

“THE FAST I HAVE CHOSEN”
REFLECTIONS ON THE SEASON OF LENT

Those of us who have grown up and/or have lived in a Roman Catholic influenced culture are quite familiar with the season of the Liturgical year called Lent. Some of us have been in churches that observed Lent as a regular part of the cycle of the Liturgical Year. If you are anything like I used to be, Lent is always a good source for jokes. “What are you giving up for Lent?” or “I gave it up for Lent” were quips which revealed that I took Lent and those who observed it quite lightly. Those who observed Lent were simply painted with a broad brush as being superstitious and engaging in man-made religion. They were trying to work their way to heaven with an external religion. Granted there are people who might think this way, but it is hardly fair to stereotype people in this way. There are some people who are superstitious and trying to work their way into favor with God. They not only do this with Lent, but they also do it with church attendance, good deeds, giving money, being right about particular doctrines, *etc.*

But even if people think in these ways, does that invalidate particular practices or beliefs? Does someone’s misunderstanding and misuse of something make the thing itself bad? Because someone misunderstands the doctrine of justification by faith, believing that it is a license to sin, does that make the doctrine of justification by faith something to be jettisoned? Absolutely not!

One of my contentions for observing the Liturgical Year is that it is good for the church. It is not necessary for the existence of the church. But it contributes to the well-being of the church. So it goes for Lent. We need to take a step back and ask two basic questions: 1) Is there any Biblical warrant for the themes that define the Lenten season? 2) And what was the Church’s intention for the institution of Lent in the Liturgical Year? The answers to those two questions will help us to understand if Lent is valid and, thus, if it is good for the well-being of the church.

LENT: REFLECTION, REPENTANCE, AND FULFILLING THE CHURCH’S PRIESTLY MINISTRY

The word “Lent” itself is an old Saxon word which means “Spring.” Lent is the Spring of the year. It came to be used within the Church as a marker of the time of the year, now defined by the Christian Church. The question is, What is Lenten season as far as the Church has understood it through the centuries? Historically, the very early church had a time for the preparation of the baptisms of adults. These adult soon-to-be converts were called the catechumenate. The individuals were catechumens. These are those who were receiving instruction in the Christian faith. Don Saliers in his contributing article in the book *The Services of the Church Year* summarizes the history of Lent and how it developed around the sacrament of baptism:

Historically considered, Lent developed as a season of preparation and formation for initiation into the church at Easter. The forty days of preparation involved the whole church, not only those preparing to be baptized. The journey of discipline, prayer, and instruction, which was known in the early church as the “catechumenate,” provided

those already baptized with a yearly reentry into the meaning and deepening range of commitment entailed in baptism. This was also a period when any people who had lapsed from the church could be reconciled and restored to fellowship. (*The Spiritual Discipline of Lent*, 228).

The Bible is quite clear that baptism is death and resurrection with Christ. Paul states this explicitly in Romans 6: “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” While this is true any time of the year that it is done, the early church connected the practice of baptism to the historical time of Jesus’ own death and resurrection within the Liturgical Year. I disagree with the practice of waiting to administer baptism because biblical evidence points us to the fact that baptisms were administered as soon as possible (see e.g., Act 2; 8.26ff.; 10.34ff.). But the practice of waiting until Easter (Pascha) appears early in the church and was practically universal.

Now, as Saliers mentioned, this period of preparation had two sides: one side was for the new converts and the other side was for those who were already Christians. The purpose of Lent in the life of the rest of the Church was to *reflect upon our baptism* and *repent of sin*. Baptism, for most of church history and for most of the world still outside of Western culture, was the time that you passed from one life into another life. In other words, you died to one life and rose to live in another. Of course, this would be in accord with what was mentioned earlier concerning the death and resurrection with Christ. Baptism signals that the old life has been forsaken—you have died to it—and new life has been entered.

Reflecting on your baptism is considering—thinking about, meditating upon, and conscientiously working out the implications of the calling baptism places on your life. Our own Confessional Standards have an exhortation concerning this. We are exhorted to “improve our baptism.”

