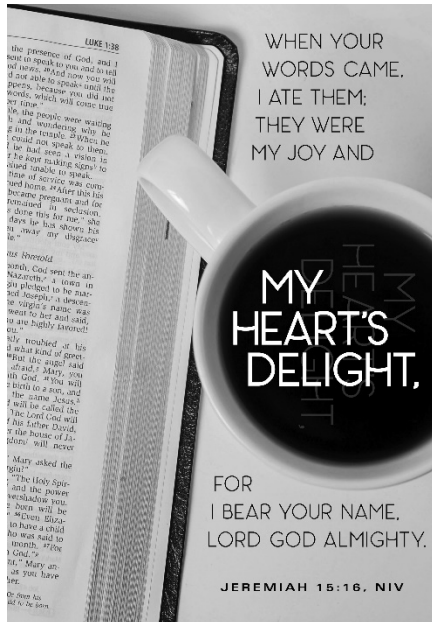


WHAT WILL YOU ADD FOR LENT?



Did you anguish this past week over what you might give up for Lent this year? Almost 20% of Christians do. And they do it for good reason. Lent is a season of penance, fasting, solemnity and abstinence to better focus one's self on the blessings which flow from the Cross of Christ. The list of possibilities that one could "give up" is endless: You could sacrifice one of your favorites like chocolate, coffee, soda pop, meat or bread of all kinds (yes, even donuts or girl scout cookies if you're truly serious). You may decide to give up a vice like smoking, excessive drinking, gossip, cursing and swearing or some other bad habit. You might even consider giving up something more drastic because of how critical it has become in your life like your screen time, social media, or Hallmark movies? [I gave those up for more than 40 days!!] It has been said that it takes around 66 days for a practice to

become a habit. So the 40 days of Lent (46 counting Sundays) puts you well on your way to a life-altering change for the better.

But these "sacrifices" often end up like New Year's resolutions. Your heart and mind are willing but your flesh is weak. Or you may end up regretting what you have given up and thus regretting the season of Lent altogether. Or your sinful flesh may "puff up" with frequent boasting about what you have done – when the focus is to be on Christ alone and what only He did for you. These sacrifices may result in a beneficial new practice for life without those "things" that are not beneficial for your walk in relationship with Christ. Praise God!

But I have discovered it far more beneficial to challenge God's people to add something that will also be life-altering for the better in your life. Once again this Lent, we are embarking on our own 40-day wilderness journey. Lent is a season where we focus on what God gives to us these 40 days - **blessing upon blessing** - when we are filled to the full with the Word of God. These 40 days will remind us continually of the One who went into the wilderness, fasted from food for 40 days, yet feasted on the Word of God and used the nutrients of that very Word to defeat the devil.

Can I be so bold as to suggest some things you can ADD to your life this Lent – in hopes that it will become a life-altering change going forward? Consider adding 15 minutes of intentional time with your spouse in prayer. Or 60 minutes of dedicated time with your children with a focus on mentoring them as growing children of God? Or spending 15 minutes each day calling, texting or visiting with someone in need – your elderly parents, a co-worker or neighbor, someone from your prayer list at church? Once again, the list is endless.

Rev. Craig Gates of Jackson, Mississippi has a great list of suggestions. He says we should: **GIVE UP** grumbling! Instead, **ADD** and replace this grumbling with "In everything **give** thanks." **GIVE UP** 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, **ADD** those 15 minutes for prayer, Bible study and personal devotion. **GIVE UP** looking at other people's worst attributes. Instead **ADD** the intentional focus on their best points. **GIVE UP** speaking unkindly. Instead, **ADD** or season your speech with generosity and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting or to offer a smile. **GIVE UP** your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, **ADD** the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins." **GIVE UP** your worries and anxieties! They're too heavy for you to carry anyway. Instead, **ADD** complete trust in God and give them all to Him. Live today and let God's grace be sufficient. **GIVE UP** TV or social media one evening a week! Instead, **ADD** a visit to someone who is lonely or sick.

I'm going to be even bolder in challenging you to ask the Holy Spirit to create within you a new or renewed hunger for God's Word. I recently came across a statistic from the American Bible Society that revealed only 9% of Americans read their Bible every day. But on the flip side, almost 70% of Americans are considered "**Bible curious**" which means they are **hungry** to learn more about Scripture. **Where are you on that continuum?**

Fully satisfied in the Word.....Hungry for the Word.

Could it be that 91% of Americans are starving without the daily bread of God's Word? Seventy percent are hungry and looking for food that satisfies but don't know where to look? Jesus said, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4). The last statistic I heard is that 83 people die every minute not believing in Jesus Christ for their salvation. If 91% of the world around you were starving, you would gladly share a meal, right?!! How much more would we share the Word of God with someone who is perishing without Christ. But here's the kicker: **we can't share what we don't have!** Every one of us needs to **ADD** more of the Word of God so that our quiver is filled with the Good News.

