

WEEK ONE February 21 First Sunday of Lent: Daily Habits

When Thursday's snow and ice storm gave me an unexpected free afternoon, I turned on my TV and watched as NASA landed a spacecraft on Mars.

Fair warning: I'm a bit of a space geek and have been since I was a kid and followed the Apollo missions.

The spacecraft that landed on Mars is named, *Perseverance*.

Here she is:

SCREEN: pic of Perseverance

Perseverance journeyed 300 million miles over seven months.

But the mission had been eight years in the planning.

If you want to know how impossible the odds were of this succeeding, one scientist described it as throwing a dart from DC and hitting a bullseye in Texas.

How did a mission seemingly impossible succeed?

Thousands of individual scientists and engineers devoted every waking moment to see this through.

They literally ate and breathed the mission every day.

There wasn't a second in eight years when the mission wasn't moving forward.

So Perseverance really is a perfect name.

SCREEN: Grow Your Faith main screen

Today we launch our Lenten message series titled, Grow Your Faith.

For the next six weeks we will discover ways that we can grow closer to God and others.

Our mission is to arrive at Easter with a deeper, fuller, more vibrant faith.

And to start us off, our focus this first week is on the need for daily habits.

Daily habits.

What do I mean by this?

Think of your daily routine.

You wake at a certain time, shower, brush your teeth, make your bed, get ready for work or school or get your family's day started.

Some things in your routine are necessary to keep you healthy, while others reflect your personality and goals.

These habits are rituals, they are ingrained - they form a baseline of what it means to care for yourself and others.

When it comes to our faith and following Jesus, we need daily habits for the journey of discipleship.

Daily faith habits.

And whether we are talking about prayer or worship, reading the Bible or serving others, God uses these to grow our faith.

Persevering in these daily habits creates space and time for God to speak to us - to keep us from drifting, getting off track, or losing sight of our journey.

So just like the folks at NASA who made the Mars mission possible, we need to get up every day devoted to growing our faith.

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In today's readings, Noah and Jesus were both journeying into the unknown.

And along the way, they encountered incredible challenges.

They teach us what to do when times get tough.

So let's get started.

If my memory serves me, the story of Noah and the Ark was the very first Bible story I learned.

It probably is for lots of kids.

It has all the ingredients of a great story -

there's tension, drama, fear, humor - what's not to love?

As an adult, I try to see the story through the eyes of Noah.

And talk about incredible odds.

Imagine the ridicule he faced building the Ark.

"You're building what? Why? Who told you this? Have you lost your mind?"

What kept Noah going, how was he able to persevere in his mission?

The book of Genesis describes Noah this way:

SCREEN: Noah walked with God

he was righteous, he was blameless, he walked with God.

He walked with God.

I love that term.

Walking beside someone implies a closeness, an intimacy, an understanding.

Taking a walk with someone means you made time and space for that person.

So Noah was never alone, God was walking with him.

And this kept him going whenever his journey became difficult or whenever he was tempted to give up.

And their relationship was not an on again/off again kind of thing - it was an ongoing, constant, daily conversation.

And because Noah persevered, he reached his goal.

Let's turn to the Gospel reading.

Every Lent begins with the story of Jesus's journey into the desert.

The version we heard today from Mark's Gospel is the shortest.

We heard that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and was tempted by Satan.

How was he able to resist the temptation to not fulfill his mission?

Like Noah, Jesus walked with God.

The Father was with His Son every second of every day.

Throughout the Gospels we read that Jesus got up early to pray.

It was a daily habit.

And because Jesus was engaged in an ongoing, constant, daily conversation with His Father, he could exit the desert and make this proclamation:

SCREEN: This is the time of fulfillment.

The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, and believe in the gospel.

The key word here is repent.

To repent does not mean making minor changes, it's going in an entirely new direction.

In order for one to repent, he/she has to first acknowledge that they've gotten off course.

It's admitting to yourself, *"what I'm doing isn't working. I need to change, I need to get back on track if I want to reach my goal."*

Because the goal this Lent is to arrive at Easter as a more faithful follower of Jesus.

How will you grow your faith this Lent?

If you want to be like Noah and Jesus and walk with God,
your daily habits are crucial.

And first among them must be prayer.

If you are like many people and don't have a daily practice of prayer,
or if you find yourself struggling to be consistent with prayer,
Lent is a great time to commit to this daily practice.

And if you are someone who prays everyday,

I encourage you to try something new or spend a little more time in prayer this Lent.

But for everyone, I want you to invite you

to start by acknowledging where you are when it comes to prayer.

So often when people begin to pray,

they start off listing their needs or the needs of others.

And that's not a bad way to start.

But then they don't always take it to the next step -

they don't take time to listen for God's voice,

so prayer becomes a one-sided conversation.

Using the image of a walk with a friend, prayer needs to be two-sided.

You start, God listens, then God speaks and you listen.

One of the ways I recommend to develop this fuller,
two-sided walk with God is to pray with scripture.

The Bible is called the Word of God.

When you pray with scripture you are hearing God speak directly to you
through the words you are reading.

If you pray asking God to make his ways known to you,

He will help you using His words.

It may be an insight into a problem you're facing,

a word of encouragement when you're struggling,

or a validation of something you are doing that God wants you to keep doing.

When you pray with scripture, God might remind you of

a problem you need to address or a mistake you need to correct.

So here's the specific invitation I want to issue to you this Lent:

join me in reading and praying your way through
the Gospel of Matthew, from start to finish.

We chose Matthew because we are already hearing from Mark throughout this year.

SCREEN: spxbowie.org/lent

If you go to the Lent page of our website

you will find a guide with a chapter of Matthew or section of a chapter for each day.

There are also some suggestions on how to read and pray with scripture.

This won't require a big time commitment, perhaps 10 minutes a day.

The main point is to do it every day from now until Easter.

I've mentioned before that Matthew Kelly is one of my favorite Catholic writers.

Here's something he wrote last month about prayer:

SCREEN: **Nothing changes unless our prayer lives begin to grow and transform.**

If you're confused about anything in your life -

remember that the Christian life is not sustainable without prayer.

-Matthew Kelly

And he ends by saying: *It's time to reconnect with God.*

Time to reconnect with God.

Or as Jesus said, *This is the time of fulfillment.*

If you feel like your faith is stuck in a rut,

make this Lent different from past Lents by praying with scripture every day.

God has set your life on a trajectory towards the Kingdom,

but it's up to you to take control and stay on track -

and for that you will need perseverance.

May these next forty days be a time for you to truly grow your faith.

Amen. +