Things like increasing your devotional time – by devoting yourself to read the Bible x amount of time each day, or committing to read certain books of the Bible during Lent, or using a Lenten devotional, or participate in a study like the Lenten lunch and learn. It doesn't matter which you choose – what matters is saying this is important and making time for it – to the end, of course, that it will draw you closer to Christ, and a clearer understanding of you who are.

Increasing your prayer life is certainly another Lenten practice you would do well to use. Once again, maybe you need to make a commitment to pray at certain times of the day. I read today about a person who is committing to stopping at noon every day from now until Easter to pray The Lord's Prayer, no matter what she is doing. Maybe you'd like to try writing in a prayer journal or a gratitude journal – great tools to focus your spiritual thoughts and ponderings.

For you, service might be the pathway during this Lenten season. If you feel like that's where you're lacking in your soul – that too much of your time is spent focusing on yourself – well, there are ample opportunities to serve here in the church and out in the community. I mean, next week is our week to sponsor the Rotating Homeless Shelter and we still need help with it. But you can serve anywhere and any way you'd like – maybe helping a neighbor or a person in need.

Certainly, worship is a powerful way to stay connected to Christ during Lent. Why not commit to being in worship every single Sunday of the season? That will say a lot to the Lord, that you're setting aside this time each week to be solely focused on Him.

Some of you may need to focus on keeping Sabbath during Lent – because you never take time for yourself. You wouldn't know what a day off looked like if it kissed you on the cheek! Maybe you need to commit to observing Sabbath during Lent – even if Sabbath is only a few hours of quiet, meditation and listening. God knows you're worth it, and you need to know that as well.

Finally, fasting. Fasting is a traditional spiritual practice, and of course, usually focuses on refraining from eating so that you're aware that only God can

truly feed you, but also to keep you aware that there are so many people in the world for whom food is scarce.

But fasting can be so much more than that, because we can fast from other things besides just food. I read something today, that I'm sure others of you saw online – a piece about fasting through the words of Pope Francis. Listen to some of the suggestions he makes – that we should:

“Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

Fast from anger and be filled with patience.

Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.

Fast from worries and have trust in God.

Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.

Fast from pressure and be prayerful.

Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.”

Wise words from a wise soul. You see, don't you, the point of what he's saying? Give up those things that take away fullness of life, things that feed the not-so-nice parts of you, things that are not Christ-like.

We all know what those things are in our own lives. We are all sinners standing in the need of God's grace. We know that. So we've come here tonight to make the first steps in this Lenten journey – of naming who we are and how we are, and making a commitment to do what we need to do to be more who God wants us to be, and draw closer to him in the process.

It's not an easy journey, and the first steps might be hard. But let me encourage you by way of an image. Ironically, it comes from social media.

Anyway, I would imagine that some of you have gotten caught up in the "April the giraffe" saga like I have. Do you know what I'm talking about? April is a giraffe who lives in the Adventure Animal Park up in New York not far from where I was born, which was why her story first caught my eye. By the way, her story first caught my eye about a week ago.

At any rate, April is about to give birth to a baby. It will be her fourth calf. So about a week ago, the park issued a release on Facebook that she was about to give birth, and you could watch her live via You Tube. So, of course, like hundreds of thousands of others, I've been tuning in. Well, guess what, a week's gone by and no baby yet – but we're still watching. She is so sweet and I can't wait to see this new little baby come into the world.

But in the meantime, along the side of the screen where April's story is being played out, other things are being posted, like videos from when other baby giraffes were born. So, one day, when I realized April wasn't going to give birth that moment, I clicked on one of those videos and watched as a little baby giraffe came into the world.

Well, it was the sweetest thing (aside from the fact that baby giraffes come out of their mothers in sort of a free fall – six feet onto the ground!). But then, with their mother hovering over them, they slowly rouse and come to life, and in a little while, they begin to try to stand up. And is that ever adorable!

They are all legs and shaky legs at that, and the first few times, the legs just splay out and the baby falls over. But little by little, they figure it out and finally manage to stand on all fours – albeit very wobbly.

And it's then that the Mom steps in. I watched as she went right up behind her baby, pushed her forward a little bit, watched her wobble, and then got right up behind her with her own legs and steadied her. You could almost see the baby lean back and rest on her support.

That's the way I feel like we can make these first steps on our Lenten journey. Sometimes it is hard, sometimes we're not sure how to go about it, or we're afraid we don't have the courage to make the hard journey, and we're a little wobbly. But through the Holy Spirit, God is like that mother giraffe, nudging us on our way, and letting us know that no matter what, he is there with us – right behind us to steady us and to be a place of rest and peace.

So my friends, make those first steps tonight on your Lenten journey. If you wish, come forward in a moment and receive ashes on your forehead to acknowledge that you know you're a sinner, that from dust you have come and to dust you shall return, but you know that God's love is even stronger than the dust of death and new life will come.

Then return to your seat and be in prayer, and honestly confess to God who you are and how you need to grow. After some time of silent reflection, we will all,

together, say and sing a Psalm of Confession, Psalm 51 (so you might want to find that in your hymnal now, so you'll have it ready).

So my friends, I invite you to observe a holy Lent. Tonight you're taking that first step, leaning on the everlasting arms of Jesus. Find ways in these days ahead to draw closer to Christ and be more the person he calls you to be. I promise, that if you keep a holy and committed Lent, you will celebrate Easter this year more fully and joyfully than you ever have before.

Ivan will be down front with the ashes. Come forward as the Spirit leads you to receive the ashes and then return to your seat. You can kneel at the rail if you want, but you will be coming up to the rail a little later for communion. If you wish to receive ashes in your seat in the pew, just tell one of the ushers.

Let us turn now to God in silent prayer, and then when you're ready, and if you wish, come forward for the imposition of ashes.