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On the eve of Ash Wednesday, a comic strip appeared in my inbox under the subject line "The Lent-iest Lent Ever." In it, a man and woman stand side by side as the woman looks at a long list in her hands. The man, coffee cup in hand, casually asks her, "Did you decide what you're giving up for Lent?"

With a look of mild uncertainty on her face and eyes fixed on the list unfurled before her, the woman remarks, "First I need to check the list of things I gave up for the pandemic."

The person who sent me the comic jotted one simple line below the comic: "With a year like this, what's forty more days?"

Dripping with sarcasm, that wisecrack made me smile in the face of the larger point the comic was hammering home. After the year we've had, what more could we give up?

Last year, after all, was supposed to have been the "lent-iest" Lent ever. From the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization in March, only a few weeks into the Lenten season, a new reality and understanding of the fragility of life, the loneliness of loss and isolation, the need for attentive engagement, and the call to prayer in the face of uncertainty took hold. The prayer, fasting and almsgiving of that Lenten season overflowed into the year that has been, creating a sense that Lent never fully came to a close.

And so, as I returned my focus to the comic my friend sent, I wondered, "what's the point?"

After a year of grief and loss, isolation and distance, masks and protocols, what more could these 40 days offer? What could I possibly give up or take on this Lent? If that list of sacrifices keeps getting longer, why not just give in and give up?

The temptation to give up is real.

Last Lent, as the pandemic and its accompanying realities began to gain momentum, the season of Lent took on a surreal air. The Lenten promises I had made paled in comparison to the ever-evolving reality of life in a time of pandemic. As a result, I chose to put my Lenten practice aside. At the time, I felt that by not following through for the full 40 days, I had come up short in my Lenten

commitment.

Looking back on that choice now, though, I know it was the right choice for me. The consciousness of God's presence that I longed to deepen by giving something up for Lent was heightened by the discernment to once again embrace the comfort of what I was going without. My attention was needed elsewhere and my ability to be fully present to the situations at hand was enhanced by my choice to give up on what I'd given up.

That, of course, leads me to this Lent.

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By the time that comic came to my inbox, I still hadn't decided the details of my Lenten practice. There were groups I could take part in, books I could read, prayers I could commit to, and small actions I could take on. All of these practices would be good options, yet with a spirit bleary-eyed from Zoom calls, world news, and other demands, I felt less zealous about making a commitment and more resigned to endure the season as best I could.

Looking at the woman in the comic, I wondered: What do you give up when the thought of doing one more thing is burdensome or the prospect of adding to the growing list of daily sacrifices is daunting? What do you give up when you feel like giving up?

The answers to those questions, surprisingly, emerged rather quickly.

When we feel like giving up, perhaps one of the best things we can give up is the need to control every facet of our lives. The pandemic has made strikingly clear that some things are simply out of our control. We cannot will the world to get back to normal. Uncertainty is more commonplace these days than we might be comfortable with, but what if we companion that uncertainty, rather than trying to correct it by controlling ourselves and others? Relinquishing the need to achieve or to obsess over having everything in order may in fact be the best thing we can give up. In so doing, we give God the space to be in control and free ourselves from the illusion that we are God, remembering instead that God has made us to be human.

If giving up the drive to control is the first step in a liberating Lent, giving up our penchant to negatively judge is a closely linked second. Judgment, of course, is not necessarily a bad thing; it helps us to gain perspective and assess situations. However, when we recognize that our judgments are unkind and uncharitable, undergirded by a need to control or lessen the "other," it's time to give them up. Just as with control, this "giving up" of judgments is easier said than done. Being able to relinquish our negative feelings and lay our judgments aside for the benefit of others and ourselves is a process of self-actualization, which takes both honesty and humility as we grow in self-awareness and face our imperfections. If we can give up the need to pass judgment, we can grow closer to the union to which God calls us and gain new perspective on the loving way God sees all of us, even those we can't stand.

By letting go of the temptation to control and judge in our daily lives, we will hopefully find ourselves freer to face the attachments of our egos and the drive to hold tightly to the power, glory and entitlement the world promises. Indeed, these promises are the falsehoods we confront when we embrace prayer, fasting and almsgiving in the season of Lent. In and through these practices we recognize our reliance on God, raising our consciousness and giving up what stands in the way of a deeper relationship with God.

Deepening our relationship with God, after all, is the aim of whatever we give up or choose to do this Lent. For that reason, perhaps the greatest thing we could give up this Lent is the nagging feeling that we should give up. In this year full of sacrifices, giving up would be a choice to relinquish hope and to dishonor all that we have been through. To give up on this season would be to give in to despair and, in the process, to lose sight of where this Lenten journey ultimately points us — to the hope-filled morning of Easter.

We carry a lot and, during this Lent especially, we need to be attentive to what might lighten our load. Maybe we are being called to let go of anger or hurt, judgement or control, sadness or selfishness, worry or regret, offering in their place love and compassion both for our neighbors and for ourselves.

As we press on like the Israelites wandering in the desert, we cannot lose sight of hope and of the One who walks hopefully with us through this season, and every season, of our lives. With God as our companion, we may have to give up lots of things. Some of those sacrifices will be voluntary, while others will not. Still, we journey forward together, giving all we are and all we hope to be to God and finding

that no matter the season, God will never give up on us.

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