

Lent 5 Year B
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As we draw nearer and nearer to holy week, we may feel more and more like church is getting kind of depressing. The whole season of Lent seems to focus on our sins and wickedness. We spend so much time reflecting on the things we have done wrong and the ways we continue to do the wrong thing. We think about all the ways we need to improve as Christians—all the ways we need to work on loving God and loving our neighbor. We remind ourselves over and over that we are not perfect people, and all this can be hard to do.

And then we look towards Holy Week and things seem to get even more depressing. Palm Sunday starts out kind of joyful. We waive palm fronds around and shout “hosanna” just as two-thousand years ago those people of Jerusalem shouted “hosanna!” “save us” as Christ entered the city. Yet soon the service takes a dark turn—we hear of the story of passion of our Lord, Christ’s unjust condemnation and brutal death upon the cross. Maundy Thursday, too, seems to start on a happier note, with us gathering together for a supper hearkening back to the last supper that Christ had with the apostles, yet even that brief moment of joy ends. We are quickly reminded that one of Jesus’ closest friends has betrayed Jesus and given him up to the authorities to be persecuted. On Good Friday we travel through the stations of the cross, reminding ourselves of the arduous journey from condemnation to death undertaken by Christ, which is very somber and even heart-wrenching. And we will commemorate Holy Saturday, the only full day that God incarnate was dead. The gloomy season of Lent just seems to get bleaker and bleaker as we attend more and more services through Holy Week.

Yet the mournful time of Lent and Holy Week serves a very important purpose. Yes, as we have talked about, Lent is important because it gives us the opportunity to reflect on what needs to change in our lives in order for us to become more faithful Christians and to become better followers of Christ. And this in-and-of itself is extremely important. But that is not the entire purpose of Lent.

The trials and tribulations of Lent remind us of the trials and tribulations of Christ—not just during the 40 days he was tempted in the wilderness, but throughout his entire ministry here on earth. As Christ traveled the countryside teaching, preaching, and performing miracles, he was met at every turn by those who hated him—religious authorities who felt threatened by him, skeptical locals who refused to believe him, people from his hometown who refused to acknowledge his identity, even his own family attempted to derail his ministry at one point. One of his closest companions, Judas, sold him out for some cash, and even Peter, the rock on which the church would be built, denied even knowing Christ when his own welfare was on the line.

But the purpose of Christ’s ministry, just like the purpose of Lent, was much more important than the suffering he would be forced to endure. “...through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, [Christ] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” Christ was able and willing to undergo the pain and torment that he experienced because it led to a higher purpose.

It is the same higher purpose towards which we travel in the season of Lent. We do not lament our sins only to lament our sins. We do not focus on our flaws simply to focus on our flaws. We do not seek to repent only to seek to repent. All of these things are done in order to help prepare ourselves for what lies at the end of the path that we travel—the path that was opened to us by Christ through his own hardships and torment. Just as Christ was prepared through his sufferings and death on the cross for his glorious resurrection on the third day, so we, too, prepare for our eventual death and resurrection.

That is the true importance of our walking through Lent and Holy Week. We are reminded WHY we lament our sins and wrongdoings. We are reminded WHY we Christians seek to repent and return to the ways of God. It’s not just so that we’ll be nicer and that we’ll be better people, though those things

are important. It's because we know that eventually we will no longer have any more opportunities to better follow Christ in our lives. And when the day comes when we can no longer see and rectify the error of our ways, we will have to make an accounting to God of all we have done, all we have failed to do, and all the ways we have succeeded or failed to make amends and turn away from our sinful ways.

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” It can be hard for us to understand this in terms of hating our life here on earth, but if we think about this from the opposite perspective—from a perspective of love, it becomes easier to understand Christ's teaching. I *love* chocolate. I also *love* my daughter Lydia. If I were to see a box of my favorite chocolate and Lydia both drowning in a pool, what would you think if I chose to save the box of chocolates? It may seem silly, but really think about it. You'd probably be disgusted, appalled, and dumbfounded as to how I could choose to save something as trivial as chocolate over saving something so profoundly important as the life of my own child.

If you were forced to choose between a carefree life in this world, or a carefree life in the world to come, which would you choose? That's the kind of perspective we are working towards during Lent. It is true that we suffer in this life. It is true that we are commanded by God to consider our sins, identify them, and then sin no more. It is true that traveling through Lent and Holy Week can sometimes seem like a bit of a downer. But those things are nothing in comparison to what awaits us Christians at the end of our journey. The sorrow of Lent and Holy Week pales in comparison to the joy of Easter, just as the pain of this life cannot compare to the glory of the life to come. Let us patiently and faithfully continue to travel the journey of Lent and Holy Week, remembering the joy that awaits us at the end. Amen.