

Lenten Preaching Series

Philippians 2:5-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. My name is Lonnie Lacy, and I'm the rector of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Tifton, Georgia.

What a joy it is to be here! For reasons I can't entirely put my finger on, I have had for some time a growing place in my heart for Trinity Cathedral. It's partially because I've had the joy of getting to know a handful of you over the past four summers at Kanuga. It's partially because I've struck up a nice friendship with your dean, Tim Jones. But mostly, the reason I love Trinity Cathedral is because I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you all love the Lord Jesus. And do you know how I know that? I know it because you, my friends, are the kind of people who show up for church in the middle of a beautiful, busy weekday, even when the guest preacher is some country hick you've never heard of from a place you will likely never go. Bless your hearts, *that* is some kind of devotion! In all seriousness, though, it really is a joy—not just a privilege, but a *joy*—to be here and to share this time with you.

So, why *are* we here?

If you ask me, we are here for one reason and one reason only. *We are here because we hunger for the living God.* You and I are here because we *crave* the goodness of God, and the very marrow of our bones *aches* for some word of his Good News. It's crazy when you think about it. We live in a world where no matter your appetite, no matter your longing, no matter your desire, you can find something to fill it in two days or less with Amazon Prime. Likewise, you and I could leave this cathedral right now, walk out those doors onto *any* of those streets, go in *any* direction, and each of us could find just about anything we might ever want to satiate and satisfy the raw cravings within us. There is everything we need—and everything we *don't* need!—right at our doorsteps and our fingertips.

And yet, we are here.

We are here because we are hungry, and we know there is only One who can fill us.

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My own sense of this hunger is part of why I am one of those sick, twisted people who can say with a straight face, "I love Lent." I know . . . it makes me sound certifiable. But I do. I *love* the season of Lent. I love Ash Wednesday; I love Holy Week; I love the dirge hymns and purple shrouds; I love the *whole forty days*. I love this holy season because this is the time of year when we move everything else aside and get down to the true hunger in our hearts. This is the time when we throw sheets and veils over all our shiniest objects. This is the time when we take all the razzle-dazzle and throw it out the door. This is the time when we, like the prophets of old, "declare a fast," and we give things up and let things go.

And why do we do all of this? We do it because we know our hungry hearts are prone to wander and because we *need* to be reminded of the Good News at the heart of it all, namely that:

God is enough.
God is enough.
God is enough.

But here's the problem. Whenever we talk about fasting, have you ever noticed how we almost always make it about *ourselves*? Have you ever noticed how when we get to Lent, we tend to talk *so* much about *ourselves* and *so* little about *God*, and almost always with a funny, false piety and a quirky kind of humor? The conversation goes something like:

Ruby: "What're you givin' up for Lent this year, Wanda?"

Wanda: "Oh this Lent, I'M giving up COFFEE, Ruby!"

Ruby: "OOOHH, that's gonna be SO HARD, Wanda!"

Wanda: "I KNOOOOW! And what're YOU givin' up for Lent this year, Ruby?"

Ruby: "Well this year, I'M giving up CUSSIN', Wanda!"

Wanda: "OOOHH Ruby! THAT's gonna be hard, TOO!"

Oh give me a break! WHO CARES?!?!?

The only person I've ever known who I think got the whole "giving stuff up for Lent" thing right was my friend James. James is now a priest living in Texas, but when we were in seminary, I asked him that same inane question: "James, what are you giving up for Lent?"

James got quiet for a minute, then he said, "I think I'm giving up God."

"Uh, James?" I replied. "We probably shouldn't tell the dean of the seminary about that one, buddy."

"No," he said. "What I mean is I've got all these preconceived notions in my head about what God is like: what he looks like, what he wants, how he speaks. And some of them are really good. But this Lent I'm asking him for the grace of being able to put those aside. Whenever I talk to God or think about God this Lent, I'm asking him to show me something new about himself, to show me something of his fullness in a way I haven't seen yet. That's the grace I'm asking for."

Y'all, *that's* a fast. Forget coffee, Coca-Cola, and cussin'. *That's* a fast.

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Here's the liberating truth. For all our Lenten talk of fasting and giving things up, our fasting actually has nothing to do with us. We don't fast in order to make ourselves better. We don't give things up in order to make God love us more. We can't do either of those things anyway, and striving for them is always going to be a losing proposition. No, we fast because he did it first and because he is all we need.

You want to talk about “declaring a fast?” You want to talk about what it means to “give something up?” Then at some point we have stop talking about ourselves, and we have to start talking about Jesus.

Listen again to those powerful words from Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but *emptied* himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”¹

Do you hear how crazy that sounds? Do you hear the scandal?

Despite all our pretense about fasting and giving things up—always with twisted, understated hopes of improving ourselves or currying favor with God—the truth is completely the other way around! *God* has fasted for *us!* *God* in his Son Jesus Christ gave it all up for *us!* By virtue of the Cross, in a mystery that we will never fully understand, Jesus who was in the form of God—who had all the power and glory of God right at his fingertips—*gave it up! fasted from it! emptied himself of it completely!*

God declared a fast from his own power, and

Jesus who was tempted by Satan,
Jesus who was betrayed and abandoned,
Jesus who was arrested unjustly,
Jesus who stood bound before Pilate,
Jesus who was hammered to the Cross,
Jesus who died the criminal sinner’s death

—in *all* of this—***Jesus became obedient to the fast and emptied himself out.*** And as the old spiritual goes, “He never said a mumblin’ word.”

God *declared* a fast.
Jesus *made* the fast.
And you and I, brothers and sisters, have reaped all the reward.

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¹ Philippians 2:5-8, emphasis added

Friends, you have come here today because you are hungry. Despite all that lies at your fingertips—despite all that you have at your disposal to fill your needs—you have come here looking to feast on the Good News.

Well, here it is:

There is One who is mightier, One who is richer, One who is infinitely more powerful than you or I—who truly *does* have *every* resource at his disposal—and he gave it all up, emptied himself out, fasted from it all that you, in turn, might have *him* . . . and thereby have *everything*.

Lent is here, and the Church has declared a fast once again. I'm not here to say you shouldn't give things up for Lent. I'm just saying that whether you've given up French fries, Facebook, or funnel cakes, it doesn't really matter. All our fasts are but a joyful response to Jesus' great fast for us, and they are but simple reminders of the great Good News that lies at the heart of it all, namely that:

God is enough.
God is enough.
God is enough.

Amen.