

“The Fast Track”

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March 29, 2020

Scriptures: Exodus 34:27-28, Matthew 4:1-11, Acts 13:1-3

This morning is the last in our Sunday Morning/Monday Morning Sermon Series exploring how a theological concept from a sermon or Christian Education relates to a practice of Christian faith that can guide us wherever we “went” on Monday morning - school or work, meetings and activities. For most of us non-essential workers, “went” is the right verb, because we are not heading anywhere tomorrow morning. I know I am not alone in losing track of days and of time passing. I have a hard time placing when things happened, two days ago, two weeks, without the anchors of routine that have reliably guided me through each week. What does Sunday Morning/Monday morning mean now that my Monday morning is both the same as any other day of the week and also unlike any of my other Monday mornings of my life?

You may have seen the Monday morning journal entry by an 8-year-old boy about his Mom’s homeschooling after school closed, “It is not going good. My Mom’s getting stressed out. My Mom is really getting confused. We took a break so my Mom can figure this stuff out and I’m telling you, it’s not going good.” (viral video, searchable on Google.) Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and so on will be a juggle of working and kid wrangling for parents who are able to work from home, of taking risks of exposure and virus spread for those who are not, of balancing staying up to date on the news and numbers without being sucked into the vortex of the internet, of worrying if neighbors have what they need and friends and family whose situations are tough, and the energy it takes to learn a whole new pattern of life and especially virtual online communication, all with brains clouded by some degree of fog due to anxiety and grief. No wonder someone at Bible Study said she feels busier now than she did before the virus. (We also had a debate about whether our houses were cleaner because we have had more time to do so or messier because we are always in them. We were about split between those, mine is definitely the latter!)

A friend of mine says she cannot hear the word “unprecedented” one more time or she will scream. And I feel that way about the phrase “new normal.” Tomorrow is the third Monday morning after school closed, is that enough for us to feel normal? Although the concept of Monday morning has changed for many of us since we started this series, Pastors Annamarie, Scott and I have noted how well the pre-planned topics fit for this most unplanned context: Exile for the first Sunday we worshipped apart, the Holy Spirit grounding us in grace in all challenges and circumstances for the second, and now Sacrifice and fasting for the third.

We chose these topics for the season of Lent and the practices of almsgiving, fasting and prayer, which take on new meaning in a global pandemic. This week Abby Conley shared from a post that said, “I wasn’t planning on giving up quite this much for Lent.” Catholic Bishops

agree with her, as a headline from Friday's Washington Post said, "because Coronavirus has led to enough sacrifices, Catholic Bishops say it's okay to eat meat on Friday." The article listed sacrifices related to scarcity of food items, that maybe you can't even find meat on Friday, no social gatherings, televised sports, coming to church, economic struggles, all the places of loss in this "new normal." The word sacrifice is more prevalent in our media and culture. On Monday when Governor Northam closed Virginia schools the reality of great sacrifice set in, for the teachers, parents, school employees, students. We have young people in this church missing out on sports season and recruitment opportunities, musicals and proms, graduation ceremonies, band concerts and science competitions, getting to say goodbye to beloved homeroom teachers, getting to say goodbye in person to a beloved youth pastor. And all that just feels taken away. I think of the words of Psalm 51: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit."

For the Israelites, the practice of animal sacrifice was a moment of communion between the people and God and unity with each other. It was a link between God and the sacred realm and life in the flesh on earth. And practically, sacrifice involved orienting money or trade around getting an animal and prioritizing time for the ritual, which often involved travel. Sacrifices connected people to God and helped the Israelites ritualize aspects of their relationship to God: gift giving, peace, purifying and repairing. Sacrifice was still a practice in the time of Jesus – who cleansed the temple of money changers related to it, and mentioned the practice in the Sermon on the Mount.

Animal sacrifices did not continue in Christian community after the sacrificial death of Jesus and the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit. Sacrifice becomes an ethic of life of a Christian disciple of giving up and laying down even one's life. Verses about taking up the cross are now the location of sacrifice, that we lead lives radically for others and we are always in the process of transformation into the servants Jesus calls us to become as his followers. That is where a practice like fasting, designed to break patterns and ignite transformation helps us live out an ethic of sacrifice.

