

After this almost-year since the pandemic began, I do not think any of us are strangers to going into our rooms, closing the door, and praying, as our Gospel reading suggests. After all this time being in our homes, this seems like a common practice for prayer, for just being alone, or being able to be closer to God in a quiet and contemplative place. Some of us with big families staying with us perhaps crave this opportunity and practice more - to shut a door behind us for some quiet time to pray and just be.

And I also know that this practice, after all this time can leave us feeling a bit weary too. That we deeply miss being able to go out and do everything that we used to, the grander things of concerts and sports games, large community gatherings without so many precautions woven in beforehand. And we miss some of the smaller things too, like spontaneously meeting a friend for lunch or coffee, or being able to walk into the store without the inevitable "oh shoot, forgot my mask in the car again!" and having to turn around on a blustery cold day.

And it can certainly feel a little overwhelming, realizing that we may not be out of the woods with this pandemic for a while yet. That we still have time in which the virus is a real threat to our bodies, our families, and our well-being. But there is absolutely hope on the horizon, with case numbers decreasing in our area and more and more vaccines being administered every single day. What an absolute gift and incredible feat it is, creating a vaccine in such a short amount of time, thanks be to God!

But friends, the feelings that we've had through this year of pandemic, the changes we've made and the inward turning we've been required to do is an opportunity to experience the reality of Lent in a deeper and more embodied way than we ever have before. Lent is the holy season of repentance, of quiet contemplation and reflection, of strengthening our relationship with God through spiritual disciplines, prayers, and worship, and a stark reminder of the fragility and blessedness of human life. Lent is ultimately the season in which Jesus was tested, tormented, and tried by the spirits of this world that threatened to separate Him from God, his father and Creator. Lent is the season in which Jesus himself, human and divine,

went through the trials and struggles of being human by himself, battling his demons, and ultimately coming through it with a stronger conviction of his calling from God.

Now, let me be clear, I am not saying that we have to go through trials and testing and torment in order to clearly receive a calling from God. God reveals Godself to us in a variety of ways, uniquely just as each of us are too. But what I do believe about God's nature, is that God comes closest to us when we embrace the deepest and tenderest parts of our human selves, especially in times of trial. God comes close to us in our human hearts and bodies and spirits, even when those parts have been hurting for a long time, and it's painful to feel so human and so vulnerable. God comes close to us when we embrace those tender, human parts of ourselves because God loves us deeply, even those parts of ourselves that are hard for us to love. God created us in love, deep and enduring, covenantal love, and that loving creation includes these things that are hard for us to love too. In Lent, we are invited to not fear or shy away from the tender and hard-to-love parts of ourselves, but instead embrace that we are all a bit fragile, we are all a bit more human and fallible than we care to admit on a daily basis, and God is still holding us in deep love.

The Gospel reading for today encourages this type of quiet and inward work of spiritual connection with God our Father. Matthew, citing the words of Jesus, gives us examples of how to practice our piety, our spiritual relationship with God. Praying in secret, in a quiet way with just you and God, anointing yourself with oil and washing your face, keeping the treasure of your life not in the things that could rust or be stolen, but instead keeping your treasure within, and expressed in your rich life in the Spirit. Treasuring the closeness of God, the work of the Spirit, the spiritual practices that connect us with Christ and the God who created us, strengthens our hearts and our whole human lives. Going through loud actions simply for the sake of others seeing you is not a way to be close to God or deepen your spiritual life, but rather these everyday, quieter, more personal practices are ultimately what give us the treasure of a deep relationship with the God who loves us endlessly.

And I invite you, dear friends, to embrace this idea of quiet, personal, everyday kinds of spiritual practices or disciplines during the season of Lent. Perhaps you spend a few moments each day reading a Psalm and saying a prayer to center yourself. Perhaps you follow a devotional guide with your family or household to have some words to meditate on through the day (we have a few options for you at church if you would like a devotional guide for spiritual practice). Or perhaps you discover an ancient practice, the practice of the Examen or chanting a psalm or prayers of the mystics that fill your cup. Whatever you choose, dear friends, know your Father in heaven, our deeply loving God, is with you. Whatever you discover about your beloved human self in this journey is holy and life-saving work. And whatever your journey through Lent and the season of pandemic looks like, know that God holds you closely, Christ walks alongside you in your deep and tender humanness, and the Holy Spirit guides us each and every day, as we rise to new life in God. Thanks be to God, Amen.