

In six years of military service in the Navy, I was assigned to an aerial reconnaissance squadron in Japan. Because most of my work was on aircraft, I actually only spent 45 days total at-sea ... that is, on-board a ship. 15 days on the 7th Fleet Flagship, the USS Blueridge, and 30 days on a destroyer, the USS Fletcher.

Aside from the day-to-day work, there were various drills staged during our time at sea – man overboard drills, fire drills, and various battle drills. The drills kept the crew at the ready for any danger or life-threatening situation that might arise. After all, when you're at sea, you can't just walk away.

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. And in the two readings, we hear about Noah's Ark.

In Genesis, God gives His assurances of a covenant with humanity; and in the Epistle from St. Peter, he parallels how the ark saved Noah and his family from the flood to how Baptism saves the members of the Church.

The Church is sometimes referred to as the Barque of Peter – that's not B-A-R-K like a dog, but B-A-R-Q-U-E, which means a boat.

The imagery is long-standing in our tradition, because the seating area of a church-building is referred to as the nave (that's N-A-V-E), which is from the Latin, *navis*, meaning "a ship." Our building could perhaps be likened to a giant life-raft, if you like.

Just like my own time at sea, where we had various drills to keep ourselves sharp as far as what to do if someone fell overboard, or if we had a fire, or if we were attacked ... the Church gives us periods of time – namely Lent and Advent – as opportunities to hone our spiritual skills.

The three pillars of Lent are: (1) prayer, (2) fasting, (3) and almsgiving.

Prayer helps us to refine our relationship with God, as well as encourages us to get into a more regular rhythm of prayer. In addition to our usual three weekday Masses on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursdays, we have Stations of the Cross during the day on Wednesday and either Stations of the Cross or Evening Prayer on Thursday evenings.

Fasting is the basis for ‘giving-up’ something for Lent.

Our formal fasting is two small meals, one large meal, and no snacks in-between. We’re already half-way through that sort of fasting – as we are only asked to do that on the first day of Lent (Ash Wednesday), and on Good Friday.

We also fast from meat on Fridays in-between, with the usual allowance for fish or seafood. Although the frozen fish sticks of my youth are perhaps more sacrificial than lobster or shrimp; the bottom line is to sacrifice something important – in imitation of Jesus’ sacrifice for us.

If you’re a vegetarian, you have to get creative. For the rest of us, giving up meat on Fridays can be as much or as little of a sacrifice as we want to make it.

Finally, almsgiving, is the third and last pillar of Lent. While almsgiving has customarily meant giving money for the poor; and at the entrances near the *Little Books* there are the cardboard “Rice Bowls” ... the point of almsgiving is to be of service to those in need.

Again, like prayer or fasting, you can get as creative with this as you like.

The point of all of this is to better re-connect with God through prayer with Him, sacrifice – to take our focus off of ourselves, and service – to put our focus on those in need.

These practices can serve as “drills” to sharpen our spiritual skills and better form our hearts and minds for Christian living. They can also help us to be at the ready to better deal with spiritual emergencies or crises we might encounter.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us pray to boldly enter into this Holy Season of Lent. May our Lenten practices strengthen us as disciples of Christ. May our own 40 days of prayer, fasting, and service unite us more deeply with Jesus ... and prepare us to better celebrate the Easter sacraments.