

Being present this Lent

My first job with any real responsibility was delivering newspapers when I was in middle school. Every weekday afternoon I would throw my canvas bag over my shoulder, walk to the corner of Hopkins and Pinehurst to pick up the papers, snap the plastic cord that was tied around them, and head to my route.

I delivered The Evening Sun every weekday and The Baltimore Sun on Sundays. The first block of Regester Avenue in Rodgers Forge was my territory. I knew that the German shepherd at 37 Regester was loud but friendly, that the people at 146 might not subscribe but were always polite, and that the lady at 18 would almost always open the door when she saw me coming. I could usually guess who would greet me with a wave and a smile.

I didn't know everyone's name, and most of them didn't know mine. I was simply "the paper girl." But I felt a deep sense of responsibility to ensure that each of them had a dry newspaper slipped inside the storm door every day. I wanted them to know they could count on me.

I can't imagine a 12-year-old carrying wads of cash around while collecting newspaper fees today, but it didn't seem unusual at the time. Once a month I knocked on doors and rang bells to collect the money, passing it along to my supervisor. Some people tipped me. Some never answered their doors when I came to collect. It wasn't a perfect system, but The Sun made its money, the subscribers received their papers, and I gained the experience of a lifetime.

I was a shy child, but I smiled and spoke to everyone who talked to me, petting the cats and dogs as I passed. On a particularly cold or warm day, one of the kind ladies on the route might invite me in to warm up or have a glass of water. We would talk briefly, and I would admire their meticulously-kept homes before I continued on my way.

When I look back on that time, I realize just how young I was to be entrusted with so much responsibility. But everything ran smoothly. For the most part, all I had to do was show up with the paper. That may have been the most important lesson for me –

the discovery that being present made all the difference.

Being present is essential. As we walk on this Lenten journey, it can be challenging to continue making the sacrifices we had intended. Some Lents I find my sacrifice finds me, and it's not at all the one I was hoping to take on. It's much heavier a burden than I would have chosen for myself. But it is my cross.

Especially in a Lent with unexpected twists and turns, it can be comforting to remember that sometimes all we can do is show up. At a minimum we can be present for and with Jesus - and allow him to be present to us. We can simply open ourselves up to him day after day, working to deepen our relationship with him, allowing ourselves to grow in faith and in love. We can remember that his presence in the Eucharist is perhaps the most extraordinary way we can encounter him during this season.

"We do not have to talk very much in order to pray well," said St. John Vianney. "We know that God is there in his Holy Tabernacle; let us open our hearts to him; let us rejoice in His Presence: This is the best prayer."

During Holy Week we often sing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" How powerful that we are asked not how we might have acted or responded, but simply whether we were there. Were we present at Jesus' crucifixion? We were, and we are. We can place ourselves in that moment, meditating again on the tremendous sacrifice Jesus made for each of us on the cross. We were there. This Lent we are there. That might be the least - and the most - we can do on this spiritual journey.