Consider this true story: Suitcases were lined up on the floor of a secret room in China. When they were opened, the contents that stuffed the luggage brought laughter, tears of joy and shouts of praise. The people in the room practically dove into the suitcases to get hold of what would now be their most valuable possession. Someone had risked arrest or even death to smuggle into China these precious gifts that you and I often leave on our shelves or coffee tables collecting dust. **The suitcases were filled with Bibles.** When the people in that room got them into their grateful hands, they hugged them; they kissed them; they even smelled the scent of this newfound treasure. They soon began to page through the contents and

voraciously read whatever they could. A woman stood in the middle of the room and said: ***“This is what we have needed the most.”***

In a Lenten sermon in 1534 Martin Luther said: **“Before I starve for want of the Word of God, I would rather do without bread and die of hunger.”** Luther recognized what the people in the secret room in China also knew: the Word of God for our souls is even more important than food for our bodies. This present body is temporary. The soul that God feeds with His Word is given food for eternal life. And that truth is true for the world around us. The treasure of the Word isn't just for us as Christians – it's what the world around us needs the most. **When is the last time you hugged your Bible or better yet, wore it out from frequent use?**

We know that the devil didn't leave Jesus after the temptation in the wilderness. He pursued our Savior all the way to the Cross. And, if you'll pardon the expression, it was there that He ate the devil for lunch. As Jesus hung dead at Calvary, He defeated the devil and all the forces of evil for us, for the world. He won for us, the world, the forgiveness of sin for salvation in Him alone. In like manner, we are daily fighting the battle against Satan with the Word. We are preparing for the feast that is to come at the eternal banqueting table. When we receive our Savior in His Word, we taste and see that He is good.

Please consider **ADDING** to your daily regime time spent in the Word. Ask the Holy Spirit to teach, equip, empower and embolden you in the Word. We have the promise from God that this Word will never return to Him empty (Isaiah 55:10-11). Rejoice in the words of the Psalmist, *“How sweet are Your Words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth”* (Psalm 119:103) or the Prophet Jeremiah, *“Your Words were found, and I ate them, and your Words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by Your name, O LORD, God of hosts”* (Jeremiah 15:16).

The season of Lent is a sacred season filled with extra worship services, additional devotions and various other blessings. Yes, you could choose to give them up for Lent as well. But that will just leave you **HANGRY**. When was the last time you were “hangry”? You know how it is. You skipped breakfast. The day got so busy that you missed lunch too. Pretty soon it was three o'clock in the afternoon and the growls of your stomach turned into growls that came out of your mouth and attacked the first innocent person to walk into the room. Your hunger made you angry. You were “hangry.”

When we starve ourselves of the Word of God, sometimes we don't even realize the impact that it has on our body, soul and spirit. This is the first time in 28 years that I have not preached the Ash Wednesday message (because of my disability): **We are reminded that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But in God's hands, and only in His hands, dust**

lives. Life in this world is short. So we put our trust in our Savior, the Bread of Life, to feed our faith so that we live with confidence as a people who have an undying hope. We do what St. Paul called the Colossians to do: Let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly while we sing hymns, songs and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts.

Will you consider the challenge to **ADD** the Word of God to your daily regime? If you already spend 15 minutes, add 5 more. Consider starting a daily program to read through the entire Bible. Have you read the Lutheran Witness (which just happens to have the Word of God as its focus this month)? Are you using Portals of Prayer, Our Daily Bread, a Lenten devotion from Lutheran Hour Ministry, Concordia Publishing House or others? Not only will you be blessed in the Word – but having this Word in your quiver, you are equipped and prepared to be a witness.

The purpose of the Church, that's each one of us as believers in Jesus Christ, is to sow the seed of God's Word as faithfully and fearlessly as possible. Charles Spurgeon was once asked how he would defend the Bible. "Defend it?" he asked. "Would you defend a lion? The Scripture does not need to be defended. Just set it free. It will defend itself." It is not the job of the Church to attempt to change society by politicking for certain laws, seeking justice, enforcing moral codes, or advocating good causes. It is enough to declare the Word, and God through the Word will change the world.

May the power of God's Word lead you to respond to this Lenten challenge (and beyond) – by **ADDING** time spent in the Word, being intentional in speaking the Word of God to a world that is hungry for it and needful of its power to change them. May the power of God's Word inspire you to respond in whatever way the Spirit leads you to help reach people with the saving Word of God. We will increasingly hunger for the blessings that He delivers in His Word so that we clamor for it like our Chinese sisters and brothers.

My prayer is this: At the end of these 40 days, the Spirit may resurrect a new person in you as we declare with our every breath and with our very lives: *"This [Word] is what we have needed the most."*