

Lenten Lessons During the Days of COVID-19
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
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Wow, it's Lent again. That means purple masks, acts of self-denial like not going to a movie theatre or on a Mexican cruise. No weddings in Lent. No blow-out family gatherings. And God forbid you forget yourself and shout out, "alleluia." Heck, it feels like we've been in Lent for eleven months, not 5 days.

And for most of us, at some point this past year, it has not been "Lent Light." Rather it has been like a medieval Lenten journey. I lost my mother to Covid last March in the pandemic's early days and my father-in-law in November. Neither has been buried or memorialized. Even our liturgy has adopted a medieval vestige-- a wonderfully deep bell that intones the moment of consecration at the words of institution. Never mind that the Anglican Church specifically says that this is not the precise moment of consecration, I love our bell. It resonates within me that something beautiful and mystical is happening here. Yes, it has been a long 11-month lent and our liturgical calendar is just catching up to the prevailing mood and spirituality.

What really marks my Lent 2021 is that we have a vaccine that is working its way into our arms. Yes, we are in the throes of Lenten disciplines; but now we actually can hope for an Easter release from these dark days.

So, today, as we mark the first Sunday of our Lenten walk, I want to offer you some straightforward Lenten "do's" and "don'ts."

1. Do remember to enjoy each day in some way
2. Do hope for a better day
3. Do embrace a Lenten discipline
4. Do remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

And I offer two don'ts

1. Don't fall into isolation.
2. Don't conflate this horrible pandemic with pseudo-biblical end times

Here's a little flesh. **Enjoy each day in some way.** Well, by way of illustration, I have my "Father Rob Covid Relief Kit." While visiting the Holy Land, a vendor sold me these shears which he swore were used by the villainous Delilah to cut the hair of God's strong man, Samson. Rob, you may need this artifact when it comes time to cut off your locks. In the meantime, I am glad to see your survival kit includes a CD of the Beachboys' Greatest Hits. Your inner surfing shines for all to see. Well, poking a little loving fun at our wonderful parish priest helped me enjoy today.

Next, **do hope for a better day.** I believe that it was the Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen who once described himself as a Victim of Hope. As Christians, hope is a pervasive strand in our spiritual DNA. It is

not wishful thinking, it is not denial of truth, it is a positive worldview built on the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God we have in Christ Jesus. It gives us the strength to endure all things. You might think of Hope is the future tense of faith. As Pearl Buck wrote: "To eat bread without hope is still slowly to starve to death." But you and I need not starve. When we come to Christ, we receive forgiveness, life, and a full relationship with God.

Do embrace a Lenten discipline. Here's a simple Covid discipline. Each time you dawn your mask, offer a prayer. *"Oh God, I wear this mask to respect the dignity of every human being. Teach me to love as you love."* Here's another for your handwashing, *"Dear God, wash away my self-deceit that I engage your creation with clean hands."* It's not hard to harness virtue from this awful virus if we will but muster some intentionality, some discipline.

My final do is **Remember that you are dust and to dust you shalt return.** If Covid has done one thing for us it has been to stare into the face of our personal mortality. We Christians hold that three things endure: faith, hope and love. We spend much of our energy trying to add a fourth to this list, my mortal life, but try as we will, through our social and personal capacity to deny our own mortality, death is real. It is existentially frightening. Your mortality must be embraced, if you are to embrace the Kingdom of God that seeks to penetrate the temporality of a mortal life. Fear of death **clenches our fists** and **calcifies our hearts** as much as any psychological wound we carry about in our backpack of spiritual garbage. A healthy embrace of death leads to a fuller life. This is oh so tricky and worthy of your deepest reflection.

Now for my **two Lenten "don'ts"** during a pandemic.

Don't fall into isolation. We are under quarantine or isolate-in-place orders. And these are so important to our personal well-being and our family's and our neighbors well being. But these necessary mandates require a counterbalance if we are to maintain our spiritual grounding. So, write letters, send emails, say a word of greeting or encouragement to all you meet on your daily walk, call that old friend, embrace zoom—stay connected. Do not allow your relationships to diminish. Finally, to this point, fight isolation by immersing yourself into the communion of saints through prayer and study. We are part of a great throng of witnesses who can support us on our way.

My last "Lenten Don't" is that you **avoid conflating this pandemic with pseudo-biblical end times.** I remember some 40 years ago driving home from church one summer evening. There was a sudden flash in the sky over Orange County's Saddleback Mountain. My mind sought to make sense of the phenomenon and for a moment decided that the flash must be a nuclear attack on El Toro Marine base. I was terrified that my life, all life, was about to end because of our stupidity. Tears welled as I waited for the blast to reach me within seconds. And I was mad. Mad at God. I shouted, "But you promised never to destroy your creation again." That is the promise of God to Noah. This episode reflected the worst of confirmation bias, the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories.

My mind went immediately to a nuclear holocaust. Instead, the flash was nothing more than a lightning strike from a rare summer thunderstorm. I was a fool to let my mind interpret a flash of lightening as a

nuclear attack. Oops, my bad. But at least I wasn't in charge our nuclear codes so my bias didn't result in a needless war.

During this pandemic, we are especially prone to confirmation bias, to interpret events in a self-confirming fashion. This is foolishness. When stressed by the natural occurrence of a pandemic, our mind wants to jump to self-confirming explanations and we conflate our circumstances with foolishness, that if reinforced, can lead to dangerous actions. When coupled with biblical overlays of God's wrath against those we somehow disregard as "the other," it is very dangerous. We see this in the crosses carried at the January 6 insurrection against the nation's Capitol, in the pernicious cancel culture endemic to social media, in our hearts when we project our fears and uncertainties onto others. Jesus fought against biblical confirmation bias, admonishing his listeners that the death of 18 people from a fallen public works project in Jeruslaem's Siloam neighborhood was an accident, not a sign of God's punishment against sinners. So, NO, arctic temperatures in Texas are not a punishment rendered against Ted Cruz as suggested by a mean spirited celebrity. No, AIDS is not a punishment for being gay. No, being born black is not a sign of inferiority to being born white. No, being born white doesn't mean that that you cannot identify with those of another skin color. Don't give in to pernicious confirmation bias.

When we are afraid (and fear is rational during a pandemic,) we are most susceptible to projecting our worst thoughts onto others.

Let's summarize. I invite you to a Holy Lent, **practice your do's and avoid the don'ts**. If we are to serve as beacons of light in our homes and communities, we must be vigilant in loving, we must be determined Victims of Hope, even in the face of death. May your lent be filled with blessing, and know that Easter will come. Amen.