



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The Discipline of Lent”

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### Centering Thoughts

*Then Jesus said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Luke 9:23*

*Lent is a time to renew, wherever we are in that process I call the divine therapy.* Thomas Keating

*Lent is a retreat...to refocus on what should be first in our lives. Lent is not first a time of giving up but a time to re-choose...It is a time to live the Beatitudes.* Fr. Dominique Philippe, OSJ

### Sermon

“Nothing but blue skies, from now on.”

Yes, the sky is blue, the sun is shining, and I am smiling. I know spring’s arrival is assured, but blue skies and bright sunshine prove our hopes well-placed.

How about you? Are you smiling and feeling good today?

Are you celebrating Mardi Gras with trumpets and parades as they’ve been doing in New Orleans? They party hearty in New Orleans for many weeks prior to actual Mardi Gras, or in English, Fat Tuesday. New Orleans uses the French term because it reflects the influence of French-speaking Roman Catholics settlers in Louisiana. In Italian and Spanish speaking regions the festivities are called Carnivale, a derivative of the Latin *carne* for flesh or meat and *vale* for farewell. Many English and Germanic speakers call it Shrove Tuesday.

By whatever name you call it, for those who strictly observe Lent, Tuesday is the last day of living life to its fullest, such as consuming rich, fatty foods and drink. Tradition dictates on Ash Wednesday that you deny yourself these sensory pleasures because Ash Wednesday begins a 40-day period of preparation for Easter. Many Christians fast during this time to remove what isn’t essential in their lives in order to focus on what is.

When I was growing up in New Jersey, my Roman Catholic school friends often told me they were giving up soda or candy for Lent. Sometimes they asked me what I was giving up. Not

being Catholic I didn't fully understand Lent, but I did know it wasn't my religious practice. They seemed jealous when I told them Unitarianism didn't require Lenten sacrifices.

Now I'm the one who is a little jealous of the discipline of Lent. I'm not envious of self-sacrifice simply for the sake of making a sacrifice. The practice of Lent is shallow if that's all it is. But a deeper understanding of Lent means more than just giving something up. Lent can be a meaningful spiritual discipline offering intentional time for you and I to reflect on our lives and recommit to living more fully in accord with our God, or however we name that which we hold to be of highest worth, such as love or the common good.

Lent is said to last for 40 days. But if you do the math you'll realize there are more than 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, the days that mark the beginning and end of Lent. If you subtract Sundays, you get the common Biblical time frame for significant events. In the Hebrew Bible, Noah endured 40 days and nights of the flood. Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for 40 days and the ancient Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. In the Christian Bible, after Jesus was baptized, he went into the wilderness for 40 days. Lent simulates this time. While in the wilderness Jesus ate nothing, one reason for fasting during Lent. Also during that time, Satan tried to tempt Jesus to turn his back on God and succumb to promises of earthly success, fame, and power. But Jesus refused, keeping his focus on serving God—something larger and more meaningful than what Satan offered.

Jesus' going into the wilderness and his denial of food is symbolic of a deeper denial. By leaving behind the hustle and bustle and myriad demands made upon him, he 'fasted.' He eliminated distractions which allowed him to better focus on his mission and ministry. Jesus retreated from the world in order to engage in intentional, mindful meditation. He needed separation and quiet to allow him to better reflect on what he needed to do with his life.

This is one way that Lent can be meaningful for you and me. The spiritual practice of Lent presents us with a chance to bring awareness and meaning to our own lives. By ridding ourselves of the distractions of daily living, we can become awake to that which is most important to us. Like Jesus, we can take stock of who we are, what we've done, and what we might start doing to live more fully in accord with whatever we hold to be of ultimate worth, be that God's will, the common good, love, or any other value. By taking time out in this manner we create an opportunity to re-set our spiritual compass. To find a new heading for our lives or perhaps confirm we're on the right course.

Every religious tradition offers a time of fasting, a time of taking stock, and a time to reset lives. This is no accident. We need rituals, anniversaries, and other reminders that time is passing. Ash Wednesday reminds us of our death, that we are dust and to dust we will return. Hopefully, for us that day is distant. Now is the time to reflect on who we are and who we are becoming. Otherwise, at the end of our days, we may not be happy with who we are or how we lived.

