



WHAT IS LENT?

Most Protestant Christians assume it is spelled lint, and is something that gets stuck in the dryer or, from time to time, one's belly-button. Others view Lent as the season when Catholics put ashes on their foreheads. However, throughout the church's history, Lent has been observed very broadly as the season of forty weekdays and six Sundays leading up to Easter. In Latin, the word used for this season is *quadragesima* (translated from the Greek, *tessarakoste*, or, the "fortieth" day before Easter). However, in the Middle Ages, as sermons were delivered in the vernacular, the English word, *lent* (meaning "spring"), was adopted. This spring season is a period of preparation for Easter via self-examination and repentance, hopefully ushering in a season of spiritual renewal.

Protestants might be averse to Lent for a couple of reasons. Some view Lent as a season that commends a legalistic approach to life. Lenten practice is seen as an external, behavioral modification of the self through rigid discipline or denial: "Aren't Christians saved by grace?" Others are simply freaked out by the rituals of Lent—things like ashes, candles, and darkened rooms, all of which create a mood of somber lament: "Aren't we past the sad, empty rituals of religion?"

Yet we should not see Lent as a merit-based approach to winning God's favor. Rather, Lenten practice is a heightened response to God's salvation and our favor in God's eyes through Christ. The New Testament Scriptures are full of indicatives (God loves you. God saves you. God

forgives you.) followed by imperatives (So obey him. So walk with him. So be grateful). In this light, Colossians 3 is a great passage for meditation. Its movement of thought is a reminder to the church that we have been "hidden in Christ" and "saved by Christ," and so then, in grateful response, we are called to take off vice and put on virtue. Further, as we are prone to confuse the proper ordering, Paul keeps seasoning these commands to obey with reminders of God's initiative on our behalf (i.e. Colossians 3:12- "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."). Lent should not be avoided for fear that it is legalistic. Rather, Lent should be observed as a season of amplified awareness of God's work on our behalf, and the cultivation of our obedient response to that work.

What of the other perception that Lent is full of vacuous ritual and empty religious practice? What might be said to those who ask, "Aren't we past the smells and bells, whistles and thistles, incense and nonsense? Aren't candles and ashes the relics of ritual of a bygone era?" Answer: "Absolutely not!" For we are creatures of habit. We are people who fully embody deep patterns, behaviors, and rituals—practices that we might call liturgies for living. To be human is not to be a mere bundle of nerves, bag of hormones, or a brain on a stick. Rather, it is to be a fully embodied self that thinks, feels, and does—and often not in that order! Think about the habits, patterns, and rhythms in your own life. What do you do first when you wake up in the morning? When you get to work? What do you feel on the commute home? What sort of smells do you

love and what do they remind you of? Where do you go when you need to escape? What do you do when you need to feel released from anxiety or fear? What you think, feel, and do in these situations forms your liturgies for living: Practices become habits become patterns become rhythms become rituals become liturgies for living.

Good liturgies for living form and shape us in humanizing ways. Bad ones form and shape us in dehumanizing ways. Lent is a special season that trains our focus on the how's, what's, and why's of life. Lent grants us opportunity to center ourselves as we practice taking off the vices and putting on the virtues. Lent helps us to become human again.

BECOMING HUMAN AGAIN

"That is so human of you!" Of what sort of behavior might this be a response? Perhaps someone just shoved to the front of the line or cut-off another driver on a freeway exit ramp. Maybe a deceptive word was offered or someone was engaged in behind-the-back slander or gossip. Maybe a grudge is being nursed or a bitter root is being cultivated.

Yet instead, what if the statement was made because another human being exhibited extreme kindness or generosity? What if the remark was made when someone offered forgiveness at great cost? Or, perhaps merciful gentleness was exhibited to someone in need. Or, there was opportunity for an "I-told-you-so," but instead, what was said was, "I make a lot of mistakes too."

My mentor used to ask, "When I say 'human being,' what is the first thing that comes to mind?" As he poses this question in churches all over the world, people blurt out, "Sinner!" We are Pavlovian in this response. But, what was the first thing on God's mind? When God created human beings, He said, "This is very good!" God looked at his human creation as being fearfully and wonderfully made. What follows is tragedy. We asserted ourselves in our pursuit of autonomy. We didn't want to be God's creation—we wanted to call the shots. And as the story unfolds, we snatch the fruit—we walk out the door! We trade in being with God or even like God for becoming gods ourselves, and thus, our capacity to be human is greatly diminished. Our thoughts, words, and actions de-humanize us and dis-integrate others.

