
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Lent

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

You're right. It's easy for a Lenten discipline to turn into a self-improvement project. I can see why just giving up your after-school Coke doesn't feel like it has much to do with God.

Many years ago I settled into giving up sugar and alcohol every year. It made me ask myself questions, like why I thought I needed an oatmeal raisin cookie in the middle of the afternoon to perk up, or a glass of wine at the end of the day to calm down.

Giving up some of my vices as a Lenten discipline made me pause and reflect, and I had the opportunity to look for God in those moments instead of filling them with the next easy fix.

Over time, though, the discipline became a routine and I was no longer reflecting on my habits.

Mostly, giving up cookies and wine made me feel better. I slept better, lost weight, and felt more energetic. It had become all about me.

The Christian mystic, John Chrysostom, said, "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great."

There's nothing wrong with self-improvement, of course, but when we're paying attention to God, we realize that it's not an end unto itself.

My Lenten discipline felt purposeful again once I found ways to use the energy that I gained from cutting out sugar and alcohol to do something for someone else.

I don't know what your ultimate response to God might be this Lent, but I think you should look for it at the moment you would have reached for the Coke.

It might be that you set aside the money you would have spent on the Coke for a specific cause – or use the time to write a letter to your dear old uncle!

Whatever it is, you'll know that you are responding to God when you are, as Chrysostom says, "doing good to others."

I look forward to hearing about how it goes.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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