Lent is an annual invitation to get closer to our God, our highest ideal, whatever we hold to be of ultimate worth. For me, acting for the common good and making the world a better place for

all to live is what I hold as my mission, my God. Our Seventh Principle reminds me that what I do affects me and everyone else, so what I do matters.

When I am tempted away from serving others or ignore my impact on the world and environment, for example, I use the principles to help return me to what really matters. But if I never stop to examine my thoughts and actions, I'll never know when I stray from my values. We need Lenten times.

And when you and I discover why our lives are not lived more closely to our values, we don't need to feel guilty. Instead, we can simply and gently work to remove the obstacles as best we can. Lent can be a time to become more awake in the sense of mindfulness or awareness. We can become more awake to God's wishes for us, or for our wishes for ourselves and our world, whichever holds deeper meaning for you.

I'm sure the idea of going off somewhere to reflect isn't new. Like Jesus, I imagine many of you have gone to a wilderness or natural setting, or at least some place devoid of distractions, so that you could be attentive to something in your life. And, I imagine you have gone off by yourself simply to recharge your emotional batteries after a time of stress or in preparation for something important. Perhaps you have used that time to take stock of your life or rid yourself of temptations that keep you from realizing a particular goal. I certainly do.

Every week I spend time in reflection to prepare for a worship service and write a sermon. I can't do that when the 'noise' of daily congregational life such as meetings, phone calls, visits, and other activities distracts me. I can't do that if I let the 'noise' of my home tempt me away, either.

When I feel my emotional and professional energies waning, I go to the ocean or forest to recharge. The beauty of the natural world soothes me and restores me, as if I've plugged my body into nature's power outlet like I plug in my phone to be powered up. Just one week restores me pretty well, but 40 days and nights sounds heavenly! No wonder scripture says Jesus was hungry when that time was over. His hunger was symbolic of his readiness to return to his ministry restored, refocused, and hungry for action. Our Music Director, Amber Fetner, is on an extended sabbatical right now and I expect she'll be hungry and ready to go when she returns.

You and I may not be able to absent ourselves for a week or 40 days anytime soon, but I believe we can participate in our own Lenten discipline anyway. I invite you to join me in following a Lenten discipline of self-reflection.

Between now and Easter, along the lines of a nightly prayer, take a few minutes before bedtime to reflect on your day. Ask yourself these three questions. Just listen for now; I have a handout you can have when you leave.

- "Where did I see the face of love, compassion, or human goodness today?" This same question can be asked from a different theological stance, "Where did I see the face of God, the Spirit of Love, or holiness today?" Then give thanks for that gift or blessing to the world.

- “How did I contribute to greater love, compassion or goodness today?” Give yourself thanks for that gift.
- “What one thing might I have done differently, one thing I might do better at tomorrow?”

If you take time to ask and answer these questions each night, I believe you will increase your awareness of how you live and respond to life.

You might feel like you don’t have time to stop and reflect on these questions. If you must, do this while you brush your teeth at night. If nothing else, you’ll get your teeth well-brushed during Lent. Alternatively, when you reach up to turn off the light or settle under your bedcovers, pause to reflect on these questions.

I make a public promise to you that I will follow this discipline. I don’t expect it to be easy. Every year when I self-evaluate myself for the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA, I admit to not attending to my own spiritual needs and practices as much as I should. To help me do this spiritual practice for Lent, I’m going to keep my Mardi Gras beads by my bedside table. They will be my rosary and my reminder to keep my promise. And since I make this public promise, and my husband will hold me accountable. I’ll let you know how it’s going for me, and I hope you’ll tell me how it is going for you. At the end of Lent, I hope you’ll share with me whether this discipline helped you, and if so, how.

May you and I observe our own season of Lent, and come Easter may we rejoice in our renewal and recommitment to what we most value. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Has there been a time when self-reflection led you to change in some way? Please share.
2. What helps in (or keeps you from) creating time to reflect on who you are or are becoming?
3. How closely do you live in accord with your highest value or your God? What most tempts you away from living in alignment with what you hold to be of highest worth or your God?