

Spring Training for the Christian Team

Lent 1: Walking, Stretching, Endurance

Today we start out on a long journey. As the season of Lent begins, so does our annual pilgrimage, where we follow the steps of Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem and beyond. *Our* pilgrimage will actually take us quite a bit farther than that, because we're going to traverse more than just *geography* on this trip. We'll cross a few millennia worth of *history*, and also a rather thick chunk of theology. There's a very good chance this journey is going to put us to the test physically, mentally and spiritually. We may soon be wishing we were in better shape, and we may be very well advised to start out slowly and gently.

With that thought in mind about preparing for a strenuous journey, right at the start of this season of Lent, *I* want to do something *different*. I want to give us a new *theme*, a new focusing image, to guide us all the way through Lent. My idea may be a little *non-traditional*, but that's a risk I'm quite willing to take, *always*. We know that in the more traditional kind of Church, Lent is usually presented as that 40-day period of *sorrowful repentance* in preparation for the forgiveness that is delivered from the Cross. And then there's that old practice of "giving something up" for Lent, denying oneself some pleasure, convenience or temptation, and that has long been used to underscore the sacrificial and penitential side of Lent. The "tone" of the season has traditionally been *mournful*, which in turn has often been reflected in sad-sounding hymns and sombre scripture lessons.

Well, I'm going to suggest we take our observance of Lent in the *opposite* direction this year. Here are my reasons:

First of all: None of that sad and sorrowful stuff for *us*. Don't need it, don't want it.

Secondly: None of that "giving up" attitude for *our* Church! We don't give up anything, for anybody, not even for Lent! In fact, we probably need to take on *more!*

Third: I want to uncover for you the original meaning of the word “Lent”, which in its old Anglo-Saxon root, simply means “Spring”, with all the happy thoughts and bright warm sunshine and invigorating new growth that Spring entails. Lent should be a *happy* time, not sad like winter!

Fourth: I want us to take a lesson from the *baseball* players and what *they* do with Spring. What *does* Spring mean for baseball players? *Spring Training*—getting fit, building strength, learning the drills, gaining endurance, and lots and lots of practice *games!*

People, that’s exactly what I want *us* to do with the whole season of Lent this year. I want us to use the entire season as a *training* period in which to build strength, speed and endurance particularly with regard to the *opposition* to Christian faith, whether you see that as sin or fear or any of the other enemies of faith. And what we’ll do each Sunday through Lent, in our sermon time, will actually be a *practice game* against some of our real-life opponents. (*Next week, for example and for a sneak preview, we’ve got a game against the “Giants”—they’re a big, tough team, and we’ll need everyone’s best effort, so be here and be ready! Wear your baseball shirts, bring your glove...*)

For *today’s* workout, as I mentioned, it would be very wise to start *slowly* and *gently*, and *we’ll* do that, just like *Jesus* did with *his* disciples—with some brisk *walking*—imaginary walking perhaps, but walking nonetheless. And we’ll add some *stretching*, then a few *drills* to work on our skills and speed. But just *before* we start, here’s a little *Pep-talk* that’s designed to give us some team spirit and to give each of you some *encouragement* for the trials ahead.

Do you know what’s the *niciest* thing Jesus ever did for his disciples? *Think* about that, but I’ve got to warn you, it’s a *tough* one. Despite the idea that he hand-picked each one to be on his team, and despite the way he played right along *with* them, like a Player-Coach. The *niciest* thing Jesus *ever* did for his disciples—he *didn’t* make *them* start off in ministry-training

the way *he* had to start. And *how* did Jesus start out? What kind of training did *he* get? That's where our Gospel Lesson this morning comes in. Here's the video of Jesus in *his* final step of training, and what does that involve? He gets a 40-day *Boot Camp survival exercise in the wilderness*—no food, no water, no companions, no blanket, no flashlight. He gets *one chance* at it; pass the test or go home. Well, in my thinking, this is *easily* the nicest thing Jesus ever did for his disciples *then*, and still does today. He didn't send *us* to the wilderness Boot Camp. Instead, he worked with us, personally, helped us develop the skills and strength and endurance we would need, taught us how to spot the danger and how to avoid being tricked. True, we *do* get pestered by temptations on occasion, but *not* the way *Jesus* did. He lets us start out gently, and he works right along with us every step of the way.

