

GIVING UP

Lent started early this year. With the east coast up to its eyebrows in snow, the Lenten season is underway. I only learned recently that every year Fat Tuesday comes to an abrupt end at midnight. New Orleans police shut down the Mardi Gras festivities promptly at 12 A.M. in reverence of Ash Wednesday. The stroke of midnight is the moment Bourbon Street revelers must give it up.

We think of giving up something for Lent. Some people give up meat. Others give up sweets, or alcohol, or television. If you want to face a real Lenten challenge try giving up your cell phone for forty days! I personally fast from sun up to sun down Monday thru Friday. But even that might not be enough to get you in a true Lenten mood.

Preacher Kimberly Long tells this story. Entering church on Ash Wednesday, Rev. Long encounters a friend who, when asked what she is giving up for Lent, quips: Anne's giving up drinking, Terri's giving up chocolate, and I'm just giving up. Ever feel like that? Just giving up?

Just give up was the Pharisee's advice to Jesus in today's gospel text. Herod is after you. He has you marked for death. Get out of town quick. Give up your mission here. When Jesus hears this warning, he surprises those Pharisees by both disregarding and embracing their message. Jesus dismisses the threat of Herod with a flip and a quip. Herod is nothing but a sly fox, Jesus quips, forever plotting but powerless against God's mission in the world. Jesus has his own schedule, his own agenda, his own mission to fulfill, and the time frame has already been divinely determined.

But Jesus also asserts he WILL give up. He will give HIMSELF up. He will travel to Jerusalem and meet head on the traumatic tradition of that city encapsulated in verse 34, "Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." Jesus will give up everything, his very life, in order to fulfill his eternal mission of salvation. Let me put it as clearly as I can: Jesus will give it up in order that we might get it all.

Have you ever wondered where the phrase "My hat's in the ring" comes from? Early in the nineteenth century there were rules for fighting. Pugilism, or what we call boxing, adhered to certain standards governing the beginnings and endings of matches. Even though it was a dangerous, bloody sport, there were protocols to follow. Long before boxing matches took place under the bright lights of a Las Vegas auditorium, it was a street event. Crowds cheered on their champion, booed the bad guy, squabbled, screeched, caused a ruckus and made a racket. When one fight ended, the only way

for the next potential fighter to get the attention of the winner was not verbal, but visual. Drowned out by the crowd the next contender declared his intention to fight by tossing his hat into the ring.

Along with this symbol for fighting, boxing also had a symbol for disengagement, for quitting. A match that started with a hat thrown into the ring might end with someone throwing in the towel. When a fighter had been pummeled, beaten to a pulp, but still wasn't going down for the count, the fighter's coach or manager could literally throw in the towel, heave a rolled up towel into the ring as a sign of giving up. Like a white flag on a battle field, the white towel thrown onto the canvas signaled the fight was over. There was a winner and there was a loser. Giving up is a dirty word in American culture. The only time giving up is embraced is during the forty days of Lent. And even then, we carefully choose what exactly it is we will give up.

We can give up chocolate or movies or parties. But do we ever really give up control over our own lives? Do we ever give up the conviction that we should chart our own destinies? Do we ever give up the illusion that if we just work hard enough, act fast enough, believe fervently enough, we will never have to give up anything, that we can achieve anything?

How many of us have watched a contestant on "American Idol" while cringing, or grimacing or covering our ears? I confess: sometimes I can't stare at the screen out of sheer embarrassment for the performer. Some contestants are hopelessly off-key. They are without rhythm, awkward, and just plain awful. Yet after being jilted by the judges, booed and booted out of the audition room, how many of those wannabe Idols look into the camera and declare; I'm not going to stop trying. This is just going to make me work harder. I will never give up! No one's going to dampen my dreams. I refuse to let Simon Cowell rain on my parade. These people don't need to give up on life. But they DO need to give up on a singing career. Sometimes we all need to give up, we need to learn how to throw in the towel and move on.

There are no limits, but there are limitations. And part of growing up is learning those limitations so that you give up on pipe dreams and bore down on God's dreams for you and your life. Some things do need to die in our lives. Sometimes we do need to give up. Give up on a career that is sucking out your soul. Give up on a relationship that is debilitating or deforming or demented. Give up on a grudge that is gouging out a cavity in your heart. Give up on an addictive escape, be it drugs, alcohol, power, speed, beauty and find renewed meaning and purpose in reality.

Jesus didn't give up to Herod's threats or the Pharisee's warnings. But Jesus did give up to God's divine plan for salvation. Jesus did not give up to his own safety, security, and self-preservation. But

Jesus did give up to the place and purpose God had designed especially for him, that only he could fulfill.

So I end this morning with the question with which we began. What will you give up this Lent? Will you throw in the towel? Will you give up the sacred sense of control you imagine you have over your life? And once you give up and throw in the towel, will you find the strength to throw your hat into the ring and give it up to a new challenge, a new mission, a God-charted direction and design for your life?

What would happen this Lenten season if instead of giving up red meat you gave up the command and control of your life and trusted the old rugged cross of atonement? What would happen if this Lent you gave up thinking that the life you are living right now is the only life you will ever know? What would happen if this Lent you, after throwing in the towel of your own control over your life, you threw your hat into the ring of God's uncharted territory and divine possibilities? It's never too late to throw in your towel. It's never too late to throw your hat into the wonderful place that is God's territory.