WLC 167 *How is our baptism to be improved by us?* A. The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavouring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

One of the purposes and effects of being united to Christ in baptism according to Paul in Romans 6.6 is that the body of sin might be destroyed so that we should no longer be slaves of

sin. So, he exhorts us, “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom 6.11-13). In our baptism we have been called to present ourselves and our members as instruments of righteousness to God and *not* let sin reign in our mortal bodies. One of the original purposes of Lent within the life of the Church was to call Christians back to this foundational truth of our faith for a yearly check-up.

The other side of this reflection is *repentance*. The call to reflection on our baptism is not simply a call to think about our sin. But is to have our thinking *changed* about our sin. Our whole disposition is to change toward sin. And that change of disposition is biblically called repentance. Repentance is that transformation of thinking which involves the transformation of our total lives. It is a change in our thinking about God and sin which results in changes in our attitudes and actions concerning God and sin. No doubt, repentance is the continual life of the believer and the Church. Practicing repentance as we ought means that we must take the time to reflect upon our sin and sinfulness; not in a way that leads to despair but in a way that leads to joyful repentance. Lent is a consistent, yearly reminder to the church that we need to take some time to reflect upon these matters and deal with the sin in our lives.

The need for and emphasis on repentance is where the well-known Lenten fasting enters the picture. Fasting is, in some shape, form, or fashion, always associated with sin. Fasting is a legitimate expression of repentance from sin. But it is also a biblical way for the church to fulfill her priestly function of interceding for the world that is still in sin. This is where I need to take just a little time to summarize what the Bible teaches about fasting.

Fasting is an oddity. I say that because in the beginning some of the first words out of God’s mouth to his newly formed children were, “Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, *I have given* every green herb *for food*”; and it was so” (Gen 1.30). God wanted his children to eat; not just for sustenance but for enjoyment (as is reflected in the feasts he would later prescribe). But something happened when man sinned. The ground that was yielding food to man began producing thorns and thistles. The lack of food became a sign of the curse. God makes this connection explicit when he outlines the blessings and curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28. Among the other blessings of conformity to God’s covenant would be the abundance of food. The curse for lack of obedience brought on the absence of food. The lack of food is the result of the curse.

The fact that the absence of food is connected to sin is seen also in the only prescribed fast day in the Old Covenant: the Day of Atonement (or better “The Day of Coverings”). On this day all of the sins of Israel that had been committed over the past year were (ultimately) rolled upon the high priest who would then offer animal blood before God so that the sins would be covered. On this day the people of God were to “afflict their souls”; i.e., with fasting (cf. Lev 16.29, 31 *et al.*). This stood in stark contrast to the eighty or so feast days that God prescribed throughout the year. Fasting was not employed because food was understood to be a “necessary evil” from which we needed to separated ourselves. The absence of food does not

mean that we have risen to a higher plane of spirituality because we don't need material things. Indeed, Jesus taught us to pray for our "daily bread" and, as a memorial of his work, left us with a feast, not a fast. The consummated kingdom is described as a feast with fine wine and food (cf. Isa 25). Food is not bad. Food is a good gift of God, and those who teach that it is evil teach the doctrines of demons (1Tim 4.1-4). The goodness of food is precisely what makes fasting an affliction of the soul. The Day of Coverings involves an affliction of the souls of the people of God because it is the great sacrifice for sin.

Fasting, whether voluntary or prescribed by God, is taking upon oneself the curse of sin, indicating the well-deserved death of oneself or those for whom one is interceding. You may fast as a "good discipline" if you wish, but that is not a biblical fast (though it is not unlawful). A biblical fast self-consciously deals with sin. When we fast we are saying to God, "We deserve death. We deserve the curse of your covenant." This is done not only for yourself but also for others. David, when he spoke of praying for those who were persecuting him sang, "But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing *was* sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart" (Ps 35.13). In intercessory fasting we stand in the place of others, fulfilling our priestly obligations in prayer, and we, in Christ-like fashion, take on the curse for other people. Christ did this very thing when he fasted for forty days in the wilderness. He himself had no sin. But he stood in our place and took the curse of sin for us. Now we, his body, are called to participate with him in this for others (cf. Col 1.24). The church fulfills part of this task in a united way throughout the world by fasting together in the Lenten season.

