

METANOIA

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JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT LENT FOR BUSY PEOPLE

by Ann Starrette

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES we've taken this journey, the journey of Lent is about being born again. Listening to Jesus is about being born again. And all of this together means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being.

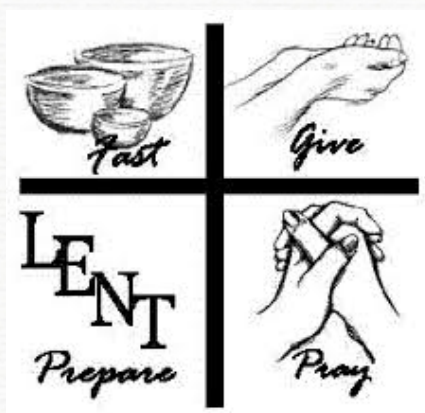
The word Lent stems from the Old English and German words for "spring" and for "long." During the forty days (excluding Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Easter the days grow longer. We begin in the darkness of winter and arrive in the brightness of spring. Hopefully not only a new season literally but also spiritually.

WHAT IS LENT?

"Lent is a time of returning to God. It is a time to confess how we keep looking for joy, peace, and satisfaction in the many people and things surrounding us without really finding what we desire. Only God can give us what we want. So we must be reconciled with God . . . The season of Lent, helps us in a special way to cry out for God's mercy." — HENRI NOUWEN

The Lenten season mirrors the forty days Jesus endured in the wilderness after his baptism. As with Jesus, we too are invited to enter into the wilderness of our own hearts to engage in an extended time of preparation.

This time of preparation is known as the season of reflection, repentance and renewal. We are especially called to the spiritual practices of self-examination and repentance as we journey with Jesus through the most sacred of all rhythms—his death, burial and resurrection.



SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR LENT

There are many spiritual practices¹ associated with Lent. However, reading Matthew 6² we are instructed to engage in, at the very least, three basic spiritual disciplines that call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. Further more, we are instructed to engage in these

disciplines in secret: Pray. Fast. Give. These Lenten disciplines are some of the means of grace God uses to form Christ's character within us.

PRAY

What is prayer?

St. John Damascene, (676-749) known as the "golden speaker," was a Syrian monk and priest. He was born and raised in Damascus and died at his monastery near Jerusalem. He defined prayer as "...the raising of one's mind and heart to God." That's what we do with intention. We return to God with our mind, our heart, our whole being. Once when someone asked Thomas Merton "What is the one thing I should do to improve my prayer life?" He said, "Take the time." A simple yet powerful definition. During Lent we intentionally

¹ A spiritual discipline is any activity we do that places us before God to do his transforming work in us.

² An Ash Wednesday Lectionary reading: Year A, B, and C.

take the time to raise our hearts and mind to God. When we say, “Let us pray,” what we’re saying is let us deepen our relationship with God.

How do you pray?

Experiment. It may be vocal prayers or silent prayers. It may be the “Jesus Prayer” or a personal Breath Prayer. It may be “The Lord’s Prayer” or an intentional time of self-examination using the Daily Examen. It may be Centering Prayer or Fixed-Hour prayers. Your way of conversing or communing with God may be through nature, journaling or art.

Yet another way to pray may be when you’re all alone in your car. I once heard someone say that when he turned the radio off, turned his technology off, and eliminated other distractions, his car was much like a monastic cell. He could enter that space not only to get somewhere physically, but to get with God spiritually.

Especially during Lent, find your way to converse with God in secret.

Matthew 6: 5-8 ⁵“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

How are you being called to PRAY in secret?

FAST

Why do we fast?

The greatest reason of all to fast is because Jesus fasted. Like Jesus, when we fast we learn trusting obedience. “While he lived on earth, anticipating death, Jesus cried out in pain and wept in sorrow as he offered up priestly prayers to God. Because he honored God, God answered him. Though he was God’s Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do” (Hebrews 5:7-8).

