The Time of Lent

02/21/16

Wednesday was the Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. It follows Fat Tuesday, better known as Mardi Gras.

Although Lent is not mentioned in the Bible, it is an important Liturgical event in the Catholic Calendar, and over the last 100 years also in many Protestant denominations.

As in many religious celebrations, the word **Lent** has an obscure origin, and is probably a corruption of similar pagan terms in ancient Anglo, Saxon, and Germanic languages, all of which referred to spring, new life, and hope. The word Lent is derived from the German word *Lenz*, which itself came from the root word for long – when the days began to noticeably grow longer.

The Lenten season spans 40 days, excluding Sundays, culminating in Easter. During the 3rd Century when Lent originated, there was some controversy over whether Lent was 40 days or 40 hours in duration. In 325, at the Council of Nicaea, 40 days for Lent was made official.

The number ‘40’ is Biblically symbolic for the amount of time necessary to prepare for an important spiritual endeavor; it means a sacred period of time. It does not necessarily mean 40 actual days; it is a reference to the time required for the spiritual attainment.

The 40 days of Lent parallels the 40 days that Jesus prayed and fasted in the desert and overcame the temptations of the devil prior to beginning his public ministry. Therefore, we are to remain prayerful, penitent, and embrace self-denial during the period of Lent.

Other references to 40 days include the rains during the time of Noah lasting 40 days; the 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai, which concluded in Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God. There was also the 40 days that Elijah spent walking before he met with God on Mount Horeb, where he received the Torah. The Hebrews wandered the desert for 40 years; Jonah gave Nineveh 40 days to repent. Some believe that the period between the burial of Jesus in the tomb and his resurrection was 40 hours.

The number 40 is significant in the Bible, and thus the time frame has been associated with Lent.

Lent is intended to prepare us for Easter. It embodies the exalted idea of cleansing and disciplining the mind and body so that we can more easily receive and follow the Christ ideas.

One of the ways people have honored Lent over the centuries has been through fasting. Praying and fasting have been long honored means of taking our thoughts away from the outer physical world and focusing on the inner spiritual.

Today, if we recognize Lent at all, the idea has evolved into less strenuous means of self-denial, such as giving up drinking or eating meat or bread for 40 days.

Some people are drawn to Lent on a grander scale, and are reincorporating prayer and fasting into the Lenten season.

Prayer is pretty straight forward. God instructed, “Be still and know that I am God.” OK, we can do that. Perhaps for Lent, if we already don’t have time set aside for prayer, we can set aside five minutes a day and just be still, and sit in the silence with God. We can offer up a quick prayer then sit and be still. If we already have a prayer time, perhaps we could consider giving five more minutes a day.

But what about fasting? Praying and fasting are methods of communing with God. Fasting and feasting are opposites but are linked in this process. As we fast in one area, we can fill ourselves in another. For instance, this is what happens when we give up bread for Lent: we fast from bread and feast on vegetables and other foods. If we literally fast from all foods for days at a time, we feast on liquids.

But it is difficult to run a household or be effective at a job without proper nutrition. I suggest we think outside the box of what fasting can be. Rather than giving up food, how about if we give up something else? So how about we restrict our television watching or newspaper reading and spend that time doing something nice for our spouse or in prayer?

Fasting is another way of saying “Let go, and let God.” So why not fast from the idea that we can do it all ourselves, that we need no help? Instead, we can feast on the knowledge that God is our constant companion and source of all good.

How about fasting from criticizing those around us or that we read about and feasting on envisioning them as beloved children of God? We could fast from the notion that any person or nation can stand in the way of God’s will and good for humankind. We can fast from our fears and doubts and feast on the idea that Christ’s power is surrounding us right now.

Lent can be a time of spiritual development if we agree to Spirit’s call. We can abstain from one or more of the worldly thoughts our egos draw us toward and fill our minds in God. Unless there is a spiritual replacement for what we are giving up during Lent there is little spiritual value. If there is fasting there must be feasting in some area.

The last thing about fasting is that it is not a public display. The Christ told his disciples, “Appear not unto men to fast, but unto your Father which is in secret; and the Father, which sees in secret will reward you openly.”

We don’t need to share what we are doing with others, as some sort of badge of honor. This is a spiritual communion. We don’t need to ask someone else what they are doing for Lent.

Lent is a good time to affirm the power of the Christ within, which influences our thoughts, actions, words, and attitudes. Each of us is responsible for improving ourselves and our relationship with God. It is through effort and practice that we learn to deny our selfish interests and attend to the impulses of love for all of God’s children.

As Theodore Parker stated: Self-denial is indispensible to a strong character, and the highest kind comes from a religious stock.

True fasting, spiritual fasting, is when we withdraw our interest and attention from the worldly, unworthy, and non-productive thoughts that find their way into our minds; when we dedicate all that we are to God instead of the world. It is true prayer, true spiritual feasting, when we take that same mental energy – the same interest and attention - and devote it to the higher-minded thoughts of love, service, harmony, peace, and goodwill toward all.

Should you make a decision to participate in the Lenten opportunity … great. If not, that is great as well. There is no pressure, there are no requirements; there is nothing we need to do, or can do, to make God love us more. Lent may simply be an opportunity to raise our awareness of God’s indwelling presence so that we can more adequately prepare our minds and hearts for the fullest expression of God in our lives.

Whether you observe Lent or not is one thing, but I encourage you at least to celebrate Lent; to look forward to the signs of hope and new life. Christ said, “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Spring is around the corner. Signs of life are preparing to bud right before our eyes, not only in the world, but within our hearts. As we give more of ourselves to Spirit, our minds, hearts, and bodies, we are filled in new and wondrous ways.

Let us pray….