While fasting is a difficult thing (it is describe in the Bible as "affliction," and it is difficult to be afflicted), it is not without hope. Fasting does acknowledge the presence and well- deserved penalty for sin. But fasting looks to the promises of God revealed in the One who took the curse of sin in his own body in death and was resurrected. In Christ, after death because of sin, there is resurrection. In the Liturgical Year this is reflected in the fact that after Lent is Easter (sometimes "Pascha"). We fast. But we fast in light of the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. So, we know that by his Spirit our fasting will accomplish God's purpose of conforming us more and more into the image of Christ, not just as individuals but as the Church, the body of Christ. We fast in hope. We know that as we fast and intercede on behalf of the world, our God will answer those prayers as well.

Lent cannot be separated from Easter. It is Easter that gives meaning to Lent. Alexander Schmemmann writes in his book Great Lent: A Journey to Pascha:

If we realize this [our sin], then we may understand what Easter is and why it needs and presupposes Lent. For we may then understand that the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first of all, in order to help us recover the vision and the taste of that *new life* which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it. How can we love and desire something that we do not know? How can we put above everything else in our life something which we have not seen and enjoyed? ... The entire worship of the Church is organized around Easter, and therefore the liturgical year, i.e., the sequence of seasons and feasts, becomes a journey, a pilgrimage towards Pascha, the *End*, which at the same time is the

Beginning: the end of all that which is “old”; the beginning of the new life, a constant “passage” from “this world” into the Kingdom already revealed in Christ. (13)

So then, Lent is an intensified focus on what we died and are dying to. We are to be, in Paul’s words, putting to death our “members”; i.e., the sins of our bodies (Col 3.5). This is the time of the Liturgical Year in which we are reminded that this remains a continual duty for the Church and every member in it. So, we are exhorted to do it.

LENT: THE CHURCH CALENDAR

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday continues to Easter Sunday. Lent itself is understood as being 40 days. But if you add up the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday you will discover that there are 46 days. Why is this? Laurence Stookey is helpful here, “Because the forty days of Lent are fast days in the broad sense, times of discipline and self-restraint. But as we have seen, the Lord’s Day is ever a feast within the church. Therefore in order to have forty days of fasting, six Sundays must be excluded from the count. Lent in truth is forty weekdays plus six Lord’s Days.” (*Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*, 79) In reality, then, while on these Lord’s Days we may take up Lenten themes, it is not a time for fasting and historically has not been in the church.

Why forty days? The number 40 is significant in Scripture. It rained upon Noah forty days and forty nights. Both Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Most importantly, Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days. These 40 day periods are all times of testing, trial, and death (in some form or fashion) which led to the breaking in of a new world or new life. It is the fasting of Jesus that is usually associated with the forty days of Lent.

The Lenten season begins with *Ash Wednesday*. At this point, a brief explanation concerning the application of ashes is in order. Ashes being applied to the head is a common Biblical expression of humility and repentance. Examples of this can be seen with Daniel (Dan 9.3), the king of Ninevah at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3.6), and the fact that Jesus uses it in a positive light concerning Tyre and Sidon (i.e., they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes had they seen the mighty works Jesus was doing; Matt 11:21). The ashes are a reminder of sin *and* the effects of sin. This is why when the ashes are applied to people Gen 3.19 is alluded to: “Remember, O mortal, that you are dust; and to dust you shall return.” We are reminded of our mortality and the effects of sin that remain. This agrees perfectly with the meaning and expression of repentance. Throughout the record of history in Scripture God looks favorably on this practice.

There may be many reasons why some of us would not like this practice (e.g., it is associated with the Roman Catholic Church which we came out of). This is understandable and needs to be worked through and looked at Biblically. Something else to consider: could it be, at least in part, that we would not want ashes on our heads *because of what it means* and because it is visible to everyone else? There is a humiliating part to walking around in public with this very visible sign upon us. That visible sign, though not absolutely required, is a good incentive to live consistently with the meaning of the symbol.

