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"Straitjacket"  
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I have a friend whose job necessitates that he keep his cool at all times. He runs an organization with hundreds of employees and thousands of clients. He constantly has people looking to him for guidance and reassurance in delicate situations. Sometimes life and death situations. He always has to remain calm, or at least give the appearance of calm. However, staying calm, he says, can feel like wearing a straitjacket.

I know the feeling well – emotions raging on the inside (whether it's fear, sadness, anger, extreme irritability), and a corresponding need to button it all up. We don't want to fall apart at the workplace, lose it on our children, or fly off the handle at anyone. And with good reason. Self-control is a virtue, as is patience and gentleness, especially in stressful situations. Sometimes we have to work to express our feelings in an appropriate manner. And sometimes we can't express those feelings at all, until we get to another venue - like a therapist's office or on the phone with a good friend.

At the same time, there's a breaking point in all of us. We reach our limit. We get to the end of our rope. And even going about our daily business can feel overwhelming and make us a little panicky inside.

I have to wonder whether Jesus reached this point in the desert. 40 days without food. I'm sure his living conditions weren't great. And despite the need that we all have for solitude and quiet, Jesus didn't go there for retreat. He went to be tempted. While Matthew doesn't mention this, Mark tells us he was tempted the entire 40 days.

I can only imagine the state I'd be in after just *three* days. My hair would be a mess. I would stink. I would definitely be what they call hangry. (Do you all know what hangry means? It happens when you're hungry, and if you don't eat soon you start to get angry, or at least very testy.) So yes, I'd be hangry. And the constant spiritual and psychological testing - whatever that looked like - would have driven me up a wall.

Now, we're not told whether this stuff happened to Jesus. By the time the Devil issues the big three temptations, Jesus has the wherewithal to deliver some pretty snappy comebacks. Maybe he's worked through any frustration and hangriness at this point. Or maybe he just stayed cool, calm and collected throughout the entire experience.

But I have to think not, especially if we look at other prophets in the desert. There's John the Baptist, dressed like a wild man and ranting and raving at every Tom, Dick and Harry about their need to repent. Elijah, who crawls under a bush and asks God to kill him because Jezebel is trying to kill him anyway and he just can't take it anymore. And finally Jonah, who tells God that he's angry enough to die because the sun is too hot and he's still upset that God didn't destroy Nineveh.

All of these people – each one a devout person of faith – let it all hang out, in the desert, before God. They do not keep it buttoned up.

Lent is a time to let it all hang out. It begins with Ash Wednesday, which harkens back to the tradition of heaping ashes on your head, tearing your garments, and wearing sackcloth – all acts of grief and lamentation over death, disaster, or your own sin. It's a rather expressive posture to take, to say the least. Expressive and presumably quite cathartic.

I don't think we need to bring these practices back, but it would be helpful to let them inform our experience of Lent. Lent is about acknowledging our human frailty and therefore our deep need for Jesus. We are broken beings who need a savior to make us whole. We need forgiveness of sin, healing of hurts, and grace in moments of weakness or sometimes just to get us through the day.

As I see it, we understand our need for forgiveness pretty well. Hence the Great Litany we chanted at the beginning of the service. We might also do some self-examination to identify specific sins that we struggle with as individuals. But I don't know that we fully appreciate our dependence on God. We are dependent on God for our spiritual health. We are dependent on God in order to live a life worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus.

How often do we truly embrace our dependence? Lent is the prime time to do it, and our Lenten disciplines can help us with this. For centuries, people have marked Lent by choosing to give up something they love, something whose absence they'll notice. Fasting from a certain food, or Facebook or even a bad habit can be a spiritual practice of self-denial that connects us to God by leaving that desire unfulfilled. Rather than turning to a creature comfort, we turn to God instead. This is the reason behind the rules of our self-imposed Lenten disciplines. It is easy to understand, but it's also easy to forget in the process. The biggest temptation in Lent is to treat our disciplines in a way that actually *trivialize* our need for God.

In other words, I'm not so sure God is keeping tabs on our chocolate consumption. I doubt God is cheering for us when we make it to Easter with a perfect record of Lenten piety. Yet we may look at our success in these things and confuse it for faithfulness. If we're not careful, we can make Lent all about us and our little self-improvement projects.

God doesn't ask us to give up coffee. God asks us to surrender our lives. Surrender. Hand over the reins. Take off the straitjacket because God knows what's going on underneath.

The whole reason we tighten up our spiritual discipline in Lent is so we can loosen up before God. So let's get real. Get vulnerable. Assume a posture of need and mindfulness about why we're giving up that coffee, or chocolate or social media.

Lenten disciplines are a valuable way of entering actively into this season. Our participation in Jesus' journey to the cross does not happen passively. Nor can we will it into being with dogged determination. What we can do is embrace our finitude, rather than ignoring it. Only then will we trod the path to the heart of God. Amen.