

If it's not hard to do, you're not doing it right. That's what the woman in the YouTube said about a knit stitch I was learning to do several years ago. If it's not hard, you're not doing it right. It was a helpful statement to me because as I was learning the stitch, I knew that if the needle went into the yarn too easily, that I was making the stitch incorrectly.

If it's not hard, you're not doing it right. The same can be said of the Christian life. We can become so comfortable that we miss the essence of our call to live our lives centered on Christ and to live the great commandment to love God, self and neighbor. Lent is a season to stop and look at ourselves honestly.

Of course I'm not talking about making something difficult for difficulty sake. But the essence of our Christian lives – living in loving relationship with other people, even those we don't like; living in loving relationship with the created world; understanding God's mercy and grace in our own lives so that we can forgive others; living in a trusting relationship with God so that when God makes a call on our lives we respond with a yes. None of this comes easily or naturally yet all are examples of the foundation of living the Christian life.

The Gospel lesson today recounts Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience, in typical Mark fashion. It is described in a matter-of-fact way and quickly, without the details that Matthew gives us. Break it down and here's what I hear.

Jesus leaves Galilee to go to the River Jordan where John baptizes him. When he comes out of the water the heavens are torn apart. It sounds terrifying and violent. The Spirit descends on him like a dove, a symbol of peace, and a voice gives him the reassurance that he is loved and pleases God. The same Spirit drives him into the wilderness. Does he not want to go? Does he not know to go? Does he need to be pushed, prodded, forced? Mark gives us no clues. Just that the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. For a long time, Jesus is tempted by Satan and he's with the wild beasts and the angels wait on him. Sounds like a mixed bag. Being tempted by Satan can't be pleasant. Are wild beasts companions or a danger? The angels are with him, though, caring for him. When he comes out of the wilderness, he goes back to where he started, Nazareth. The experience, baptism and wilderness, the touch of the Holy Spirit and the interference from Satan were precursors to his preaching about repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of God. After baptism and his wilderness experiences, he returns to Nazareth a changed person and with a mission.

Will Willimon is a theologian, retired bishop of the Methodist Church and a professor at Duke Divinity School. In a blog about about Jesus' baptism by John, he says this:

To be baptized "into Christ" and "in the name of Christ" means to be incorporated into the way of life which characterized (Jesus') life, and life of the empty one, the servant, the humble one, the obedient one, obedient even unto death.

That day at the Jordan, knee deep in cold water, with old John drenching him, the

Anointed One began his journey down the (road to crucifixion). His baptism intimated where he would finally end. His whole life was caught up in this single sign. Our baptism does the same.

The chief biblical analogy for baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. Discipleship is more than turning over a new leaf. It is more fitful and disorderly than gradual moral formation. Nothing less than daily, often painful, lifelong death will do. So Paul seems to know not whether to call what happened to him on the Damascus Road “birth” or “death” – it felt like both at the same time.

In all this I hear the simple assertion that we must submit to change if we would be formed into this cruciform faith. We may come singing, “Just as I Am,” but we will not stay by being our same old selves. The needs of the world are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the lures of the world too seductive for us to begin to change the world unless we are changed, unless conversion of life and morals becomes our pattern. The status quo is too alluring. It is the air we breathe, the food we eat, the six-thirty news, our institutions, theologies, and politics. The only way we shall break its hold on us is to be transferred to another dominion, to be cut loose from our old certainties, to be thrust under the flood and then pulled forth fresh and newborn. Baptism takes us there.

The majority of us listening, maybe all of us, are baptized. We may have been infants, young teens or adults. Regardless of our age, being baptized gives us the blessing of being part of God’s family and the expectation that we participate in the life of the family. If we are to live into our baptism, we have to die to our own purposes and be reborn to God’s. It’s a daily discipline.

Whatever Lenten discipline you choose, choose something that helps you die to yourself and make more room for God. If you’ve given up chocolate, it won’t matter to your life in Christ if it’s just a way to lose weight or be healthier. How is abstinence from chocolate helping you in your Christian life? When you have a yearning for chocolate, can you pause and pray that the desire becomes a desire for God instead? If you’ve added something, like praying every day in a new way, how can you make it a habit that will be hard to give up at the end of Lent.

Whatever you choose to do, if it’s not hard to do it’s probably not worth doing. We learn in steps, sometimes small steps, but transformation is always hard. I finished the knitted piece I was working on and picked up another one that I had put down because I thought it was too hard. Wouldn’t you know that what I thought was too difficult before had the same stitch I had recently learned. The mistakes I made were visible and I could see what I’d done wrong. I breezed through it, and what was a difficult pattern to me before is easy now. But just this week, I used the same stitch after several years of not needing it. I had to relearn it.

The same principle applies to the Christian life. Pushing ourselves aside does not come naturally, especially in a culture that says that it’s all about us. Dying to self and making room for God is the conversion we need on a daily basis. We only really live as we die to all of the ways that push us away from God. Lent is the time the church sets aside for us to really examine, with naked eyes, our sinfulness - which is nothing more or less than turning our backs to God.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by

reading and meditating on God's holy Word. It's hard, but worth doing.
Amen.