Certainly there is much hypocrisy with the practice (as with many other things). But hypocrisy should not keep us from doing good things. Jesus pointed out that there were hypocrites in his day as well (cf. Matt 6.16-18). But he does not discourage fasting. In fact, he assumes that his disciples will fast (cf. Matt 6.17; 9.14-17). Hypocritical practice does not invalidate the legitimacy of fasting or any other biblical discipline. There are hypocritical husbands and wives (those who cheat on one another and act like they are faithful). Should we stop getting married because someone might associate us with being that kind of husband or wife? Ludicrous! Hypocrites attend worship, pray, sing, etc. Should we stop doing all these things because there are hypocrites who do them? How many times have we defended against the excuse, “I won’t go to Church” or “become a Christian because the Church is full of hypocrites.” There will be hypocrites in Lenten practices. There will be hypocrites fasting. And Jesus told us not to be like them *when we fast*. Jesus did not say, “I want to make sure that you are not associated with the hypocrites so stop fasting.” He essentially said, “You fast and do it right. The Father will take care of the hypocrites.”

Following Ash Wednesday is the first Sunday in Lent, which is a Sunday where the theme of judgment and hope is picked up. The *second through the fifth Lord’s Days* commonly focus on covenant—God’s gracious initiative in bringing us to himself and calling us to diligent obedience—and new life—the need for it and the promise of it.

The *sixth Lord’s Day* of Lent is *Palm or Passion Sunday* which is the beginning of *Holy Week*. Palm Sunday is the Sunday which commemorates what is traditionally called “the triumphal entry.” But that nomenclature has a certain irony to it. The cries of Hosanna of that Sunday look toward the cries of “crucify him” on Friday. One is seen in light of the other.

The end of the week—Thursday, Friday, Saturday—is known as the *Triduum*. This liturgical word is literally “three days.” This has historically been seen as one continuous worship service that lasts for three days (even though the worshipers don’t stay in the same place for three days). These days are unified.

Maundy Thursday is the celebration of the events of the upper room just before Jesus went to the cross. Traditionally, there has been a foot washing (in accordance with what Jesus did in John 13) at this service. (This is where the name “Maundy” came from. It was derived from the Latin word for “commandment” and is based upon the “new commandment” given to the disciples.) Other acts of service by those in authority can and have replaced the traditional foot-washing for various theological reasons. But what is common is that the Lord’s Supper is shared on that night. Even though this is the eve of the crucifixion of our Lord, we celebrate the Supper, not in sadness, but in joy. It is solemn, there is no doubt. But it should not be in a morbid fashion.

Good Friday follows in which the crucifixion of Jesus is then remembered and celebrated. Stookey is excellent on how the Church should commemorate Good Friday: “Emphasis has been on the seemingly senseless human suffering of Jesus rather than on the purposeful humiliation of God through which redemption comes. In other words, we have failed once

again to read the sacred story backward.” (*Calendar*, 96) Thus, Good Friday is bright sadness. Stookey continues:

Thus again and again the Fourth Gospel presses the point: The forgiving agony of God fulfills the divine and eternal purpose of redemption. That is why this is both God’s Friday and Good Friday. That is also why on this day the faithful gather less to contemplate the pain of a dying man than to rejoice in the purposes of a Creator who willingly suffers for the creature... If we are the people of God called and disciplined to carry on the work of Christ in the power of the Spirit, then on this day we are chiefly to do what the Savior did upon the cross: To offer ourselves for the world, and that particularly by way of intercession ... Far from being an introverted occasion on which I consider primarily what Jesus did for me on the cross, Good Friday should be an extroverted occasion on which we as [the] church consider how best we can present to the world the redemption of God, both by word and by deed. (99-100)

Holy Saturday is the day that Jesus rested in the tomb. It is the day that the old creation came to its appointed end because of the sin of Adam. Lent ends at the beginning of the Pascha Vigil in which there is a movement from darkness to light in the worship. Christ is risen, and thus begins the great fifty days of Easter.

