

The Divine Comedy:

Notes from Pastor Darryl

March 2020

I still read the daily newspaper. Actually, I read three newspapers every morning, without fail. One of the things I like to do is the New York Times Crossword Puzzle. I started doing crosswords as prep for the SAT exam a long, long time ago. And have just continued.

I like the ones in the beginning of the week – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Because on *most* days I can fill *most* of these one's up. My favorite part of doing the crossword is when I tackle one big blank part of the puzzle at once after feeling blocked. **In one flash of brilliance the dam is lifted, and a tidal wave of right answers comes pouring out.** Whole sections of the puzzle that were once blocked can quickly come alive once I remember that an artichoke is an edible flower, and that acme is a four-letter word for peak. Eventually though, I hit another block.

I seldom finish a whole crossword. It seems like there is always some intersection of an obscure town in India and the first name of an actress from the thirties that I just can't figure out. I try as hard as I can to finish the whole thing, but almost inevitably, I have to seek help. But first I have to declare to myself, "I give up."

"I give up" are three powerful words. During Lent, a lot of Christians around the world give up some vice or bad habit – I am one of these Christians. The practice of self-denial is an ancient spiritual discipline. Others, have poo-pooed the idea giving up of things for Lent. They see it as something superficial. But I say, If you want to give up chocolate, who I am to tell you that you shouldn't do that?

Last year, I did a Ramadan style-daylight food fast. For a few years ago, I drank nothing but water during the days of Lent. A few years ago, I tried to write a note to someone for every day of Lent. I wish I could tell you I actually wrote 40 notes in 40 days. I can tell you though, that it was a very rewarding experience.

This year, Lent comes around again and I'm supposed to give something up, and I can't pick just one thing. **So, pass me the ashes, I give up.**

Hear me out ... I give up my plan.

I give up my power.

I give up my ability to affect change beyond myself.

I rub ashes on my head, and mark myself “given up.” Tired. Weary. Exhausted.

I remember that out of dust I was formed. To dust I will return.

I give up. I confess my failures. I examine my shortcomings. I reflect on the ways that I cannot do it all. I resign myself to God’s will, not my own. I remember that I will die, and pain and suffering will remain, but I will have lived. I will live without the need to be right every time. I will live without the need to follow my plan, without the need to check every box, without the need to fix everything. **Out of dust I was formed, and to dust I will return, but in between I am going live. I’m going to live well. I know I am going to err, but I will try to err on the side of kindness, mercy, and peace.**

I am going to live a loving life that is patient and that endures.

I am going to sit on my prayer mat every morning and turn inward toward God, and I am going to repeat the words of Christ,

“To you, O God, I commend my spirit/life”

And suddenly the dam is lifted, and a tidal wave of grace comes pouring out.

Like the Prophet Micah before me, the fast I choose is justice, mercy, and kindness. Not because my actions will solve the world’s problems, but simply because God is. God is justice. God is mercy. God is kindness. God is love. This same God took a pile of dust and breathed life into me, so how else ought I live?

I give up. I can’t solve the world’s problems. I can barely finish my laundry. These ashes are a reminder of my own blessed mortality. These ashes are a reminder of my own God-stuff. These ashes are a reminder that God took ashes and formed something that I could never form. God provides answers I could never know. God provides paths I could never find.

I give up. I get up with God, and I feel fine.

Peace. Love. Understanding.

Pastor Darryl