



DAILY

PRACTICE

REV. BETH DANA

MAR
09
2025

The times when we say yes to life, to truth, to love are often made possible by a thoughtful and courageous no. No. In order to say yes to something new or to carry something forward, we have to make space or let go of something else. This is what we practice here every January at church with the Burning Service or the Service of Renewal. This year in the ritual act of letting go and saying, no, I wrote the words unfulfilling consumption on my little slip of paper, and I let the flame envelop it and turn it into ashes. Those ashes mingled with the ashes of this entire community's ritual letting go were smudged on the foreheads and hands of those who attended this week's Ash Wednesday service marking the beginning of the season of Lent. The words that you write on those slips of paper are not like the wishes that you make on birthday candles.

You can share them without risking their failure. In fact, sharing them helps hold us accountable for the promises we have made to ourselves. This year for Lent with the ashes as a reminder of my imperfect and finite humanity and the preciousness of this life, I am recommitting to the promise I made in January to let go of unfulfilling consumption and to be more discerning about what I fill and what my body, my mind, and my life with during these 40 days leading up to Easter. And as a congregation, we will spend the five Sundays of Lent exploring spiritual practices to light the way, a framework to deepen our spiritual lives so that we can have a positive and meaningful impact on the world around us. Now, those of you who have taken the Faith Forward spiritual practice class or who might be in that right now are familiar with this framework, which includes daily practice, weekly worship with the faith community, a monthly opportunity for service, a yearly retreat, and then a pilgrimage at some point in your life.

Our focus today is on daily practice. What are the everyday practices that can help us to connect with what matters most and light the way forward? Because Lord knows the path forward is pretty murky right now. I hear this from you in a myriad of ways, and I feel the anxiety of uncertainty saturating lives and impacting how we relate to one another. We are living in wilderness times. Throughout the Bible, the metaphor of wilderness and the number 40, 40 days, 40 nights, 40 years, are used to describe uncertain and unpredictable seasons of life where we realize there are forces we can't control. Most days I don't know about you, but I think we wake up keenly aware that we are living in a wilderness reality. We only have to turn on the news or look at social media or see slogans broadcast on bumper stickers and yard signs and billboards and T-shirts and hats to know things are not as they should be.

But the way out of this, the way forward is not yet clear. We are wandering in the wilderness. Now, people will suggest various ways out of the wilderness, but as your minister, my role is to suggest ways that your faith and your spiritual practices might help to guide you on this path. What I know is that when we are living in wilderness times, we need to be in touch with what makes sense, with what grounds and sustains us and gives us faith in an underlying goodness in the universe, even when that goodness is hard to find amidst all the cruelty and gas lighting. We need to see with clarity both our inner lives and the world around us and to remain connected to the loving spark of the divine that dwells within and among us all.

For the fire to burn and light our way we can't crowd the logs, nor can we crowd our lives. We need to leave spaces between for the spirit to move. This is why it is a common Lenten practice to give something up. The other day, I was in the waiting area at my daughter's speech therapy office and overheard a boy and his grandfather talking about Lent. The boy asked his grandfather, "What are you sacrificing for Lent?" The exchange that followed between the boy and the grandfather revealed a very strange sense of humor on the part of the grandfather. "Oh, did you give up good haircuts for Lent?" He asked the boy jokingly, but the boy responded very earnestly, "I'm sacrificing candy and junk food and screen time." Now, some people take this practice more seriously than others, and that's okay, but it's common to give up sweets or caffeine, or alcohol. Others give up habits that are not serving them.

Others try to resist tendencies and temptations that are very human but not aligned with their values. Things like judging others or unkind speech. When we do spring cleaning, we declutter our homes, reclaiming room to live, and this is a season of spring spiritual cleaning, decluttering our interior lives to make room for God, for the spirit, for what really matters, but how do we know what to keep and what to get rid of? I once read a story by Kay Northcutt, a theologian and seminary professor in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that posed this same question, how do we know what to keep and what to get rid of? It's a delightful story about her quirky neighbor Margaret, who didn't believe in using the telephone when she wanted to reach her neighbor. Instead, when she wanted to speak with Kay, she would get a rake from her garage, a rake that was probably at least as old as Margaret and missing a few times, and she would commence raking her cement driveway.