LENT: THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH

I have already mentioned some ways in which the church observed the Lenten fast. We can participate with the rest of the church in some of these things. I want to take the closing of this article to focus on some specific benefits and suggestions for Lenten practice.

One of the benefits that I see for the church recognizing and observing a Lenten fast is that *we are joining Christians around the world at the same time of the year in repentance and intercession*. One of the distressing things about the condition of Christ’s church right now is the unhappy divisions that exist between us. Lent (as well as other practices in the Liturgical Year) is a time that we are able to show our unity with the church around the world. How appropriate it is for us to fast together, especially in light of the many sinful attitudes and actions which keep us divided!

Another benefit that I see for the church, especially as it is reflected in our individual families, is that *Lenten fasting gives heads of families the opportunity to be an example and lead their families in understanding the nature and purpose of fasting*. I don’t like fasting. I am not writing this article as one who fasts regularly. This is not my hobby horse. I like food. But there are times to fast. Jesus wants us to fast. The Lenten season is a reminder to us that we have certain Christian duties, and we are to be leading our families in these areas as well.

Now here are just a few suggestions with which I want to conclude:

(1) *Choose a particular type of fast.*

There are no set rules for how fasting is to be done. There are fasts that only last parts of days (cf. Judg 20.26; 1 Sam 14.24; 2 Sam 1.12; 3.35. These probably lasted from sunrise to sunset).

There are fasts recorded in Scripture that lasted for seven days (cf. 1 Sam 31.13). Daniel fasted for three weeks (Dan 10.2-3). Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all fasted for forty-day periods (Ex 34.28; 1Kin 19.8; Matt 4.2). You are not cheating if you fast for a different amount of time than someone else. Neither should we compare our fast duration to someone else in pride.

Fasts are also different in type. Daniel, whom I mentioned earlier, fasted from “pleasant food” which seems to be explained by “wine and meat” (cf. Dan 10.3). This fast is somewhat reminiscent of the fast he and his Hebrew brothers engaged in when they first arrived in Babylon; when they refused the meat and wine of the king (Dan 1.11-13). There are also total fasts from all food and drink (only done for a short time; cf. Ezra 10.6). My point is that it is still a fast if you abstain from certain types of food. The church has traditionally given up meat during Lent. That is not silly nor is it cheating. That is a legitimate fast.

Choose a particular fast. You don’t necessarily need to do what others are doing. Your situation is different, and there may be circumstances that would limit the type of fasting you can do. But whatever you choose to do during the Lenten season, connect your abstinence with prayer, reflection, and repentance.

(2) Fast as families (if you are able to do so).

Realizing that children cannot go on a 40-day full fast, maybe your family can fast from some type of food you really enjoy. Yes, children may not understand it at first and they will feel afflicted. But use the opportunity to teach them and lead them to understand the horrors of sin. Help them understand that if it weren’t for Jesus taking the curse for us, all of life (and the food that sustains it) would be taken from us. Remind them that they have a calling in their baptisms to deal with sin and pray for others as well as you. Remind them, therefore, that they are not doing this for themselves alone but for others as a part of God’s priesthood in the world.

(3) Make a special effort to give alms or perform some type of mercy (‘alm’) ministry.

We will be collecting a special alms offering in our Ash Wednesday service. Our intercession is to have “feet.” In Isaiah 58 where God teaches his people about the fast he has chosen, part of what he says is the purpose of fasting is “to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him ...” (Isa 58.7). While we give alms all year (and we should), this becomes a time for a special emphasis on mercy-giving.

You might choose to give extra to the alms offering. You might choose to take the money you would spend on the food from which you are fasting and make that your alms. You might even choose to show mercy in particular acts of service to others. Make a conscious effort to show mercy.

CONCLUSION

Lent has certainly been the catapult for many jokes; especially by us Protestants. But historically the Church has taken it quite seriously for good reason. Yes, there have been hypocrites down through the ages who have sought to show off before the world or try to merit something with God. But this does not make the practice of fasting or the observance of Lent illegitimate. With as much sin as there is in the Church at this point, a good, sincere observance of Lent would do us a world of good. It may even do much good for the world.