

Lent is late this year. WHY? **Because a source of nature GAVE UP Easter late instead of early this year**, Easter falls at the end of April. **Lent's timing is determined by Easter**, which is celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox (March 20). This moon falls on April 12th this year making Lent a period of preparation that begins 46 days before Easter, starting on Ash Wednesday.

I only learned recently that every year Fat Tuesday comes to an abrupt end at midnight in New Orleans. It is there that the police shut down the Mardi Gras festivities promptly at 12 am in RESPECT for Ash Wednesday. The stroke of midnight is the moment Bourbon Street Party-Goers must **GIVE IT UP!!**

An old tradition is one 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! **WHAT ABOUT YOU...DID YOU GIVE SOMETHING UP FOR THIS SEASON OF GROWTH, THIS SEASON OF LENT???**

Preacher Kimberly Long told this story at the beginning of one of her Lenten sermons. Entering church on Ash Wednesday, Nora Gallagher encounters a friend who, when asked what she is giving up for Lent. “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 snaps, 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 this phrase — “Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (v.34). **JESUS WILL “GIVE UP” EVERYTHING, his very life, to fulfill his eternal mission of salvation.**

In other words: 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 fighting ring.**

“Throwing your hat into the ring” soon became a figure of speech, as well as an actual act. *Teddy Roosevelt is credited with being the first to use the image in the political domain.* In 1912 he declared “My hat’s in the ring.” In other words, he was entering the presidential race on the Progressive Party ticket, **whose motto was, “We Stand At Armageddon and Do Battle For the Lord.”**

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

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.

The more mundane and peripheral the better. 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 and we do 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 and hiding and peeking out behind something? I confess: sometimes I can't stare direct 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.

Here is a paper from the academic journal Psychological Science, entitled "You've Gotta Know When To Fold 'Em."

Being persisting in our effort to reach future goals can often mean success, but when the goals become to difficult, ongoing pursuit of them can lead to health problems. According to a recent report in "Psychological Science," tells of Psychologist Gregory Miller study on teenagers over the course of a year, using an instrument developed to distinguish between people who either persist or let go when faced with a difficult goal. He found that the less-stubborn teens had lower levels of the protein CRP, an indicator of bodily inflammation. Since inflammation has been linked with serious diseases such as diabetes and heart disease, the psychologists suggest that it may be wise for all humans to cut their losses in the face of challenging events.

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 our 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 through drugs, alcohol, sex, 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" and embrace his Messianic identity and mission. Jesus did "give it up" to the place and purpose God had designed especially for him, that only he could fulfill.

SO, I COMPLETE MY THOUGHTS THIS MORNING WITH THE QUESTIONS I BEGAN WITH.
Did you “give up” anything this Lent? Will you “throw in the towel?” Will you give up the sacred SENSE OF CONTROL “YOU BELIEVE” you have over your life?

And once you GIVE IT UP, and “throw in the towel,” will you find the strength to “throw your hat into the ring” and TAKE ON A NEW CHALLENGE... a new mission, a God-charted direction—ONE THAT HAS BEEN DESIGNED FOR YOUR LIFE??? and WHAT MIGHT THAT BE???

THE LENTEN SEASON INVITES US TO “GIVE UP” --TO CHANGE!! What would happen this Lenten season if instead of giving up red meat you gave up the command and control of your life and instead trusted IN THE “OLD RUGGED CROSS OF CHRIST?” What was it Jesus said? *He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”*

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? *That instead you, like Christ became one who focused on a life of justice for ALL.*

Prophets dream an eyes-wide-open dream of that day when God's realm, God's kingdom shall completely unfold among us, and indeed, among all creation. Such dreams, thank God, are not easily put aside; they are not easily shaken.

In the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership of that 1963 March on Washington, Time magazine chose him as its Man of the Year. Asked later whether he was satisfied with the progress being made in the movement toward racial justice and concern for the poor, King responded that we can never be satisfied until the entire dream becomes reality. And is that not the very nature of dreams? As people of faith, we dare never rest content with business as usual, for the dream of life in the kingdom of God is ever before us. We dare never make too easy a peace with the existence of injustice and brokenness, of selfishness and sin, of racism and greed.

What would happen to each of us if this Lent after “*throwing in the towel*” of our *own control over our life*, “*threw our hat into the ring*” of God’s uncharted territory and divine possibilities? *Remember his last words to us today...*

And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Yes, with him in control of our lives, we will do amazing things... ARE YOU READY TO GIVE UP THE OLD WAYS, AND TAKE UP HIS WAYS? Amen.