Yet, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection grant us capacity to become human again. In the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus commends to us practices, habits, patterns, rhythms, rituals—liturgies for living—that will help us, by his grace, to become human again. Remember, you are saved by grace through faith in Christ. It is his work on your behalf that brings you new life. And so, after having received a new heart, fresh legs, willing hands, and a transformed mind, respond to Jesus' call as He beckons, "Follow Me!"

Practicing Becoming Human Again

Matthew 5:1-12

February 26

Ash Wednesday

"ALL OF THE ARTICLE OF OUR RELIGION, ALL THE CANONS OF OUR CHURCH, ALL THE INJUNCTIONS OF OUR PRINCES, ALL THE HOMILIES OF OUR FATHERS, ALL THE BODY OF DIVINITY...IS IN THIS ONE SERMON ON THE MOUNT." *-John Donne, Sermon Preached during Lent 1629*

"THUS THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE TO BE DIFFERENT—DIFFERENT FROM BOTH THE NOMINAL CHURCH AND THE SECULAR WORLD, DIFFERENT FROM BOTH THE RELIGIOUS AND IRRELIGIOUS. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT IS THE MOST COMPLETE DELINEATION ANYWHERE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN COUNTER-CULTURE. HERE IS A CHRISTIAN VALUE-SYSTEM, ETHICAL STANDARD, RELIGIOUS DEVOTION, ATTITUDE TOWARD MONEY, AMBITION, LIFE-STYLE AND NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS — ALL OF WHICH ARE TOTALLY AT VARIANCE WITH THOSE OF THE NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD. AND THIS CHRISTIAN COUNTER-CULTURE IS THE LIFE OF THE KINGDOM OF THE GOD, A FULLY HUMAN LIFE INDEED, BUT LIVED OUT UNDER THE DIVINE RULE."

-John Stott, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount.

If you are someone who grew up in the church, then you might be tempted to say that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is light on orthodoxy (right theology) and heavy on orthopraxy (right living). As you listen to the sermon, you may feel there is not enough to know, and too much to do. Perhaps that is why churchgoers tend to steer away from it. We go to study the book of Romans or some other book that we consider to be "heavy on doctrine." But, in the Sermon on the Mount, the Word made Flesh has called us to become fully human again. It is a beautiful summons!

The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' most famous sermon, begins with the Beatitudes, perhaps the operation manual or blueprint for Being Human. This Ash Wednesday we will explore how these blessings inform our practice of becoming human again.

Practicing Love and Forgiveness

Matthew 5:21-26; 38-48

March 1

"FORGIVENESS FLOUNDERS WHEN I EXCLUDE MY ENEMY FROM THE COMMUNITY OF HUMANS, AND WHEN I EXCLUDE MYSELF FROM THE COMMUNITY OF SINNERS." *-Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace*

Someone wrongs us, and we might simply say, "Don't worry about it... no big deal." But some things are a big deal, and in our dismissal of a real and hurtful wrong, we try to pay down that debt that they owe in our own power, but we simply cannot. It grows and festers and often explodes. As has been said, we drink the poison of bitterness while we wait for the other person to die. Or, someone wrongs us and we demand that they pay down that debt ("Go make it right," we say), promising forgiveness to them in return. But in asking them to make restitution in order to receive vindication, we are not offering genuine forgiveness. When forgiveness truly happens, a debt has been paid in full and is forgotten. Christians have as their resource a God who paid down the cosmic debt of our sin—an insurmountable debt that we could never fully pay down. This forgiveness empowers us to truly forgive others. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean restoring a new line of credit to the person that has wronged us—trust has been broken and it needs to be reestablished—but it does mean not dwelling upon the wrong of the past, and looking to the future open to the possibility of full reconciliation and restoration.

Questions for Lent Reflection:

Do I feel fully forgiven in the presence of God? If not, what would it take to get there?

Who have I wronged and have I sought forgiveness? If I need help in doing so, who can help me?

Who has wronged me that I have not forgiven? If I need help in doing so, who can help me?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She was so quick to offer forgiveness!

Prayer:

Jesus, deliver me from the guilt, shame, and fear that arise when I don't feel the freedom of your forgiveness. Heal my broken relationship with _____ with the power of your forgiveness. Amen.

Practicing Prayer

Matthew 6:5-15

March 8

“TO PRAY IS TO CHANGE. PRAYER IS THE CENTRAL AVENUE GOD USES TO TRANSFORM US. IF WE ARE UNWILLING TO CHANGE, WE WILL ABANDON PRAYER AS A NOTICEABLE CHARACTERISTIC OF OUR LIVES. THE CLOSER WE COME TO THE HEARTBEAT OF GOD THE MORE WE SEE OUR NEED AND THE MORE WE DESIRE TO BE CONFORMED TO CHRIST.”

-Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline.

I want to change! I wish I did this. I wish I did not do that. Prayer is a chief change agent. But some of us do not pray because we would rather change ourselves. Prayer seems to be a royal waste of time when instead I could go to a seminar, read a book, or talk to a friend. And some of us do not pray because we are afraid that me might change, and we are not sure of what we would become. We do not want to give up control! What would it look like to pray, trusting God to turn us into the fully human being that he wants us to be?

Questions for Lent Reflection:

Why is prayer hard for me? What stands in the way of being more dedicated to prayer?

What might I stop doing in order to start praying?

God doesn't want us to have a prayer list, but a prayer life. Thus, how should my prayer look different as a way of life?

With, prayer, I often assume that I should do it alone and that it must always be novel and new. Would I consider doing it with a few others, and using a historically-proven liturgy to help me along? When? Where? How often? To what extent?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She seemed so dependent upon God, always in conversation through prayer.

Prayer:

Jesus, deliver me from my self-sufficiency. Deliver me from my fear of giving up control. Change me. Make me, not the person that I want to be, but the person that you want me to be. Amen.

Practicing Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

March 15

“IN EXPERIENCES OF FASTING, WE ARE NOT SO MUCH ABSTAINING FROM FOOD AS FEASTING ON THE WORD OF GOD. FASTING IS FEASTING.

-Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

“PRAYER AND FASTING CONFERENCE. THE COST FOR ATTENDING THE CONFERENCE INCLUDES MEALS.”

-Seen in a Church Bulletin

Does anyone observe fasting today? Perhaps only observant Muslims? Or, maybe also the intermittent fasters that bother us by their devotion? We live in an instant gratification culture. Nothing is further than one click away. Perhaps some of us have tried to not eat for a few days. Perhaps we have given up chocolate or alcohol for a season. Perhaps we have fasted from the internet or Netflix. Maybe we gave up shopping or our daily latte. These are great practices, but they often fizzle and we often fail because we do not observe them in community nor do we attach them to feasting (as Richard Foster notes above).

Questions for Lent Reflection:

What could I “give up” during Lent? As I give this up, what might I “take up”? (What will I feast upon as I fast?)

Who might I share my fast with, and how will we hold one another accountable?

What is my fast teaching me about God? About myself? About others?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She was so content and principled. She seemed to let her ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and her ‘no’ be ‘no’!

Prayer:

Jesus, deliver me from the release, escape, and control that I exercise in my consumption of the people, substances, and behaviors that end up consuming me. Help me to feast upon you and your Word. Amen.

Practicing Giving and Generosity

Matthew 6:1-4, 19-24

March 22

“IF RICHES INCREASE, SET NOT YOUR HEART ON THEM.” *-Psalm 62:10*

“HE WHO TRUSTS IN HIS RICHES WILL WITHER.” *-Proverbs 11:28*

“RICHES AND ABUNDANCE COME HYPOCRITICALLY CLAD IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING PRETENDING TO BE SECURITY AGAINST ANXIETIES AND THEY BECOME THEN THE OBJECT OF ANXIETY... THEY SECURE A [PERSON] AGAINST ANXIETIES JUST ABOUT AS WELL AS THE WOLF WHICH IS PUT TO TENDING THE SHEEP SECURES THEM AGAINST THE WOLF.”

-Soren Kierkegaard, Christian Discourses, 1819.

“SELF- N. THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN THE UNIVERSE. SELFISH- ADJ. DEVOID OF CONSIDERATION FOR THE SELFISHNESS OF OTHERS. SELF-ESTEEM- N. AN ERRONEOUS APPRAISEMENT. EGOTIST- N. A PERSON OF LOW TASTE, MORE INTERESTED IN HIMSELF THAN IN ME.” *-Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary.*

We cannot give because we cannot get over ourselves. We are anxious, fearful creatures. Our time, talent, and treasure must provide us with either status or security—we spend for status or save for security. We feel it is our responsibility to hold it all together. Jesus, the one in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-22), points out the dinner menus of sparrows and the adornment of lilies in the field, and then commends us not to worry, but to trust him.

Questions for Lent Reflection:

What would it look like to give more of your time in 2020?
What would it look like to give more of your talent in 2020?
What would it look like to give more of your treasure in 2020?
What are the chief fears and concerns that are holding you back?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She was so generous!

Prayer:

Jesus, deliver me from the assumption that I care more about me than you care about me. Amen.

