

Theology on the Rocks - Preparing for Lent

We are drawing very near now to the time of Lent. Yes, it is that time when McDonald's starts selling a Fish Sandwich, and sales of peanut butter go up! But Lent is not a time when we don't eat meat on Friday, it is a time of preparation for the glory of Easter. We follow our Lord into the desert and take on spiritual disciplines to remove distractions from our hearts and souls. Then we can follow the Lord into his Paschal Mystery. So, let us take a look at the disciplines in a way that will make us more ready to start this blessed time next week.

Christians intensify three religious practices during Lent: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We have inherited these from our Jewish roots and share such practices even today with our Jewish sisters and brothers. In truth, they are generally Semitic roots, as devout Muslims also focus on these three disciplines, especially during the holy month of Ramadan.

Fasting can mean different things. Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, abstaining from meat and eating only one full meal (and two smaller meals according to one's need to

maintain strength). We also abstain from meat on all the Fridays of Lent. Fasting is a way to discipline our body and make us more aware of our dependence on God, getting in touch with the deepest spiritual hunger in our lives. It is a way of becoming more attentive to how we live our lives. We find what is truly needed and what is simply extra. Fasting's purpose is to draw us closer to God.

It is also traditional for us to “fast” from other things during Lent, from the time when we are children. Often it is giving up candy or other sweets, something we enjoy. If we observe this kind of “fast” every day during Lent, we may be tempted to break our commitment occasionally, to sneak just one little piece of candy or a cookie. But there is also something very satisfying when we find that we can discipline ourselves and persevere in our “fasting” throughout the forty days. This is a helpful discipline, but it is rightfully a very juvenile way of fasting. We adults have come farther than that, so our fasting should grow as we have.

I have a suggestion for Lent this year: May we “fast” from being angry and reactionary people during this Lent. We have become so outraged as a society. Everything is a cause to lose peace and shout

about what is “not right.” May our Lenten fast be to “give up” that worldly way of reacting. We are Christians, and we can choose to respond with patience, peace, and understanding, with care for our sister or brother in Christ. This is how we deepen our love of God and our love of neighbor.

When we speak of prayer, we are talking about giving time and space to be with God. During Lent we have traditions of praying the rosary daily, if this is not our habit. We have the Stations of the Cross regularly in our parishes during Lent. These are beautiful traditions and we should definitely keep them up. However, once again, it is time to reflect on our adult faith. How can we truly deepen in prayer during this season? One thing that is so needed in our noisy world is to cultivate a sense of silence. We Christians have a tradition of contemplation that we need to reclaim. Contemplation means we sit in silence with the Lord, and let the Holy Spirit speak to our hearts in ways we cannot hear with our ears or understand with our minds. It can be difficult, as our brain rushes to fill the silence. But use this Lenten time to practice. Give it 5 or 10 minutes a day to start. Find a place you can be at peace, then sit comfortably and ask God to be with you. Then silence your mind and heart. Let God move in his

mysterious ways. When thoughts or images come flashing in – and they will! – simply acknowledge them and let them slip past you. You can deal with them later. This is a privileged time with God. May prayer be your foundation this Lent.

And finally, we come to almsgiving. This one is among the most misunderstood aspects of our Lenten practices. We do almsgiving with things like the second collection for the poor or like the rice bowl. But very often these things are reduced to giving the change we have in our pocket at the time. Real almsgiving is intentionally caring for the poor. It is seeing those in need as our sisters and brothers, and being urgent about sharing with them. How can you or even your family serve the poor this Lent? Can you make sandwiches and hand them out to the homeless? Maybe volunteer at Catholic Charities. Organize a canned food drive for 40 Cans for Lent. Give up something you are used to and spend that money rather helping those who do not have the resources you have. Almsgiving reminds us that we are all united in the world. Everyone on earth is my neighbor, all are my brothers and sisters, and we need to work to open our hearts to them.

So, my friends, may we approach Lent like adults, allowing God to deepen our faith and our faithfulness, by deepening these practices so many of us grew up with. May they be tools to increase our love of God and our love of neighbor, so that when Holy Week comes, we will be ready to welcome the Lord of love and life.