



“Lent 101”

Proverbs 4:20-23; Colossians 1:24-28; Mark 8:34-36

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February 22, 2009

Transfiguration Sunday

The religious tradition I grew up in had no use for Lent. Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians are part of a radical reformation rooted in the Puritans of England. Our Puritan ancestors vigorously opposed old church traditions like Lent and Christmas. They objected to the excesses and abuses of the Medieval Church.

I was trained in a seminary that paid little attention to the liturgical calendar. I guess they figured that Lent, as traditionally practiced, was a gloomy and guilt-ridden deflection from the primitive good news preached by Jesus. They had a point. We were optimists who preferred the glory of Easter to the darkness of Lent – or even Good Friday.

My first years in ministry were served in congregations that celebrated Christmas and Easter but paid no attention to the larger liturgical year. Until recently, most Protestant churches omitted the church year and resisted the idea of Lent. Lent seemed to most a Catholic or, if you lived in the right part of America, a Lutheran tradition.

Interestingly, perhaps ironically, my first experience of Lent was in Boston at Park Street Church, a congregation that takes its Puritan heritage very seriously. Puritans and their heirs are always pragmatists and, given Boston’s large Catholic population, Lent was an opportunity for community outreach.

For years, Park Street has conducted services on the Wednesdays of Lent. The services are from 12:15 p.m. to 12:45 p.m. The service is short: a hymn, Scripture Lessons, prayer, special music and a short devotional by one of the ministers.

We didn’t publicize the services. On Wednesday morning, we put a sandwich board sign on the sidewalk, opened the doors at noon and people came. The church is on one of the busiest corners in downtown Boston and the service was obvious and available to government workers, people in the financial district and/or people wandering by.

It was an amazing experience in many ways. Despite its deep religious history, Boston is a very secular city, its work ethic is demanding and life is complex. Yet, each Wednesday lots of people showed up. Most of them were not part of the congregation. Most were young. Most came alone.

In that noisy, complex, secular world, our sanctuary was a haven of quiet, a spiritual place where people could gather the scattered resources of their souls. There in the heart of the city was a time, a season for the soul.

Most participated in the singing and praying. Others sat quietly and listened. Some remained after the service, eyes closed, embraced by the silence.

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Our program certainly wasn't a traditional Lenten experience. It had a certain Protestant flavor. The ministers of the congregation weren't quite certain what to make of it. But we kept on doing it.

It was an ironic experience. After all, New England Puritans and Congregationalists loathed the very idea of anything liturgical and Lent has a long liturgical history as an important part of the cycle of the church year.

Rightly, they opposed the abuses of traditional Lent. Anything that got in the way of faith as the heart of our relationship with God was their mortal enemy. Lent as they'd seen it was a distraction from faith that easily became an empty ritual that destroyed faith rather than built it.

Most modern objections to Lent focus on its gloomy, guilt-producing practices. The Puritans did not object to that. For most Puritans, all of life was a Lenten experience. Historian George Marsden says the Puritan movement in America was motivated by a "hermeneutic of self-suspicion." Highly introspective and always looking for sin in themselves and each other, Puritan piety was often destructively intense.

No wonder old Puritanism – and traditional observances of Lent – passed into the dim mist of history. The human soul cannot thrive long on a diet of guilt and denial no matter what the source.

Recently, however, we've begun to suspect that the Reformers often threw the baby out with the bath water. We are rediscovering, or retrieving and redeeming ancient church traditions. Lent is one of them. For nearly a generation now, a liturgical renewal movement has begun to transform churches and the practice of our faith.

One rediscovery is the rich treasure of the church year. Easter stands at the center of the liturgical year and Lent is an ancient preparation for the great Feast of Easter.

In the early church, most baptisms were adult converts to Christianity. For centuries, all baptisms were on Easter morning as a symbol of the power of the resurrection to create new life here on earth in us. Candidates for baptism underwent a rigorous preparation process. The week before Easter, they fasted and prayed asking if they were ready for the rigors of this new way of life lived in a pagan Empire.

That week was the original Lent. Over the years, the entire congregation began to observe Lent with the candidates and, by the early 7th century, Lent was a 40-day period of fasting by which the church prepared itself for Easter. The idea was to walk with Jesus through his 40-day temptation in the wilderness.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Good Friday. Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we are all mortal sinners in need of God's salvation. It one of the too few times the church looks us in the eye and tells us the truth we don't want to hear: we are dying; we fall short; we need God desperately. Since death and sin are among the few empirically verifiable aspects of the Christian faith, you'd think we'd pack out the church looking for help! Sadly, we resist the truth, preferring to rush quickly to the glory of Easter morning.

Good Friday is a remembrance of the cross where God dealt with sin and death once and for all. We observe Ash Wednesday because we need Good Friday with its dark and somber reflection.

In between, Lent offers us the rare opportunity to spend time with the entire Christian Church asking ourselves vital questions about our lives and our faith.