Fasting existed for the Israelites along with sacrifice – in the Exodus passage, Moses does not eat or drink on the mountain with the Lord. At Bible Study we noted that is a sign of divine providence, because Moses lives. Fasting remains a part of life for Jewish people in Jesus day. It is also mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus himself fasts at a critical moment in his ministry as we heard in Matthew. Right after his baptism, and before the rest of his ministry begins, Jesus spends 40 days and nights fasting, which is where we get the 40 days of Lent, which as Pastor Scott mentioned last week, is really 46 because the Sundays don't count.

Fasting becomes a part of the ethic of sacrificial Christian life in the early Christian community, as we see in Acts 13, where fasting is linked to worship, communal prayer and discernment. The Holy Spirit shows up in the midst of it and calls Barnabas and Saul for a special mission. But they don't leave until they have prepared by fasting and praying. Bible Study participants shared experience fasting from food individually, and connecting worship and

fasting in churches, like through the 30-hour famine. But Lent includes lots of fasts, things we abstain from, some have done social media or Facebook fasts, no glasses of wine. I knew a youth who once decided to fast from quickly judging people for Lent.

All of these fasts are meant to remove what distracts us from God, pulls us away from prayer and serving others, and tempts us to create idols to our successes. They also give us room for prayer, discernment of the call of Christ, and to ground ourselves more fully in God. But it is in choosing these practices that we find their meaning. And there is often a finite amount of time – Lent only lasts 46 days, after all. So where do we find the encouragement from these scriptures and practices of faith in a season of so much imposed sacrifice with no certain end?

In the rest of Lent and however long we are responding to the Coronavirus, we identify places of joy in choosing the fast, the cross to pick up and carry, and then to lament what we cannot. We can choose to keep others safe by staying home, and we use our Holy Spirit inspired imagination to picture how this matters in saving lives. We lament what our and all the kids will miss from their school year.

I can choose to organize my time at home find more joy than I thought in connecting by Zoom: pastoral check-ins by Zoom, and bible studies by Zoom, and staff and Deacon meetings by Zoom. I use that same imagination again to hold you all close and hold you to God. I lament that I can't be in the same room with you, and how hard it will be if a day comes when I will really want to visit you, in sadness or in joy, and won't be able to.

Given my place of privilege in a shaky economy, my husband and I have work we can do from home, I can choose to support others, safely. Gift cards and support for local businesses, donations to the Fairfax County meals program for all those kids who rely on schools, same to SHARE. Many of you have sent ideas for how we can support our neighbors, and they are on the website. Yet I lament so much job loss, and small business struggle, and parents who have to work and leave kids at home because they need money and there is no at-home choice.

I and we can simply choose to pray more. And then to lament all that comes up in those prayers, especially thanksgiving and deep worry for medical personnel whose sacrifices are a risk of their own health and even life.

And I can choose to carry some of the lessons of this season forward to be transformed by the gratitude and blessings I find in this fast. What timing that Andrew and I are teaching a class on Christian Simplicity, focusing on practices of earth care regarding consumption, water, food, energy, at a time when our lives just got much, much simpler in many ways. I have learned some important things about what I can do without that can help me love God's creation better. That is a specific place of learning for me, and I imagine we will all have some places of blessing in this season of self-sacrifice and fasting, giving and praying. Which has always been what Lent has been about. If you were to make a list like mine, what would be on it for the things you can choose? And what would be your places of Lament?

In Christian practice the cross becomes the location of sacrifice that leads to an ethic of radically giving for others, as Jesus calls us to pick up our crosses to follow him. A professor of mine (Gilbert Bond, YDS in '02) said that telling someone that something is his or her cross to bear is the worst kind of theology, and usually used to keep vulnerable people from seeking justice. So I won't, in regards to all the hardship we face, go around placing crosses on anyone's shoulders. I will only invite us to look down and see the crosses at our feet, and to pick up the ones that we can, that we have the strength and resources to carry, knowing that we do it together, and always with God's help. In these days and weeks of the Coronavirus as we always have in Lent, we practice what we can give up, and what we can carry. For Jesus, who gave up everything for us, and who carries everything with us, even still.