

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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CONTROL

the great tension at the heart of Lent

by Drew Downs

One of the hardest things about the last few years is dealing with wildly changing expectations. Running a meeting was hard enough. Then we had to figure out how to do that on Zoom. And hybrid? And now? However we do this stuff!

The season we're in (Lent) in the age we're in (the Postmodern Era) keeps exposing how ingrained the desire and expectation for control is—especially for leaders.

In Lent, we explore a sense of self-control while exploring stories which reveal the sin of controlling others, our environment, and God! Let's face it: this isn't an easy proposition!

The invitation at the heart of Lent is to learning, exploring, examining, imagining. For Jesus, control, at its root, is *abuse*. Therefore, controlling another person's life or one's environment displays a fundamental lack of faith. In God and each other.

LENT

2024

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Discipline

I have long championed the use of words we might not fully appreciate. Words that have either lost their true meaning or those that have been narrowed by the way some would use them.

Discipline is one of those words.

It brings to mind self-control and punishment. Of working hard to get things done and also spanking a child for not listening to directions. What neither of these brings to mind is joy, connection, or deep learning.

What we know from human psychology is that punishment is an ineffective teacher—particularly if we have something we intend to teach with it. And our common uses of discipline are all fundamentally punishing. They don't evoke joy, curiosity, or compassion.

The church speaks of our actions during Lent as discipline. And what we mean are *practices*. Things we do that open ourselves up to learn, engage with our neighbors, and listen to God's voice.

When we enter into the discipline of Lent, we're not seeking control that isn't ours or to punish ourselves for who we think we're supposed to be. We are offering a more open posture, engaging more intentionally with our environment, and preparing ourselves for the joy *and intimacy* such openness brings.

With love,
Drew

LENT

2024

FOR SUNDAY

Second Sunday of Lent

February 25, 2024

Collect

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

LENT

Reflection

Last week, we read about Jesus's time in the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. Now we hear Jesus's second temptation.

It is always jarring to read this story: of Peter trying to save Jesus's life and Jesus's response: "Get behind me, Satan!" But let us not avoid the most obvious part of the story. That Jesus sees what Peter says to him *as temptation*. And that, whether he intends to be or not, Peter is doing the work of the Tempter here.

Thanks to popular culture, we think of Satan as a red guy, horned head, bearing a pitchfork. And that he tries to compel us to do grossly evil things. In our imagination, these are conspicuously bad; like drugs, murder, adultery.

What we actually get from scripture, however, is temptation to power. Power over ourselves, others, and our environment. Even power over God. It is about *control*. Controlling our circumstances and the people around us. And it can be as innocuous as wanting to ensure the best results on a test to abusing and exploiting others.

Peter tempts Jesus with control over the divine project God has put in his hands. To remove the cup from his lips and prevent his inevitable death at the hands of Empire.

What perhaps troubles us most about this story is that Peter is doing something good: saving a life. And yet, what this action exposes, is the degree to which our instincts and values, while geared toward the good, can be corrupted. Perhaps by fear of loss. But also, as in this case, a misunderstanding of the mission. That Jesus hasn't come to gain power over Rome. But to undermine all empires.

What temptations to power come to you as "doing good?" What control tempts you?

ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
215 N. 7TH ST TERRE HAUTE IN 47807
812.232.5165

STSTEPHENSTH.ORG
