In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Oh the annual dilemma! Do I give something up or take something on as my Lenten discipline? There is such a strong tradition of giving up eating or drinking the thing that I know I will think about obsessively every time I pass the cupboard where (fill in the blank) is kept. I may even give up the (fill in the blank) every year. And then the next question – do I stick it out, straight through Lent, or do I remember that Sundays are not part of Lent, and thoroughly enjoy Sunday by indulging? Will that only make Monday harder?

Or perhaps I take the modern approach, and begin practicing a new, good habit. Perhaps (fill in the blank) will make me healthier, stronger, a better and more virtuous person. Perhaps if I can practice (fill in the blank) by Easter I will have acquired a new feather in my cap – a permanent improvement in my physical and spiritual life. Ahhhh!

Or it may be that neither the addition of a good habit or the disciplining of a less good one speaks to you this year. Perhaps your temptation is just to give up the news feeds and start a new novel. Perhaps what you really want is to shut the door and not have to listen to anyone else’s rant about their favorite topic. Perhaps you are caught by a tough decision, or have heard difficult health news. Perhaps you are just –tired.

There is a holy habit for those who don’t feel called this year by either the taking on or the taking away tradition of Lent. It is called Holy Waiting. This Lent may be one that you sit out with God, waiting for the darkness to clear, anxiety to lift, a choice or decision to become clear. It may be a time for a relationship to end, or begin, or strengthen. Perhaps you are waiting to hear about a job or a move, or the next step in a long process.

In our 21st century non-stop world, we don’t wait well. No line is short enough, no lane moves fast enough. The worst sign on an airport or train departures board is the
word “Delayed.” Oh no! We are going to have to wait. Nothing in our world teaches us how to simply, calmly, wait.

Lent is a time of waiting. It is OK to wait during Lent. In fact, it is good to wait, and wait patiently and well, during Lent. We wait upon God.

Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Cowley Brothers in Boston, says: “If you have lost touch with the wisdom of waiting in your life, I believe you’ve lost touch with part of your soul.” He points out that Scripture, and especially the Psalms, are full of waiting for God’s moment of action. And not just being bored and frustrated by such waiting, but waiting in hope and trust, that God is working God’s plan out in our life and in those we love. Think for example of that memorable line from Psalm 46 – “Be still, and know that I am God.”

For our soul is where we meet God. If we are too busy to stop and sit with God, to wait upon God’s desire for us, perhaps we are indeed in danger of losing touch with a very important part of ourselves. Ironically, it is in times of danger and fear, in illness and trouble, that we often must wait for help and healing. Such waiting can be agony without God’s help.

There is a Chinese character that means “wait.” When I first heard about it many years ago, I thought it means the kind of waiting I do in grocery store lines, or when the traffic slows to a crawl, or I am waiting for a bus. Then a friend explained that it meant a different kind of waiting – a sort of essential, primal waiting. As she put it, the character means: Not now; maybe later; possibly never.”

What does such waiting look like? Well, Isaiah suggests that it is a time of good works that “loose the bonds of injustice and undo the thongs of the yoke that let the oppressed go free.” It is a time when in your darkness, if you call out to God, you remember Isaiah’s words – that God will be our rearguard, the answer to our cry for help. God will say” Here I am!”

Simple waiting is a Lenten discipline that acknowledges God’s power and God’s glory. It is not our power and our glory that we await. “In the fullness of time,” we say, when you are ready to act, Oh Lord, remember us.

Simple waiting in hope lets us see beyond the trials of today. In Lent we look toward the Resurrection of Jesus beyond the pain and scandal of the cross. We sit,
quietly, as Jesus suggests we do in our Gospel reading today. Perhaps Holy Waiting requires us to “go into our room and shut the door and pray to our Father who is in secret.” It may require a cheerful face and calm we do not feel, when we want to wear a sign that says: Poor Me.” Holy Waiting looks like this, says Jesus, it has a freshly washed face and combed hair, clean clothes and a generous heart.

Teilhard De Chardin, a Jesuit scientist and writer of the mid-20th century, wrote about the value of Holy Waiting:

“…trust in the slow work of God….It is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that may take a very long time.”

Whether this is a year to take on something new for Lent, to let something go, or just simply, humbly to wait for God to work God’s purpose out, be of good heart. Jesus tells us that God, who works in secret, will see what is in our hearts, and what our intention is.

This is a time to prepare for both the cross and the tomb, so that we get to know our souls a little better in these Lenten days. And most of all, this is a time to prepare for our celebration of Easter morning, when Jesus vanquished evil and death’s hold upon our souls and gave us hope as our baptismal gift.

May this be a blessed and holy Lent for you, when God’s will becomes your own desire.

Amen.