

THOUGHTS ON ASH WEDNESDAY AND LENT

Written by Mike Potter on February 17, 2010

The Western liturgical calendar was largely abandoned in the Protestant Reformation to the point that Christmas and Easter were the only holy days left on our church calendar. Here at Foothills Fellowship, we've not gone that far, but, in my opinion, I feel it's necessary to recover and observe more of the church calendar than we have. We do make a point to observe Advent – which is the period of time that leads up to Christmas where we remember the wait for Jesus' first coming and renew our awareness that we are waiting for His Second Coming. However, we've neglected the time set aside long ago as a period of preparation for the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – which is called Lent.

Lent is a time on the church calendar when Christians prepare spiritually for Easter. Without Easter, there is no need for Lent because Lent is all about preparing spiritually for Easter. What do most Protestants do to prepare themselves for Easter? Buy a new dress? Color the eggs? Buy candy? Most of us do little to nothing to prepare. And that's why there is the season of Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday.

History of Lent

Since the earliest times of the church, there is evidence of some kind of Lenten preparation for Easter. For instance, St. Irenaeus wrote this around 200AD:

"The dispute is not only about the day, but also about the actual character of the fast. Some think that they ought to fast for one day, some for two, others for still more; some make their 'day' last 40 hours on end. Such variation in the observance did not originate in our own day, but very much earlier, in the time of our forefathers" (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, V, 24).

The importance of the passage is in the phrase "in the time of our forefathers" — which is always an expression for the Apostles. So, the practice of preparing oneself spiritually for Easter is something that even the Apostles were doing, but the practice was not unified until some 250 years later.

Lent became more unified and more widely practiced after the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313. The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), in its disciplinary canons, noted that two synods (meetings) should be held each year, "one before the 40 days of Lent." St. Athanasius in his "Festal Letters" dated 373 A.D. implored his congregation to make a 40-day fast prior to the more intense fasting of Holy Week. Pope St. Leo in 461 A.D. preached that the faithful must "fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of the 40 days," again noting the apostolic origins of Lent. One can safely conclude that by the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of Easter preparation known as Lent existed, and that prayer and fasting constituted its primary spiritual exercises.

Lent Defined

The word "Lent" initially simply meant *spring*. It's derived from the German word for spring (*lenz*) and the Dutch word for spring (*lente*). In those languages, it literally means "long" because in the spring the days visibly lengthen. Before the English word "Lent" was used, the word used for it in Latin and Greek literally meant the "fortieth day" before Easter.

Whether Lent is observed for a day, for 40 hours (like it was when it was first observed), or whether it is observed for 40 days like it is now, Lent is all about preparing spiritually for Easter, and this preparation is marked by a call to repentance and renewal. It's a time that Christians set aside to establish, maintain, repair, and transform their

relationship with God, and this is done through fasting (giving up something)¹, praying (more deliberately and consistently than usual), and by the giving of alms (which is to sacrificially give of one's time or possessions to help those in need).

The discipline of Lent originated with those preparing for baptism in the early church. A period of instruction and fasting was called for by those leading new believers into the baptismal waters. When a person in the early church was to be baptized, he or she first had to go through a time of repentance and renewal (a Lent-like discipline) before being baptized - sometimes for a period of up to 3 years.

It's interesting to note that the baptismal candidate was not the only one instructed to go through this period of repentance and renewal. The *entire church congregation* was called upon to do the same with them. Read the following words of the Didache, which was a gathering of early Christian teachings and practices:

"Before the baptism, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand."

So, this practice of repentance and renewal as a form of preparation has been around since the beginning of the church, and from this preparation for baptism comes what we now call "Lent" – the preparation for Easter. Professor and author Robert Webber says this about Lent:

"Lent is the time to will Christ's presence in our lives, to choose him as the model for our living, and to call upon Him through the name of Jesus to be present at every temptation, to dispel the power of the evil one, and to set us free from the destructive power of evil."

