

ON KEEPING A HOLY LENT

Rev. Craig Higgins, Pastor, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Rye, NY

People from different religious backgrounds have very different reactions to the season of Lent. Some grow up in churches where Lent is observed, but with little to no real explanation. Whether observed as a time of strict austerity or merely as a time of forgoing a few simple pleasures, in such cases Lent may seem like an empty, meaningless ritual.

On the other hand, some grow up in church traditions where Lent is not observed at all. These folks may think of Lenten observance as, at best, a hollow custom, or, at worst, quite foreign to authentic Christianity. As a matter of fact, many who grew up in church have the same question as those who didn’t: “What is Lent, anyway?”

THE MEANING OF LENT

Lent’s origin is hidden in the early centuries of church history, but we do know that it originated as a time of preparation for Easter. From the church’s earliest days, the resurrection of Christ celebrated not only each week (on Sunday, the Lord’s Day), but also in a special festival of the resurrection. This festival we call Easter Day, and it is celebrated as the Sunday of Sundays!

Lent, as a season of preparation, is traditionally focused on repentance. Speaking biblically, to repent means to make a change in our attitudes, words, and lifestyles. As 16th century reformer Martin Luther taught, the Christian life in its totality is a life of repentance. Beginning when we first commit our lives to Christ, and continuing throughout our lives, we are more and more turning away from sin and self-centeredness and more and more turning to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Even though a repentant spirit should mark all we do, it is still appropriate that certain times be set aside for a particular focus on repentance.* The church has traditionally done this at the Lenten season (and, to a lesser extent, in the pre-Christmas season of Advent).

Lent, therefore, is a time for focusing on the heart, a time for asking questions about our spiritual health:

- What are my characteristic sins, and how can I work and pray for change?
- What idols have captured my imagination so that my love for the living God has grown cold?

* In much the same way, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ each Sunday, but especially at Easter; and while we should always thank God for the Incarnation, we especially celebrate it at Christmas. These periodic reminders keep us from becoming forgetful and imbalanced.

- In what ways is my devotion to Christ and his church less than wholehearted?

The Lenten season is the spiritual equivalent of an annual physical exam; it’s a time to take stock of our lives, our hearts.

Keeping Lent, however, is potentially dangerous, precisely because of this focus on the heart. After all, it is much easier to read a book on prayer than to spend time leisurely speaking with our heavenly Father. It is much easier to fast from certain foods than it is to turn from idols of the heart. It is much easier to write a check than to spend time in ministries of mercy. Consequently, Lent is easily trivialized. The point of Lent is not to give up chocolate; it’s to give up sin!

Even with this warning, however, we need to beware of going from one extreme to the other. Yes, it is possible so completely to *externalize* your Lenten observance that you end up trivializing it. Yet we need to remember that we are not purely spiritual beings. God created humans as *physical* beings; we are psychosomatic creatures, a “nexus of body and soul.”† What we do physically has an effect on us spiritually—and we neglect this principle to our peril.

For example, it is unquestionably true that my attitude in prayer is more important than my posture in prayer. However, sometimes being in a physical posture of humility—kneeling in prayer—helps me get in the right frame of mind. It shouldn’t surprise us in the least that there is a connection between the physical and spiritual; it simply reflects how God created us. That’s why, at the center of Christian worship, God gave us the sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist—simple physical rites involving water, bread, and wine, but rites that communicate to us the most profound of spiritual realities. That’s also why, in the pages of Holy Scripture and throughout the history of the church, we find many physical acts and postures‡ designed to help us worship, to help us pray, to help us in our spiritual growth.

Recognizing this God-created link between the physical and the spiritual, the Lenten season has historically

† This phrase comes from Dr. Jack Collins of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis.

‡ The list could be quite long, such as standing for prayer and praise, bowing one’s head and closing one’s eyes for prayer. Two practices not generally practiced by Presbyterians also come to mind: Lifting up one’s hands for prayer and praise is seen in both Scripture and history. And making the sign of the cross, while post-biblical, has a long history (yes, even in Protestant circles!).

included a physical element, specifically fasting and other acts of self-denial. We'll deal with these more fully below.

SHOULD WE OBSERVE LENT?

