

Preaching On Lent

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AT the beginning of Lent one pastor told his listeners in a joking way, "Go out there and suffer." Preachers need to ask: What is Lent? Does it have value? How is it best kept? Where does it lead? How do we find a delicate balance between the rigorous fasting and self-denial of the past and meaningful ways to observe Lent? It certainly is a time of self-denial and self-examination especially in relationship to the cross, a clarion call to embrace the cross whole-heartedly. We need to track the bleeding feet of Jesus all the way to Calvary. The saints certainly felt the marks of his footprints in their hearts. It can help to name the new Calvaries or Good Fridays leading to Easter.

For some Lent means a revival, for others a survival. It can be a labyrinth workshop not knowing where we are headed or how we are to get

there, or be like a ship's sextant guiding us during forty days to a safe harbor. Lent is a bronze serpent saving us from dying in the desert. It is a time to live as pilgrims and strangers, people on the march. It can be a time to counteract the temper of our times because many listeners hide behind walls of indifference, apathy, procrastination and even smugness. Do we admit our need for Lent? One retreat master asked the retreatants to take pictures of Lent and make a collage. They were told to come back on Palm Sunday and share. That project became a very moving experience for many of the participants.

We know that Lent can be traced back to the 4th century, the Council of Nicea. It has been observed by Orientals, Orthodox and Western Catholic churches through the centuries. How many know that the pretzel dates to the fifth century and

was eaten only from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday? Its shape symbolizes two crossed arms in prayer. Ash Wednesday has a mystique of its own. Huge numbers crowd churches on this day to receive the ashes that can be a kind of "baptismal branding." If there are follow-up programs in parishes during Lent, we might ask Jesus' question, "Where are the other nine?" We are invited to observe the forty days Jesus spent in the loneliness of the wilderness that can present a stark reality. For some it is a period of vacuum, emptiness and loneliness where we readily want to push the anxiety button. Abraham and Sarah experienced the loneliness of being without a child. The prodigal son felt loneliness while sitting in a pig sty. Martha and Mary felt the sting when Lazarus died. The devil tried to fill this loneliness for Jesus by his threefold temptation to bread, glory and power.

Fasting

Fasting is a well-established biblical custom with a rich significance especially as a preparation for Easter. It was common in the ancient world and a way to empower one's prayer life. We can recall how the Apostles failed to cast out a demon from a child with convulsions. Jesus told them that this could be done through prayer and fasting. Lent is the time to trim our excess and try to

put us into shape. We often follow a recipe for superficiality or doing the minimum rather than accept a more adventurous call to austerity. Lent is not a time of waffling, indecision, or half-heartedness. We wrestle as Jacob did with our pride, jealousy, irritability, nagging doubts and fears. Do we arm ourselves with a sword like Peter, or live with ambiguity and lack of control?

True fasting involves a struggle. Medieval romances often picture the knight who is about to go into battle or slay the dragon as fasting. Fasting deepened a resolve to carry out his quest, not cringing in the presence of evil. Lent paints a similar picture of confrontation between good and evil locked in deadly combat. Jesus entered into this combat when he met the devil during his forty days in the desert. His fasting prepared him for this encounter as well as his mission. He dealt a mortal blow to the devil when he said, "Get away, Satan!" (Mt. 4:10) Lent is often presented even by some preachers as a time to give up things. It reminds me of the three men who were discussing what they were going to give up for Lent. One said that he was going to give up smoking. The other said that he was not going to touch any hard liquor. When the third man did not say anything, they asked him, "And what are you giving up?" "Oh," he replied, "I am just giving up!"

Fasting has to be done always in relationship to prayer and almsgiving

(not just a donation of money but good works like a gift of our time, talent or just an attentive ear). They form a holistic triad. Thomas Merton in his *Climate of Monastic Prayer* wrote, "Such exercises as fasting cannot have their proper effect unless our motives for practicing them spring from personal meditation." To fast without praying or doing good works is counterproductive. The same is true concerning prayer or doing good works. Even in Isaiah's time meaningless fasting was condemned: "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own" (58:6-7). Reuben fasted for seven years for selling Joseph into Egypt.

Lent is a time to highlight our images of fasting, prayer and almsgiving that are brought out by Jesus in the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday. But we are presented with a conundrum because Jesus asks us to do this without being seen. The punch line comes when he said, "Your Father who sees in secret, will reward you" (Mt. 6:4). This can be disconcerting because we have been told over and over again not to perform good deeds to be seen by others. We have preached how getting rewarded is selfish and needs to be

avoided. What preachers need to point out is that Jesus expects his disciples to already be doing these acts but they might need to re-focus and sharpen them. Megan McKenna believes that Lent is a time for conspiracy with God and us. The derivation of the word "conspire" means to breathe together, to have one heart beating in unison. All conspiracies are done in secrecy or are hidden. Maybe that is how we approach whatever we do during Lent, a secret shared only with God.