Lent is the time where we practice in its truest form Paul's instruction to put off the old self and its sinful deeds and put on the new self that has been made new in Christ (Ephesians 4:22-24). It's a time leading up to Easter when we "will" this putting off and putting on to happen. It's a time when we deliberately choose to model our living off of Christ's life - not because we want to earn something or prove to ourselves and others that we can do it - but we do it as an act of worship and an act of preparation for celebrating the resurrection of Christ on Resurrection Sunday.

Ash Wednesday

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday - which is exactly 40 days (not counting Sundays) before Easter. Sundays are considered special during Lent. They are to be seen as days of resurrection and celebration, and the fast is to be broken on those days. Mourning over our sin is to turn to joy over the resurrection of Jesus on Sundays.

Ash Wednesday comes the day after Mardi Gras ends. When we think of Mardi Gras, we think of New Orleans and all of the debauchery that accompanies Mardi Gras during that time of celebration, but the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans is a perversion of what Mardi Gras should be to the Christian. To the believer, Mardi Gras should serve as the least feast before the solemn season of Lent arrives, which is marked by fasting.

For centuries, it was customary to fast by abstaining from meat during Lent, which is why some people call the Mardi Gras festival *Carnival*, which is Latin for *farewell to meat*. So, on Ash Wednesday, believers around the world gather together to be reminded of what the Lent season is all about (preparing for Easter through repentance and renewal).

Believers gather to be reminded of their sin and to be called upon to repent. They sing together, recite Scripture together, pray together, and to receive a cross of ashes on their foreheads. The ash serves as a reminder for the rest of the day of the biblical principle from Genesis 3:19 which states, "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

This practice has its roots in the Old Testament (book of Ezekiel) when an angel of the Lord was told to "pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."

Ash Wednesday is a day when Christians are to be reminded of their sin (to sigh and groan over it) and to begin a time of remembrance and thanksgiving for the work of Christ on the cross where He – once and for all - forgave us of our sins and cleansed us from all of our unrighteousness.

¹ Brief Thoughts on Fasting

Fasting is hard, but the benefits are many. What we find is that in doing it, we discover what really controls us. What our bottom-line really is. Here's what John Piper says about it in his book, A Hunger for God:

Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us. What are our bottom-line passions? More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside of us with food and other things. Psychologically, that sort of thing is spoken of a lot today, especially in regard to people who have much pain in their lives. We would say they 'medicate' their pain with food. They anesthetize themselves to the hurt inside by eating. But this is not some rare, technical syndrome. All of us do it. Everybody. No exceptions. We all ease our discomfort using food and cover our unhappiness by setting our eyes on dinnertime. Which is why fasting exposes all of us – our pain, our pride, our anger. One of the reasons for fasting is to know what is in us. In fasting it will come out. You will see it. And you will have to deal with it or quickly smother it again. When midmorning comes and you want food so badly that the thought of lunch becomes as sweet as a summer vacation, then suddenly you realize, "Oh, I forgot, I made a commitment. I can't have that pleasure. I'm fasting for lunch too." Then what are you going to do with all the unhappiness inside? Formerly, you blocked it out with the hope of a tasty lunch. The hope of food gave you the good feelings to balance out the bad feelings. But now the balance is off. You must find another way to deal with it.

Fasting is something that is called upon by the Lord, something Jesus did, and something that the people of God have done throughout their history. Fasting was mentioned in the Didache (an early church manual), and Martin Luther wrote these words in the early 16th century: *Of fasting I say this: It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, or studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God's Word cannot remain.*

Fasting is not to be limited to just food. Some people have physical conditions that make fasting from food unsafe. If children want to participate in a fast (which I highly encourage) then not eating may not be a healthy choice for them. There are many ways to join in on a fast. Some may choose to give up an activity like TV watching, texting, movies, computer time, etc. and use that time to pray and meditate on the Word instead. Martin Lloyd-Jones said this in his book, The Sermon on the Mount: Fasting must not be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.