I am sometimes asked why churches should observe Lent at all. Well, I certainly agree that of all the seasons of the church year Lent is the most-often trivialized. Consequently, many churches (including some Presbyterian churches) do not observe the season. There are, however, two good reasons for keeping this tradition:

First, this is a *wise* tradition. Realizing that repentance should characterize the totality of the Christian life, we should see the practical wisdom in setting aside time especially for this purpose. Just as a baseball player may work at staying in shape year round but still give special attention to conditioning before the start of spring training, so we may find great spiritual benefits in setting aside a few weeks to give special attention to the state of our souls.

Second, it is right that we *honor* the traditional wisdom of the church, and Lent is a tradition that the church has observed for centuries. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has been present throughout church history, guiding God's people into an ever-increasing awareness of biblical truth, we believe that it is foolhardy to disregard history and constantly to try to "reinvent the wheel." We dishonor our spiritual ancestors when we casually disregard their wisdom.

Are Christians required to observe Lent? Strictly speaking, no; Presbyterians have long emphasized that our consciences are bound to Scripture alone, and there is no biblical mandate to celebrate Lent. But countless generations of Christians have found this a helpful tool.

WHEN IS LENT?

The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts until Holy Saturday, the Saturday before Easter Day. The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, which includes both Maundy Thursday (commemorating the institution of the Eucharist) and Good Friday (commemorating the crucifixion of our Lord).

Reminiscent of Jesus' fasting for forty days in the wilderness, the Lenten season, not counting Sundays, lasts forty days. Sundays are not included because the Lord's Day, according to church tradition, is never a fast day but always a *feast* day—a celebration of the resurrection! Therefore, during Lent the Lord's Days are listed as Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent.

HOW CAN I (& MY FAMILY) KEEP A HOLY LENT?

Traditionally, the Lenten season is observed in four basic (and often overlapping) ways:

Self-examination. As we've discussed, this is central to the traditional Lenten observance. Use this time to ask yourself some hard questions about your spiritual life, your spiritual maturity.* If you're married, ask your spouse to give you his or her evaluation of your spiritual health. Many Christians have a Christian friend, or a small group of fellow believers, who have agreed to hold them accountable. If you don't have an accountability group or partner, Lent might be a good time to initiate such a relationship. Parents—especially fathers—could use Lent as time to spend more time with their children individually, trying to understand their particular spiritual struggles and providing them encouragement.

With all this emphasis on self-examination, however, it is crucial to keep your focus the *gospel*: All of us are more sinful and helpless than we would've ever dared admit, yet in Christ we are more accepted and forgiven than we would've ever dared hope. Be careful that your self-examination is centered on this good news. There is always the danger of falling into morbid introspection, which can lead to despair over your own spiritual health and to a harsh legalism toward others.

Self-denial. The Lenten season traditionally is also a time for acts of self-discipline and self-denial, a time to remind ourselves that we do not live by bread alone. Self-denial helps us remember what is so beautifully signified in the Eucharist—that Jesus is the true bread of life, our only source of strength and sustenance.

The two major fast days of the traditional church year—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—both occur during the Lenten season. Traditionally, the other days of Lent—except Sundays, of course[†]—are marked by other acts of self-denial. Some common examples would be giving up one meal a day or giving up a particular food. Self-denial, however, doesn't always involve what we eat; some people may work on other habits, seeking better to use their time. (I've known some people to fast from watching too much television!) For families in this dangerously frenetic culture, Lent would be certainly be an appropriate time to cut back on the seemingly-endless flow of activities and spend time worshipping, praying, and learning together.

Since fasting is so unfamiliar to many in our culture, it is wise to consult with a pastor or other spiritual leader before making any decisions in this area. (Some people, of course—such as expectant or nursing mothers, the sick,

* See the questions at the end of this paper for a place to start.

[†] The traditional church calendar sometimes has a few other "feast days" during Lent as well.

and those on special diets—should not fast.) Before you begin fasting, I would recommend that you look at what the Scriptures say about the practice (see especially Matthew 6), and perhaps get some guidance from good books on the subject.* And again, remember that there is nothing magic in these spiritual disciplines; they are tools to help you grow closer to Christ.

Acts of compassion. The Lenten season is a particularly appropriate time to ask God to fill you with compassion for the poor and oppressed and to put this into practice in concrete ways. This can take many practical forms. For example, there are Christians who give up one meal a day as a Lenten discipline, and then give the money they've saved by doing so to the poor. Many churches—including ours—have an Easter offering for ministries of mercy, so money saved during Lent could be given at that time.