The reward

But what is the reward? Silence! The Gospel does not give any; we are left in the dark. Is it the hope of heaven or a glimpse of the beatific vision? No. The Greek word *misthos* means pay or hired labor. It reminds us of the parable of the hired laborers, where the landowner said, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Mt 20:15) Jesus stressed the generosity of God. The reward will be as generous as the action is small. This is brought out very forcefully in the life of St. Therese of Lisieux. She helped a crotchety old nun to the refinery or dining room for her meals. Therese maintained that it was a small act but already rewarded here on earth, "small as it is." She also wrote, "Do not let your left hand know what your right is doing."

Fasting for many people is going

on a diet with the purpose of losing some weight. It has become a fad or a guru practice for some. We read in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "Whoso will pray, he must fast and be clean, and fat his soul and make his body lean." But in many instances these diets are short-lived because they often are not accompanied by prayer and good works. To follow through on a strong regimen, one has to discipline oneself for a real conversion to take place. The same can be said of smoking. A certain chaplain asked a heavy smoker who wanted to give up smoking for Lent how he was doing. "Not too good," he replied, "it lasted for 10 hours and eight of them I was asleep." Observe the run for nicotine patches that are taken off pharmacy selves during Lent.

The purpose of fasting is to change our perceptions and vision or to increase our ability to see what ordinarily seems opaque. Fasting can cast light on the areas of our darkness and free people to pray more intensely, and be more willing to perform good works. Wholesome or holistic fasting refrains from being stoic and Jansenistic that emphasizes the body-soul duality.

Desert experience

Lent has often been characterized as a desert experience where we enter unchartered territory or an un-

discovered country. Maggie Ross in her *Seasons of Death and Life* maintains, "No one can take you into the desert. You must find the path yourself. Plunge into the loneliness, your hunger, and your thirst. In the desert you will be purified and tempted. God will speak to your heart and angels will come and minister to you." It can be a place of healing and transformation. We reach for the hem of Jesus' garment and feel his healing power surge through our bodies. We can easily become anesthetized by eating, drinking, excessive working, partying and shopping. It takes much discipline not to fall into the trap of consumerism, to buy, buy, and of course pay later. Thus we point out how our listeners might be in need of transformation, new beginnings or a new exodus. The desert is a place of passage, not a final place, where God wants to bring us home.

The Jewish concept of the desert was a place of demons, rough stones, and howling winds. Desert is a place of deprivation. We don't like being deprived because we are often slaves to food, pleasure, and what others think of us. When in pain we take a pill. As we grow older we dye our hair or have a face-lift. Lent is an invitation we extend to our listeners to revisit their own agonies, scourings, and crucifixions. It might be the agony of Parkinson's disease, the scourge of a mental disease, the crucifixion of growing old gracefully. The desert is often a place of wil-

dermess much like the Sinai Peninsula was for the Israelites. There they roamed for 40 years where God had to smash their false idols before they could enter the Promised Land. Lent is a time when we name our false idols, claim them, and tame them. In smashing our false gods we also smash our false ego that can stand for edging God out.

Mark Searle states, "The purpose of the first part of Lent is to bring us to compunction. 'Compunction' is etymologically related to the verb 'to puncture' and suggests the deflation of our inflated egos, a challenge to any self-deceit about the quality of our lives as disciples of Jesus." If we say that we don't have any false gods or a false ego, we deceive ourselves. All we have to do is look at our addictions, whether to television, workaholism, alcoholism, etc. Lent helps us to find our true selves. We see ourselves as God sees us, and that is all we are, no more, no less.

The desert offers a new found freedom where we leave behind the familiar. Are we afraid of that? We need to awaken from our sleepwalking or our sleep of death. The Israelites wanted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt. What if Moses had allowed those people who complained the most to go back to the fleshpots? Maybe in a short time they would have tried, probably sheepishly, to sneak back into the Israelite camps. The desert is a place of choice. Do we choose life or death? (Dt. 30:19)

We need to encourage our listeners to choose life regardless of the cost, the pain or the risks because that brings real freedom. Whether we walk in the Garden of Eden or in the desert we have to remember that God walked there first. We need to face the desert if we are to reach the Garden where all are free.

What do we go out to the desert to see?

