Columns
Spirituality



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There is a wisdom in the liturgical cycle. The yearly remembering of the life of Jesus of Nazareth accompanies our own evolving self. It invites us to engage the scriptural story anew with the insights, concerns and deepening awareness of who we are and who we are becoming. It assures us that life-death-new life continues throughout our life and our time.

When I was growing up, Lent was a special time to stop and spend more time with God. It was 40 days bracketed in the middle of the 365 days of our regular life. Many of us might only remember Lent as the time when you "gave up" things — candy, favorite TV shows, movies. You couldn't wait for Sunday. For some reason, Sunday freed you of these sacrifices and you could indulge yourself eating candy all day if you wanted (at least that was my Chicago Catholic memory).

As I think about this year, "giving up" is certainly not needed. We have experienced the loss of so much throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Most things we have not chosen to give up: Rather, they were taken from us. Seeing parents, family, friends, the birth of new grandchildren; special celebrations for birthdays, graduations, anniversaries canceled; high school and college sports truncated; and classroom education replaced by online teaching. Jobs lost; housing evictions; reduced income; getting sick with COVID-19 and dying of COVID-19. And the list can go on.

We have changed. This year has both taken a toll on us and — hopefully — given us new insights into what is important, what can be let go and what is essential. However, as we face more months of potential mask wearing and physical distancing, emotions still seethe in us, as do questions and wonderings about the future.

Instead of *giving up* anything else, perhaps what is needed is *taking* more time to spend with God this Lent. There are many ways to do this, but one that might be illuminating is to engage with the story of Jesus' life as expressed in one of the Gospels.

It is not simply to read the daily readings, but rather to choose one Gospel and enter into a dialogue with it, after having experienced a full year of the effects of the pandemic.

The story line is similar to ours. Jesus lived in a tumultuous time. There were divisions within the political and religious groups. People were sick and in need of healing. Certain types of people were considered outcasts. There were entitled groups who flaunted privileges that oppressed others.

Jesus entered his public time in ministry by being tempted. Power, wealth and self-sufficiency were offered to him and he struggled to respond. He experienced rejection and ridicule. He was a frontline worker who tirelessly healed the suffering of those he encountered. He was tortured, accused of a crime he did not commit and he suffered the death penalty of the time — crucifixion. He even cried out in desperation, seeking the God who he felt abandoned him.

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At the end of his life, Jesus had nothing to show for it. Most of his followers abandoned or denied him, or hid lest they be seen as associates of his. Only the women stayed and were among the first to encounter the mystery of resurrected life.

Living through this year of the pandemic there are many emotions within us, many questions, many worries, many expectations. Dialoguing with one of the Gospels allows us to express every emotion in ways that can heal, awaken and transform.

Suggested process:

Find a New Testament translation that you like and can write in.

When you enter the dialogue, it is easier if you can write your responses close to the text that evoked them. If it is a family Bible or a book that you don't want to write in, you can also find the Gospel you choose online where you can write your responses or print the copy and use that for the process.

Choose one of the four Gospels.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the names given to the anonymous authors of the Gospels that were selected to be part of the official canon. Most likely, none of them were written by an eyewitness, as they were compiled from a long oral and written transmission years after Jesus' death. They each tell the story of Jesus' life with a different emphasis and — as many scholars believe — with a focus for a different group of potential believers of the time. Any one of them can make a good dialogue partner.

Determine how much time you can give and when in the day or week you might engage in the dialogue.

Everyone's circumstances are unique but it is wise to know approximately the length of time you want to commit to and a basic time of day when you might be able to do it.

Find a space where you can feel free to engage in this process.

You might find yourself talking out loud, expressing emotion, being argumentative or conveying a loving response. You don't want to feel that you have to censor your responses.

Begin.

Prepare as you would for a contemplative sitting, and start by setting the intention to be open to the workings of Divine Mystery within you. You may want to simply sit for a couple of minutes. Then open the Gospel you have chosen and begin to converse with the text.

Remember you are bringing who you are and all that is stirring within you to this encounter. Listen to the words and listen to what is happening within. Then there is the space between the written text and your reaction. Listen to that as well.

As you are moved, write down your part of the dialogue. For example, as you read one of the healing miracles, you might feel such grief — because no one healed your loved one — that tears well up and you cry out, *How could you? ... Why didn't you heal my wife? ... Why is this happening?* Write that down and then simply listen to the space between. When appropriate, continue the dialogue.

End.

When the time has ended, sit quietly for a few minutes. See what is staying with you. If you want to, write that down as well. It might serve as the beginning of the next conversation.

Throughout such a process, you are trusting the Spirit within you. We are all quite raw after these months and hope to move forward but are not quite sure how. The poet Rumi writes, "What you seek is seeking you." And in the Gospel of Matthew, it is written, "Knock and the door will be opened for you."

May this Lent be an opportunity not to "give up" but rather "to take" — take the time to be with God, knocking on the door and seeking a way forward, trusting that the door will be open and that what you seek is seeking you as well.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.