

“On the Lent”

A number of years ago, my seven- year-old nephew invited a friend over to play. When asked if he would like some pop to drink with lunch, he responded, “No.” Surprised, my sister-in-law asked if he liked pop. “Yes,” he did, but he couldn’t have it because, “I’m on the Lent.”

For many of us from an evangelical tradition, this has been our only understanding of Lent. We see it as a time when believers are asked to give up something they enjoy (like coffee, candy, chocolates, or activities like watching TV), for the purpose of spiritual growth. This act of self-denial is only a part of the Lenten journey.

Lent seeks to help us understand the concept of “deny yourself” more fully, and in our materialistic society, this can be a valuable experience of recognizing and reorganizing our priorities. But, if we understand the roots of the Lenten season, we see that Lenten spirituality and the journey to the cross (that for which Lent prepares us) is more rich.

Traditional observance

The church’s observance of Lent dates back to as early as AD 330, many years before the celebration of Christmas was established (around the sixth century). Lent was originally a time of intense discipleship preparing catechumen (those entering the church) for baptism on Easter morning. Their baptismal class of 40 days (emulating Christ’s 40 days in the wilderness) sought to teach the foundations of their faith and help them understand the implications of their call to follow Christ. It became a time of spiritual renewal for the entire church, as existing members were reminded of their own baptism and commitment to Christ. Today, it is a time in the church year when we revisit the core of the gospel (sin, repentance, and forgiveness) and learn how to live out our faith in the contemporary world.

The word “Lent” comes from the Middle Ages when the English word “lenten,” meaning “spring,” became associated with the 40 days before Easter in the traditions of the church. This is where our tradition of “spring cleaning” comes from, as congregants were encouraged to clean up their homes and prepare their hearts and lives for the Easter celebration.

We too should prepare for Easter; Lent is a time when we are asked to remember what truly matters in life. This year, the liturgical readings for the weeks of Lent take us on a journey of renewing our faith and commitment. As we hear stories of changed lives, we are encouraged to change.

The six weeks leading up to Easter is a time to identify and repent of the things that are hindering our walk with God, and build new habits into our lives. What is your spiritual diet as you prepare for Easter? What old habits do you need to change?

Lenten spirituality does not ask you to deny yourself for the sake of outward piety, but Lent tradition asks you to forgo one thing in order to replace it with something better as a part of your own spiritual renewal. We replace old habits with new ones. We sacrifice something in order to give. Giving up coffee for Lent should also mean donating the money you would have spent on coffee to those less fortunate. Giving up TV should also mean that we are spending our time on works of service and helping others.

As you prepare for Easter this year, consider being “on the Lent.” Come as a child once again, renew your mind with the truths of Scripture, dig deep into the core of what you believe, and find the call to follow Christ in the everyday. Allow God to build into your life new habits that will transform the way you live the rest of this year and the years to come.

Side Note:

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday (Mar. 9 this year). The Ash Wednesday worship service seeks to remind us of our mortality. We enter into Lent with the prayer of repentance – “create in me a clean heart.” The Gospel reading for this day (Matthew 6:1–6,16–21) asks us, “What is the true essence of our faith living?”

The following weeks emphasize the foundation of our faith and the profound nature of the works of Christ in us.

Week 1: Temptation – Sin has entered the world and we are all fallen (Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7). As Christ was tempted in the wilderness he overcame and became the new Adam, the one who lived a pure life to give life to all (Romans 5:12–19). We can have hope.

Week 2: Deny sin – God calls us to stop pretending we are righteous and come, like Nicodemus, to Christ (John 3:1–17) to be “born again” and live a new life in Christ.

Week 3: Repentance – Like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5–42), we are called to confront our sin and repent. This will lead to a transformation of our hearts and lives as we seek to know and follow God.

Week 4: Healing and conversion – We come to Christ as the man born blind (John 9:1–41) and the healing power of God restores us for his glory.

Week 5: Foretaste of Easter – As Ezekiel saw in the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14), we see in Lazarus that Christ has the power to raise the dead (John 11:1–45). That resurrection power is alive and at work in us as we choose to hear Christ’s voice, repent of our sin, and follow Him.

Week 6: Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion – We celebrate Christ as the coming King and hear ourselves in the crowd saying, “Hosanna, Lord save us,” (Matt 21:1–11) but we also read of Christ’s betrayal in Matt 26–27 and recognize our betrayal put him there. Holy Week begins with the journey to the cross and ends in the joy of Easter morning.

For further study:

Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, c. 2004.

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