So, let's get this year's Spring Training underway. Just like the disciples of Jesus, what *specific* exercise are we going to do more than any other? *Walking*, yes indeed! I hope you brought good shoes. Those *sandals* the disciples wore? *Not* good footgear, and I'll bet they had the blisters to prove it! Most days they *walked*, and they walked for the *most part* of each day. Jesus had lots of ways to keep them moving around, not letting them get too comfortable in any particular location. It's hard to calculate the total miles they could have rolled up, but based on the gospel accounts, it could have been about a *hundred* miles in a *week*, and then over maybe 3 to 5 years of active ministry, that puts us into the 10's of thousands of miles conservatively, close to a *hundred* thousand at the *other* extreme. Whatever else people may have said about this small band of proto-Christians, they were *certainly fit!* They burned off *all* the calories they took in, they were toned and tanned, they were ready to play on Game day, even if the game went into extra innings!

All the while they were walking, they were also doing *other* exercises. Primarily what they did *while* walking, was listen to the *stories* that Jesus told. And it's in these stories,

especially the ones we identify as “parables”, that we find the unique *stretching* exercise that Jesus encouraged to the utmost. These stories, some of them very short, were “tossed up” by Jesus while the group walked along, basically to see what the other members of the group could *make of* them, if indeed they could handle them at all. In baseball Spring Training, it’s like the drill the outfielders practice when “shagging” fly balls. The ball is batted, in this case by the coach, as high as possible, the fielders move around as needed while keeping an eye directly on the ball, and *then* they either they *catch* it or they *don’t*. If they don’t catch it often enough, the drill will go on quite a while longer. It’s interesting, if only to me, that the trajectory a fly ball follows is called in English a *parabola*, which comes from the same Greek word as our word “parable”, which is a story that follows a similar trajectory, going way up and a little bit out, while the listener either *gets* the point or *doesn’t*.

Whether *you* can catch the point of a parable, requires you to *stretch* not just your body and your arm but your *thinking*, from the customary kind, to a kind of thinking that understands that the “last *can* be the first”, or “the smallest *can* become the greatest”, *and* “those who think they have it all figured out already *can* be and often *will* be terminally confused at the end.” When Jesus talks about a tiny *mustard seed* and how *that’s* like the kingdom of heaven, the listener *really* needs to stretch to see just how large that thing becomes. Same with the story about a pinch of yeast that gets hidden in the dough, and what *that* thing will become by the power of God, requires a massive stretch in your brain muscles. All the time the lads were walking, Jesus gave them “pop-ups” like this to get them in shape. And then, over the years and the miles, that gave them the ability to build *endurance*—strength for the long haul. Strength to keep *in* the game, playing at your best level.

All these years later, nothing has really changed. For disciples of Christ, we really need continuing exercise to keep fit, we need stretching to keep loose and agile, and all of that

needs to build endurance because, truth be told, we will need to fight more than one battle. And we'll meet more than one kind of enemy. And we won't always know when the next battle is coming. We *need*, as disciples of Jesus, to *get* prepared and *stay* prepared.

So, this year, for *us*, Lent *is* "Spring Training". We're going to get a bunch of exhibition games with a wide variety of opponents. And it's not just for this one particular season that we need to prepare, but for lots and lots of future seasons. This *on-going* training is absolutely vital for all followers of Jesus. Thanks be to God that *our* Player-Coach, who is also our Saviour and Lord, is playing right alongside us, still bringing out from within us the skills and strength we need most, still vitally interested in how we *play together* as a team.

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