We certainly will encounter the devil as Jesus did. But we also are invited to partake of the manna, to strike the rock, and living water will spring forth. Maybe we will receive a new name (Rev. 2:17), a morning star (Rev. 2:28) or an open door (Rev. 3:8). Our God is a desert God who invites us into the deepest center of ourselves, the desert within. As the prophet Hosea said, "So I will lure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart" (2:16). The desert is not big enough for two," says Kazantzakis. "Either we live and God dies, or we die and God lives."

Hunger for something deeper

Bernard Lonergan, S.J. (someone has said that his complex thought has saved him from becoming a celebrity) maintains that every individual has a longing for authenticity which is discovered only when we find our true selves and fall in love with God

and all that God has created. We fear to surrender to God's love because we picture God distant from us and very demanding. Lonergan states that God is not met "out there" but within. A worthwhile goal for Lent is to get in touch with the God within and to remember, "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). We need to plumb the depths of that saying which might take a lifetime. Wade Clark Roof in *A Generation of Seekers* states that baby-boomers have rebelled against sterile dogmatics; they are seeking deeper truths. Are we offering them?

Lent is a time of final preparation for people who are to be baptized at the Easter vigil. The Council Fathers insisted that Lent has a twofold character: penitential and baptismal. Preachers can encourage listeners to support the RCIA people who are to be baptized by praying and fasting in solidarity with them. This program has also deepened the faith of those who accompany the catechumens toward their goal. We share in their joy by renewing our baptismal commitment during the Easter vigil, a return to our spiritual roots.

Lent makes us aware that the emptier we are inside, the more we crave for food, money, clothing, and a comfortable life style. We often don't feel the deeper hunger of the soul because we spend too much time trying to satisfy material hungers. We don't see our inner nakedness the way Adam and Eve saw

their nakedness once they sinned. Jesus came to open our eyes to deeper truth—that we are sinners but still loved by God. He said, "Blessed are your eyes, because they see" (Mt. 13:16).

Repentance

Repentance is at the heart of the Lenten season (nothing insightful about that!). Jesus underwent John's baptism of repentance (Mt. 3:13) even though John opposed the idea. Repentance implies a change of direction in one's life, a new attitude or way of thinking or behaving. Raymond Brown, the famous scripture scholar, speaks of it as a *metanoia*. This entails a change of heart and mind, a new way of thinking and acting. We contrast or test our values with Jesus' values. As a result we experience God's presence in a unique way. The preacher's task is to invite listeners to be open to repentance and be willing to counteract any resistance. Lent can become a new beginning in one's life. The turning away from sin or selfishness also implies a turning more toward God and others. So instead of carrying heavy loads of unjust anger, resentment, hurts, and the desire to control, we need to replace them with forgiveness, letting go, and not living in the past.

Jesus turned his whole attention to Jerusalem and his death and ris-

ing. Listeners can be invited to take up their crosses and follow in Jesus' footsteps. But preachers have to precede them or practice some form of repentance before they can effectively preach this message. Luke in his "travel narrative" states how emphatically Jesus turned his attention to Jerusalem, "He resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem" (9:51). Nothing could deter him from his goal. A parallel could be made to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Jesus' earthly mission was to free us from our sins. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. King's mission was not just to free African-Americans from bondage and the evils of racism, but also to free all people from their evil prejudices or attitudes toward race. King knew the dangers that lurked in Memphis, but he went. It was his last Lent here on earth.

Oscar Romero wrote in *The Violence of Love*, "Our Lent should awaken a sense of social justice." Our undernourished countries have a perpetual Lent. We need to

broaden our vision and not just be concerned about our own forms of penance. His Holiness, Pope John Paul II in his homily at Yankee Stadium entitled "Pilgrim of Peace" stated, "The poor of the United States and of the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ. You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs of the feast. You must take of your substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them. And you must treat them like guests at your family table." Leonardo Boff in *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice*, states, "The eternal destiny of human beings will be measured by how much or how little solidarity we have displayed with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the oppressed. In the end we will be judged in terms of love." Lent is the time to practice this kind of justice. Are we ready to preach Lent?

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St. Francis de Sales had many friends and maintained a voluminous correspondence with them. One of his special spiritual companions was St. Jane de Chantal, with whom he helped found the Order of the Visitation. When Jane, a young widow, was first contemplating a religious vocation, she appeared at a party bedecked in her family's finest jewels. St. Francis looked her up and down and then asked if she was seeking a husband or still considering religious life. When Jane assured him her heart was set on the convent, Francis wryly observed, "Then, Madame, I suggest you lower the sails." — From PRAYING WITH THE SAINTS, W.Koenig-Bricker, Loyola Press