You can imagine the sound of it, right? One evening, as Kay and her husband were finishing up dinner, Margaret began scraping her driveway. "Oh, for pity's sake," Kay said, "I've got to get out there."

Margaret wants to talk with me." And so Kay went outside, crossed the front yard, and said, "Margaret, you wish to speak with me." And Margaret stopped raking and started wringing her hands anxiously, and when Kay asked her what on earth was the matter, Margaret stopped wringing her hands and pointed accusingly at Kay's driveway and saying, "What's all that?" "Oh," Kay responded, very relieved. "I've been spring cleaning. All those boxes are filled with things that I'm giving away. The American vets will be here to pick them up tomorrow, but if the boxes are disturbing you, I can put them away in my garage." "No, no," Margaret said, "that's not it."

"Then what is it, Margaret?" She looked at the boxes and then back at Kay, and she just shook her head and said, "You are far too young to know what to throw away and what to keep." Kay thanked Margaret and went back inside to wash the dishes. This the spiritual challenge of subtraction is the challenge of Lent. Meister Eckhart, the 13th and 14th century Christian mystic wrote, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction." We live in a culture that is obsessed with addition, having more, achieving more, being the best. Similarly, we often think of spiritual practice as doing something more or new or adding something to our already busy daily lives, but the season of Lent points us toward the reality that one day our lives will end to dust we will return.

When we look back on our lives with that perspective, we can more easily identify what was unnecessary, what was excessive, what was unfulfilling or lacking, the meaning that we thought it was at the time. We can see the spaces in between the logs that were the fertile ground for spiritual growth. Subtraction also interrupts capitalism and white supremacy, which insists that possession and productivity are the ways that we prove our worthiness. It gives us the space and the clarity to know what needs to be put out in boxes in the driveway or written on a little slip of paper and burned to ash. So I invite you to think back to what you burned or what you would have burned as part of our service of renewal.

There's a good chance it points towards something that could be the foundation of a meaningful Lenten practice. For many years of burning services, I resolved to let go of various shoulds, not wanting the shoulds of others to dictate my life and make me feel guilty. I burned it year after year after year because it kept sticking to my fingers like that paper sometimes does. I admit that I have struggled with the discipline of daily spiritual practice, the feeling that I should have this figured out. Yes, even your minister finds this challenging. I know I'm not the only one, right?

But this year is different. Instead of being controlled by the shoulds outside of myself, I am more interested in and focused on the musts that come from within. And so I ask myself, and I ask you, what must you do in this time for the well-being of yourself and of others to sustain you spiritually for the work of collective liberation, peace, and justice, or for the work of pulling yourself out of bed each day to keep going, keep loving, keep being who you are in the face of forces that are trying to silence or deny who you are and what is dear to you. What must you practice to make that possible? Daily spiritual practice as hard as it can be, helps us to discern what we must do, whether it's meditation or prayer or contemplative reading, or journaling, or embodied practices like singing or walking, or dancing.

Intentionally setting aside time on a regular basis to connect with the core of who you are, your longings, your soul, to pause and listen. To discern and reflect, and sometimes to confront what you find. When we do this, it becomes clearer to us what we must do going forward, and what can be left behind as we try to make our way through and eventually out of the wilderness. Meanwhile, the world keeps turning. The universe of which we are a part keeps living and growing and dying and renewing. There is a piece among wild things as the farmer and poet Wendell Berry describes.

Berry writes, "When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day blind stars wading with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free." From dust and the blue-green hills of earth we come and to dust, and the blue-green hills of earth we will return. So let's engage in the spiritual practice of singing together. A reminder that we're not alone, that we are part of something larger and longer lasting than 40 days in the wilderness, or even one lifetime. Each of us must do our part for the good of our spirits and for the good of all, may it be so. Amen.