

Have you ever felt like you were fighting against yourself? We are often our own worst enemies, sabotaging ourselves despite our best intentions. We want to do good, yet we fall back into old habits, giving in to selfishness and distraction. Some of us even use this season to improve ourselves, only to return to where we started once Easter passes.

But why are we constantly at war within ourselves? Scripture gives us the answer: **our hearts are divided**. We are torn between loving God and running from Him, between serving others and focusing on ourselves. In one moment, we desire holiness, and in the next, we immerse ourselves in sin. The struggle is real because, **on our own, we do not have the strength to make ourselves whole**.

Toby, a young lamb, lived with his family on a well-protected farm surrounded by a fence. He often wondered why the fence was there. One day, during one of his walks around the farm, Toby discovered a hole in the fence. Curious and eager to explore, it slipped through and wandered off. At first, it felt free, running through the open field, enjoying the thrill of adventure. But as night fell, Toby realized he was lost. Worse still, he heard rustling in the bushes—a wolf was nearby.

Toby ran, frightened and alone, desperately trying to find his way back. He stumbled into a ditch, unable to climb out. He was stuck.

Meanwhile, back at the fold, the shepherd noticed one lamb was missing. Leaving the rest of the flock behind, he went out into the cold night, searching relentlessly. He called out his name, but Toby was too afraid to answer. He feared the shepherd might punish him for wandering off.

Finally, the shepherd found Toby trembling and exhausted in the ditch. He climbed down, lifted him onto his shoulders, and carried him home. There, he bandaged Toby's wounds, fed him, and let him rest safely in the fold.

And here's the most surprising part of the story: when they returned, the shepherd **did not close up the hole in the fence**. He didn't build a bigger

barrier. He simply carried the sheep back, knowing that love does not prevent us from making mistakes, but **it saves us when we do.**

This is the very lesson of Lent. We are like Toby—we wander away, thinking we are free, but we soon find ourselves trapped by sin, stuck in patterns of selfishness and distraction. And yet, **God never stops searching for us.** He calls out to us, not to condemn us, but to **bring us back into His embrace.**

That is why God pleads with us in today's first reading from the Prophet Joel:

"Return to me with your WHOLE HEART."

Not just part of it. Not just the fragments we are comfortable giving. **He wants all of us.** But here's the key—Lent is not about **us making ourselves into better people.** You can do that through a diet plan, a self-help book, or a new routine. Lent is about something far deeper—**conversion.**

Conversion is not about **us** fixing ourselves. It is about **God** transforming us. It is not about controlling our growth, but surrendering to **His work in us.**

Many of us, just a few days ago on Valentine's Day, gave our loved ones heart-shaped chocolates. Imagine receiving one of those heart-shaped boxes, only to find that some of the chocolates were missing. How would you feel? That is what it's like when we give God only part of our heart. He will still accept our gift because He loves us. But **He wants more.** And the truth is, **deep down, that's what we want too—to be whole, to be fully given to Him.**

This is the work of Lent: **to stop trying to fix ourselves and instead let God heal us, shape us, and transform us.** And Jesus gives us three tools to help us surrender to Him: **almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.** These are not just exercises in self-discipline; they are ways to **open our hearts to God's grace.**

The first practice is **almsgiving**—giving to those in need. It's easy to focus on ourselves, on our struggles and worries. But when we help others,

something powerful happens: our hearts are lifted beyond ourselves. We start to see the world as God sees it. We realize our life is not about self-improvement but about loving the poor as God loves. To build up God's Kingdom and not our own Kingdom.

The second practice is **prayer**. Saint Augustine once said that prayer is "exercising our desire for God." It is in prayer that we acknowledge our weakness and our complete **dependence on God**. Prayer is not just about talking to God—it is about making space for Him to work in us. It is not about presenting God with a list of requests—it is about **surrendering to His will**.

Finally, the third practice is **fasting**. Giving up food, social media, or other comforts is not about proving our self-discipline. It is about **creating empty spaces in our busy lives so that God can fill us**.

In a few moments, we will receive ashes on our foreheads, a solemn reminder that **we are dust and that without God, we are nothing**. Just as in the beginning, when God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed life into him, so too must we become dust—empty of self, stripped of pride, surrendered completely. **Only when we die to ourselves can God, in His love, breathe His life into us this Lent—if we allow Him**.

And just like the lost sheep, **God is searching for us even now**. He does not stand at the gate waiting for us to make our way back—He comes for us. He climbs down into the ditch where we are stuck, lifts us onto His shoulders, and carries us home.

And just like in the story, the fence remains open. God does not force us to stay—love must be chosen, not imposed. We may wander again, we may fall, but His love is relentless. He will always come for us.

The days ahead will not be easy. There will be times when we give in and fall short. But that is not failure. **The only failure is refusing to start again**. Lent is not about achieving holiness; it is about trusting that **God alone can make us holy**.

May this Lent be a time not of striving, but of surrender. Not of self-improvement, but of trust. Not of our own work, but of His grace molding us into the saints we are meant to be. Amen.