Jesus' temptation was not a gloomy period of guilt-ridden introspection. Rather, he wrestled with the great question of his life: What does it mean to be the Son of God? All his temptations pointed at precisely that question. In Lent and with Jesus, we ask ourselves, what does it mean to me to be a daughter of God, a son of God?

We also ask ourselves the first question God asked Adam and Eve in the Garden, “Adam, Eve, where are you?” That is the central question of Lent. Where are we in our life? Where are we on the journey of faith? Where is our soul?

Properly understood, Lent is not gloom, doom and dark reflection. Lent is an opportunity, a recurring season of the year, intended to help us focus on our lives and our faith. Where am I in my life in 2009?

Lent is an annual spiritual exercise with a goal. Lent points at growth, our spiritual growth. By the end of Lent we should know we love God more and love our neighbors more. During Lent we ask for Christ to be born in us so that we become less of what we are and more what God wants us to be.

These are not small issues. All three of our Scripture Lessons point at a Lenten type of self-examination. Proverbs, that great collection of practical and spiritual wisdom, reminds us to put first things first. “Take care of your heart for out of it flow all the issues of life.” Lent is a time for heart care and repair. How is your heart and what shape is it in?

In Colossians, Paul sums up the life of ministry and the church as simply, “to present every person complete in Christ.” Our life together, your life as a Christian disciple, is pointed in a single direction, making us less of what we are and more of what we are designed to be as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Jesus puts it bluntly. “What does it profit us if we gain the whole world but lose our soul?” Indeed. What if we climb to the top in life, accomplish all our goals and dreams and yet do not love our neighbor – or our spouse – what good is it at all? To gain the whole world and yet, like the Grinch who stole Christmas, have a heart three sizes too small, is, in fact, failure. If we are not growing in love for God and others in our soul, our heart, we’ve missed the point of life entirely.

And so, I invite you to participate in the season of Lent 2009 at Plymouth Church. We have a plan – you’ve seen the events and opportunities on the calendar for the next six weeks. Be part of what we hope are a significant number of people who take on this 40-day spiritual adventure. Each community event is an opportunity for soul growth and community building – each a laudable Lenten goal.

The Lenten journey is first of all a journey inward. Where am I in my life, my faith? What are the areas of my life and faith that need work? All of life is in play for all life is, in one way or another, spiritual. Our families, our relationships, our work, as well as our inner lives, are, at least in part, matters of the soul. What part of my life needs remedial work?

Once a woman in the congregation told me she was giving up gossip for Lent and wanted me to know and hold her accountable. Half way through Lent I asked her how it was going and she said it was most difficult challenge of her Christian life!

Bob was a Type A guy who came to faith at mid-life. He was a steamroller of a businessman. A neighbor told me Bob would sell his mother if it made enough money. Needless to say, Bob had spiritual work to do.

Bob spent time every day one Lent thinking about Jesus’ statement that he was gentle, humble and that in his presence people found rest for their souls. He asked God to make him more like that than himself. Bob didn’t turn into Jesus overnight, but over time he did become a gentler, humbler man who people enjoyed being with.

A young family decided to give up television for Lent. They thought the TV was becoming too much a babysitter in their home and not helping their family relationships. They were amazed to discover how much time they’d spent not talking to each other. At the end of Lent they gave away their TV!

Several times, my Lenten discipline is eating a third to half the food I ordinarily consume. I have two purposes. One is to let physical hunger remind me to be equally hungry for God – to love God increasingly. The other is to feel a little bit of the hunger that millions of humans experience every day.

But I repeat, Lent is not so much giving up something as it is getting somewhere in our life and our faith. We all need soul work. If the Fruit of the Spirit, that great list of Christian virtues (Galatians 5:22) I mentioned last week, is the product of Christian faith, perhaps meditation on those qualities and values is a proper Lenten exercise.

Spending time in Jesus' Beatitudes, his teaching about the norms and values of the gospel, is always a proper project and worth spending time with. Or, easier still, pray the Lord's Prayer and sing the *Gloria Patri* every day in Lent. Think about what you are singing and saying. For example, what would we look like if "thy kingdom come; thy will be done in [me]"? What kind of person do you want to be? How can God help? There is no doubt, all of us need to practice our faith.

A Christian journey inward is not sufficiently Christian unless it becomes a journey outward. This year Plymouth's Lenten Project is working with Bread for the World, an advocacy group for hungry people in the world. Poverty and hunger are not partisan political issues. The Bible has more to say about poverty and hunger than most things. And in case you don't know it, God and Bible are very much against hunger and poverty. And God expects the church and the state to do something about both.

We hope to create a real sense of solidarity with the poor that turns into positive action on behalf of the poor.

(Parenthetically, some people take the money saved by eating less and give it to a hunger project. A variety of web sites offer helpful advice about making Lent a family project in which a sacrifice of some favorite food can be an opportunity to teach children generosity to the poor. Google "Lent for children" and you'll find dozens of sites.)

This Lent, let's talk along the way, encourage each other on the Lenten journey and learn to be accountable to each other. We need Lent. There's work to be done in us. The world needs Lent because the world needs us.

Amen.

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