

Ash Wednesday

2-14-18

“Who Needs Lent?”

Let's face it. Lent is in trouble. Let me explain. Most of us have favorite holiday seasons. For some it's Christmas, with the family get-togethers and presents. For others it's the Fourth of July and summer, filled by a sense of national pride and beach vacations to boot. But each year at just about this time, it strikes me that very few of us would pick Lent ... a season that seems to most of us as grim as the weather that attends it in the Northwoods.

Think about it ... who amongs us crosses off days on the calendar until Ash Wednesday ... leaving work just a little early, saying “I've got to get my Lenten shopping done.” When have you seen advertisements on billboards and television reading “only 12 more days ‘til the day of Ashes?” How many little kids go to bed, asking their parents, “How much longer ‘till Lent is here?” It just doesn't happen.

The trouble with Lent, I think, is fairly clear. It's buried right in the heart of the primary reading for Ash Wednesday, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6: “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their

faces so as to show others that they are fasting.” (Sigh) Actually, you don’t have to read the whole verse, as the brunt of the problem of Lent is in the first four words of the 16th verse, “And when you fast...” And when you fast?! C’mon. Who fasts anymore? I’m not talking about Jenny Craig, or Nutrisystem, or Atkins Diets ... I’m talking about the ascetic practice of denying yourself to be closer to God. It used to happen with some frequency ... but very few people fast anymore.

And there it is in a nutshell, you see, the trouble with Lent ... it feels like this strange, weirdly anachronistic holiday that celebrates things we don’t value and encourages attitudes we don’t share. No wonder that each year fewer and fewer churches observe this age-old (fourth century!) tradition ... it’s too old-fashioned, too “Roman,” too medieval for many contemporary Christians to handle.

So, let’s face it. Lent is in trouble. I mean, even among those traditions like ours that do honor the season, rarely is there the same kind of enthusiasm or expectancy which greets Advent. We don’t pine to sing Lenten hymns ahead of time. Lent is in trouble.

I don’t know, maybe it’s that there are no presents at the end, and no fun and games along the way. Or maybe it’s that Lent asks us to give up things. I mean, my word, haven’t we had to sacrifice enough already to get our kids through

college, to save for retirement, to put that new roof on the house, thank you very much. Why should we give up anything more for Lent?

Or maybe it's the themes of Lent that trouble us. Penitence. Sacrifice.

Contemplation. These are the words of Lent, and I, for one, have a hard time believing they were popular even with the Puritans (you remember them don't you, they were the folks that actually held competitions to see who could resist the greatest temptation or avoid the most pleasure) and I know they aren't popular now.

Lent, I'm telling you, it's in trouble. And so, each year, as I listen to my non-Lent-observing colleagues knock it as "works theology" and my Lent-observing colleagues complain about it as a pain in the neck, the same question inevitably demands loudly to be answered ... Why Lent? I mean, who really needs it?

But you know what? Each year, whatever my feelings approaching Lent may be, the same answer comes whispering back ... *I do*. Just maybe, I need Lent. Just maybe I need a time to focus ... to get my mind off of myself, my next sermon, my next meeting ... and a hundred other things to which I look for meaning ... and center myself in *Meaning* itself.

Just maybe I need a time (is 40 days really enough?) to help clear my head of the distractions which any involved life in this world will necessarily bring ... and re-orient myself towards the Maker of all that was given for my pleasure and which I have let become merely distracting.

Maybe I need the opportunity (and perhaps deep down I crave the chance!) to clear my eyes of the glaze of indifference and apathy which comes from situation after situation where I feel nearly helpless so that I can fasten my eyes once more on the almost unbearable revelation of the God who loves God's children enough to take the form of a man hanging on a tree.

And maybe, just maybe ... and this takes the greatest amount of imagination of them all ... just maybe Lent really isn't mine to do with whatever I please.

Perhaps Lent isn't even the Church's to insist upon or discard at will. Maybe Lent isn't any of ours to scoff at or observe. Maybe Lent is God's. Maybe Lent is God's gift to a people starved for meaning, for courage, for comfort, for life.

If it is ... if we can imagine that Lent is not ours at all but is wholly God's ... then maybe we'll also begin to recall ... at first vaguely but then more strongly ... that we, too, are not ours at all, but are wholly God's ... God's own possession and treasure.

Seen this way, Lent reminds us of whose we are. The “sacrifices,” the disciplines ... these are not intended as good works offered by us to God ... rather, they are God’s gifts to us to remind us who we are ... God’s adopted daughters and sons ... God’s treasure, so priceless that God was willing to go to any length ... or, more appropriately, to any depth ... to tell us that we are loved, that we have value, that we have purpose.

Yes. I need Lent. I need an absence of gifts so that I might acknowledge *the* Gift. I need a time to be quiet and still ... a time to crane my neck and lift my head, straining to hear again what was promised me at Baptism ... “You are mine! I love you! I am with you!”

I need Lent, finally, to remind me of who I am ... God’s heir and Christ’s co-heir ... so that, come Easter, I can rejoice and celebrate with all the joy, all the revelry, all the anticipation, of a true heir to the throne.

And so yes, I need Lent. And to tell you the truth, I suspect that you do, too. You see, if Lent is in trouble, it’s only because we’re in trouble ... so busy trying to make or keep or save our lives ... that we fail to notice that God has already saved us ... and has already freed us to live with each other ... and for each other ... all the rest of our days. And so, we have Lent, a gift of the church ... the season during which God prepares us to behold God’s own great sacrifice for us ... with

the hope and prayer that, come Good Friday and Easter, we may be immersed once again into God's mercy and perceive more fully God's great love for us and all the world and in this way find the peace and hope and freedom that we so often lack.