There are many ways in which families can practice compassion during Lent. In your neighborhood, there may be a poor family you could help (with or without drawing attention to yourselves). Or maybe you know an older person who lives alone who could use some help around the house—or would simply like having a friend. Some families save their loose change or forego some simple expenditures, then give the money to the poor. Lent can be an excellent opportunity to teach our children the value of compassion.[†]

Using the means of grace. Finally, the Lenten season is a time for renewing our focus on the means of grace—a focus that all-too-easily fades when not given adequate attention. Historically, the church has said there are three means of grace—three instruments through which God helps us grow to be more and more like Christ: the Scriptures, prayer, and the sacraments.

If regular times of prayer and Bible study have never been a part of your life (or if they once were but have become less so) then Lent is a wonderful opportunity to begin these life-changing practices. There are scores of lectionaries and Bible-reading plans out there; talk with a pastor or mature Christian to help you find one right for you;[‡] there are also many helpful aids for developing a consistent life of prayer. The Lenten season would also be a good time to get involved in a small group—a practice that generations of Christians have commended as key to their spiritual growth. And if your family doesn't have a time of worship together, Lent is a great time to start—and then keep going the rest of the year!

* An excellent discussion on fasting and other spiritual disciplines is found in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991).

† For more ideas on building compassion as a value in your family, see John & Susan Yates, *What Really Matters at Home: Eight Crucial Elements for Building Character in Your Family* (Word, 1992), especially chapter 5.

In our individualistic culture, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Christianity is a *communal* faith, that the center of Christian life is not private religious devotion but corporate worship, gathering with fellow believers to sing, pray, and receive Holy Communion. There are many today who identify themselves as Christians but for whom the church is peripheral and tangential. If this sounds like you, then use this Lenten season to commit yourself to the community of God's people. If you are a follower of Christ and yet have never been baptized, then make every effort to be baptized as soon as possible. If you have been baptized, remember that in baptism you were incorporated into a community, the family of God, and that you are to join in the family meal, the Eucharist. And parents, the Lenten season is a wonderful time to help your children realize that the church is their family, that worship is their first duty and greatest joy. And if your children understand the gospel, then this season could be a wonderful time to take the steps toward having them admitted to the Lord's Table.

As Lent begins this year, my prayer for you is that this would be a truly blessed season, a time of genuine and significant spiritual growth for you and for your family. May God grant you a truly holy Lent.



Lord God, eternal and almighty Father, we join with the first Christians in praising you for the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received forgiveness and eternal life. We thank you too that it became the custom of the church to prepare for the celebration of Christ's resurrection in a time of penitence and self-examination. Grant us, therefore, gracious Father, the grace to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on your holy Word. Grant that we may remember that though we are dust, and to dust we shall return, that we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Appendix: Questions for Self-Examination

1. Have I been fervent in prayer? Was there warmth? access?
2. Have I prayed at my stated times? with my family?
3. Have I practiced God's presence, at least every hour?
4. Have I, before every deliberate action or conversation, considered how it might be turned to God's glory?
5. Have I sought to center conversations on the other person's interests and needs and ultimately toward God, or did I turn them toward my own interests?
6. Have I given thanks to God after every pleasant occurrence or time?
7. Have I thought or spoken unkindly of anyone?
8. Have I been careful to avoid proud thoughts or comparing myself to others? Have I done things just for appearance?
Have I mused on my own fame or acclaim?
9. Have I been sensitive, warm, and cheerful toward everyone?
10. Have I been impure in my thoughts or glances?
11. Have I confessed sins toward God and others swiftly?
12. Have I over- or under-eaten, -slept, -worked?
13. Have I twisted the truth to look good?
14. Have I been leading in my home, or only reacting to situations?

In his set of questions for self-examination, the late Jack Miller gets right to the point: *

1. Is God working in your life?
2. Have you been repenting of your sin lately?
3. Are you building your life on Christ's free justification or are you insecure and guilt-ridden?
4. Have you done anything simply because you love Jesus?
5. Have you stopped anything simply because you love Jesus?

* These questions are from *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Zondervan, 1986).