

What Is Lent, and Who Borrowed It?¹

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To Most Protestants, Lent is a time in the church year that is only now becoming to be appreciated. I can remember when I was in elementary school, when I refused something as a PB&J sandwich because I had given up PB for Lent, they would ask what Lent meant, had I lent my PB to someone else? And of course this would kick off a discussion about the Lenten season. Now we all know that the name LENT has nothing to do with something previously LOANED - it comes from an ancient word that meant "springtime," - that period of the calendar during which the days LENGTHen. Now if we say that with a bit of a British brogue, we can see how lengthen became Lenten. Because the church season always fell at that time of year, the name came to apply there as well. Even after the word "Lent" no longer referred to spring, it was still used by the church to describe the season before Easter.

As you know, the season of Lent as currently observed is said to last forty days, Ash Wednesday till Easter. The early church celebrated Lent only for a few days before Easter, but, over the centuries, the season grew until it was several weeks long. In the seventh century, the church set the period of Lent at forty days to remind people of the duration of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. And we often talk about the forty day Lenten season or Lenten fast. But if you count the days From Ash Wednesday to Easter, you'll find that there are actually 46 days. Why is that? The Sundays during Lent are not counted, Sundays are not considered as fast days, rather they are feast days, days in which we come together to share in the Eucharistic Feast.

My parents were not steeped in the traditions of Lent, more especially in the tradition of Ash Wednesday, and so while I heard about Ash Wednesday in Sunday School, it wasn't until I was in my late teens that I actually went to an Ash Wednesday service. But I remember seeing kids in school with a smudge of gray or black ash on their forehead. I remember the response I got the time I told a school chum he needed to go to the restroom and wash the smudge from his face and he said, "I can't, it's Ash Wednesday." I responded, "Oh," as if I understood the connection, yet I was really more puzzled than before I said anything.

Yet I remember the first year that I "Gave up something for Lent," it was PB. Now to appreciate just how serious a fast this was, PB was the only reason I survived elementary school. I remember when I was nine years old, my family was coming home after just finishing a huge Thanksgiving meal, and as we walked towards the front door I asked, "Can I have a peanut butter sandwich?" Peanut butter was a critical ingredient of breakfast, it was in my sack lunch I took to school, it was my afternoon snack and it was what I had after dinner if we had no dessert. So giving PB up for Lent became a great deal that year.

And too, I remember "Mite Boxes;" those little cardboard sheets that you would get in Sunday School and fold into a box. Then throughout Lent you would put change in the mite box as an additional aspect of self denial. Which is what Lent became to be known as, a season of self-denial. It is this tradition of self-denial that ultimately led to the raucous celebrations of Mardi

¹ Reference: Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

Gras – Fat Tuesday, or in Brazil, Carnival. The Tuesday before somber old Ash Wednesday would arrive, was seen as the last chance to kick over the traces before a month-and-a-half of bleakness. Since Lent was traditionally a time of fasting, the day before it began was always one during which people would use up the Fat Foods, the Foods from which they were to fast, eggs, butter, sugar, and in some cultures meats. And so "Fat Tuesday" or Carnival was celebrated with many traditional and tasty baked goods and seasoned meats. Then would come Ash Wednesday. No more goodies till Easter. It has since become a week long excuse for riotous living which is practiced more by pagans than by devout Christians.

What does Lent mean for us today? Yes, it is still the church season in which we prepare for Easter Sunday. It is a special time of prayer and reflection, of confession and self-denial, and yet Tom Fitzmorris wrote in the New Orleans City Business Newspaper, "It seems funny to come back after the excesses of Mardi Gras with a loophole for further pleasures of the flesh. But that's what Lent is to engaged New Orleans diners, even if you carry the Lenten strictures to an extreme. Because eating only seafood for 40 days is not much of a penance. My own plan: Order whatever fish looks good and only eat half of it. This will recall when the fasting days of Lent were marked on calendars with half a fish and a whole fish on Fridays."

Another newspaper columnist had it right sometime back when he said, "Lent is an excuse to be better." He wrote:

A steady stream...paraded down the aisle and paused for a priest to smudge the sign of the cross on our foreheads and warn, "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return." The message is: Be humble. No problem. Humility comes easily if you're a Catholic. The religion is impossible to live up to. Oh, Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul and a few others are good Catholics. But the other 600 million or so have plenty of weaknesses to keep us humble...

I vowed to dedicate Lent to a few do-able reforms--eat less (no Italian bread with butter for 40 days!), watch my language (no vulgar tantrums when agitated, such as in traffic jams), speak and think charitably of others, pray for people I envy or resent rather than criticize them. I was merely showing modest goals I've set for myself for years (with modest progress), but Lent concentrates mind and soul to try once again to achieve them, Lent is an excuse to be better...

An excuse to be better. I like that. What will Lent, mean for you? The decision is yours. Here are a few suggestions for your consideration, you may have heard of them, but they are worth considering anew.

- ⊕ GIVE UP grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks;" moaning, groaning, and complaining are not Christian disciplines.
- ⊕ GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, use that time in prayer.

- ⊕ GIVE UP looking at other people's worst points, concentrate on their BEST points. We all have faults. It will be easier for people to overlook OUR shortcomings when we overlook THEIRS first.
- ⊕ GIVE UP speaking unkindly, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting. As Tommy Smothers would say, "Curb your tongue, knave."
- ⊕ GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything; learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."
- ⊕ GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about...like tomorrow! Live for today and let God's grace be sufficient.
- ⊕ GIVE UP TV one evening a week! Instead, visit someone who is lonely or sick. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Give someone a precious gift, your time!
- ⊕ GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet their basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God's bounty, not consumers.

This is not a long list, in fact you can think of things to add to it. But in the true spirit of Christian Charity, why not make Lent an excuse to be better.

One last note regarding your fast, whatever it might be, remember what Jesus said, "when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

We are not to make a public spectacle of our offering, fasting, and self-denial so as to gain the attention of our peers. Rather we are to go humbly and quietly before others. If our sacrifice causes discomfort or pain, we are to conceal the discomfort and maintain a cheerful countenance so that no one is the wiser. For it is to the Lord only whom we offer our sacrifice, and Jesus promises that when we offer our sacrifice to God only, that He will recognize it and you will receive His reward.

Amen!