Practicing Slowing and Simplifying

March 29

Matthew 6:25-34

FATHER IN HEAVEN! WHAT ARE WE WITHOUT YOU? WHAT IS ALL THAT WE KNOW, VAST ACCUMULATION THOUGH IT BE, BUT A CHIPPED FRAGMENT IF WE DO NOT KNOW YOU? WHAT IS ALL OUR STRIVING, COULD IT EVER ENCOMPASS A WORLD, BUT A HALF-FINISHED WORK IF WE DO NOT KNOW YOU? YOU THE ONE, WHO IS ONE THING AND WHO IS ALL! SO MAY YOU... GIVE TO THE INTELLECT, WISDOM TO COMPREHEND THAT ONE THING; TO THE HEART, SINCERITY TO RECEIVE THIS UNDERSTANDING; TO THE WILL, PURITY THAT WILLS ONLY ONE THING. IN PROSPERITY MAY YOU GRANT PERSEVERANCE TO WILL ONE THING; AMID DISTRACTIONS, COLLECTEDNESS TO WILL ONE THING; IN SUFFERING, PATIENCE TO WILL ONE THING. YOU THAT GIVES BOTH THE BEGINNING AND THE COMPLETION, MAY YOU EARLY, AT THE DAWN OF THE DAY, GIVE TO THE YOUNG THE RESOLUTION TO WILL ONE THING. AS THE DAY WANES, MAY YOU GIVE TO THE OLD A RENEWED REMEMBRANCE OF THEIR FIRST RESOLUTION, THAT THE FIRST MAY BE LIKE THE LAST, THE LAST LIKE THE FIRST, IN POSSESSION OF A LIFE THAT HAS WILLED ON THING."

-Soren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing, 1813

OH LOOK AT ME IN MY FANCY CAR AND MY BANK ACCOUNT. OH, HOW I WISH I COULD TAKE IT ALL DOWN INTO MY GRAVE, GOD KNOWS I'D SAVE AND SAVE. MAN, TAKE A LOOK AGAIN, TAKE A LOOK AGAIN AT THE THINGS YOU HAVE COLLECTED, WELL IN THE END IT ALL PILES UP TO ONE BIG NOTHING, ONE BIG NOTHING AT ALL."

-Dave Matthews Band, Seek Up (Album: Remember Two Things)

WE BUY THINGS WE DO NOT NEED WITH MONEY THAT WE DO NOT HAVE TO IMPRESS PEOPLE THAT WE DO NOT LIKE.

-Arthur Gish, Beyond the Rat Race, 1973

"NOW HERE, YOU SEE, IT TAKES ALL THE RUNNING YOU CAN DO, TO KEEP IN THE SAME PLACE. IF YOU WANT TO GET SOMEWHERE ELSE, YOU MUST RUN AT LEAST TWICE AS FAST AS THAT!"

-the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland

"I am so busy." "I am so tired." I hear these two common refrains in nearly every conversation that I have. It is the rare person that sees the correlation. Thomas Aquinas referred to busy-ness as the same thing as laziness. We rarely take the time that is necessary to develop a what-not-to-do-list in order to slow down and simplify our lives. We remain busy with the urgent so we can be lazy with the important. Lent is a great season to take some time to slow down in order to focus upon what is important rather than what simply seems urgent.

Questions for Lent Reflection:

What should I stop doing in Lent and continue not doing in 2020?

Who are the people that populate my life? Are they the people that should populate my life?

How much time do I online or in front of the television? Is this too much? How could this change?

How much time do I spend on social media? Does this take me away from the people that I live in close proximity to?

What do I have that I could give away? What do I have that I could trash? What do I have that I could share?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She seemed like she always had time for me.

Prayer:

Jesus, deliver me from my hurry. Teach me to slow down. I cannot follow you if I am always running ahead. I want to follow you. Slow me down. Amen.

Practicing Trusting and Following

Matthew 7:24-29

April 5
Palm Sunday

Christians all over the world follow Jesus through Holy Week, or "The Week of the Passion." Would you set your cadence to Jesus' rhythm this week? Netflix has a great presentation of each Gospel account. Perhaps you might watch one? Consider reading through two of the Gospels this week. Come to our special services.

Questions for Lent Reflection:

Will you "trust me"?

Will you "follow me to the Cross"?

Will you "come to the Tomb"?

Will you "follow me through your funeral to eternity"?

Imagine this being said at your funeral:

She trusted him all the way to the very beginning.

Prayer:

Jesus, teach me to trust you. Jesus, teach me to follow you. Amen.