The church, too, calls us to fast. Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. In most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. So, the primary purpose of fasting must forever center on God. It must be God initiated and God-ordained. When we keep the primary purpose primary, fasting allows the deeper hunger to arise - our hunger for God.

Spiritual guides throughout the ages tell us more than any other single spiritual discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things (and not so good things!), but in fasting these things surface. Often we are like kids. We want what we want when we want it! Desire is good. Desire is God-given. But, when a desire is dominant—when a desire becomes our little god, well that’s another issue. When we pray, “Create in me a clean heart, oh God “ we’re asking God to help us wake up and notice what controls us. “That’s the way it works,” I once heard a priest say. “In the physics of the soul, when you suppress certain desires other deeper desires can emerge — that’s just the way it works.”

Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. We can easily begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. We can quickly begin to crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul wrote, “Just because something is technically legal doesn’t mean that it’s spiritually appropriate. If I went around

doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims" (1 Cor. 6:12 The Message). Many of us, if not most of us, are enslaved by something.

Isaiah 58:6-7 NRS reveals what God desires from us when we fast:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

How do we fast?

We are to fast *in secret*. This is between you and God and not for show.

- You can choose to fast from certain foods during Lent - or certain foods on certain days.
- You could fast from having your own way or from having the last word; you could fast from technology during certain hours or from TV or the News Channel altogether.
- You could fast from anger or impatience; from anxiety or ego-grasping, or any number of character traits *and* feast on its opposite.
- You could fast from multitasking or driving over the speed limit.
- But perhaps it is a *pleasure* that is dominant. You know what that is—so limit or eliminate that during Lent. We fast or abstain from certain things as a way of waking up to what is keeping us from a deeper relationship with God. Fasting is one practice of intentionally dismantling (*dying to*) what enslaves us so that we may awaken and manifest (*resurrect*) what is true and excellent.

When we fast, what goes on spiritually is of much more consequence than what is happening bodily. We may well be engaged in spiritual warfare and need all

the weapons of Ephesians six — or we may be filled with "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). No matter what we choose to fast from or what goes on spiritually (inwardly) we are to outwardly go about our regular duties with an inner attitude of worship. Inwardly, we are to be in prayer and adoration which will cause every task to be a sacred ministry to the Lord.

Matthew 6: 16-18. ¹⁶"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Hindrances to Fasting

The devil does not want us to fast. Why? Because he knows too well that if we fast we are growing stronger in grace and more able to resist his temptations. The devil is sure to come to you if you fast — he came to Jesus. You are sure to be tempted — he tempted Jesus. When we are tempted, spiritual guides invite us to dedicate each act to God, saying, "LORD, help me to do this to show my love to You. Help me through this to be stronger in my fight against temptation and sin. Help me!"

How are you being called to FAST *in secret*?

GIVE

What is Almsgiving?

Lent invites us to practice self-denial by asking ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others - not only from our abundance, but from our poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts. If it does not hurt on some level it is not self-denial.

Matthew 6: 1-4. “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

As with fasting and prayer, giving to the poor is to be done strictly in secret, so much so that we should not even let one hand know what the other is doing. If the gift is to be pleasing to God, we are to avoid all boastfulness in our giving.

How can you give?

How might God be calling you to give from your poverty, your place of self-denial? Scripture after scripture instructs us to share what we have with the poor. Scripture further instructs us to do so cheerfully and not reluctantly; secretly and not for the praise of men. We also must do so, as the poor widow in the gospel, not only from our abundance, but out of our need.

How are you being called to GIVE *in secret*?

During Lent we are looking for reminders of ways to unite ourselves with the sacrificial love and suffering of Christ. I love the way Emilie Griffin puts it in her book *Small Surrenders: A Lenten Journey*;

“Our modest penitential practices in Lent — things we give up, things we do without, things we do on purpose in charity— all these are reminders of Jesus’ love for us, and the sacrifice he made for our salvation. They help us to walk with Jesus to Calvary and beyond.”

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And finally, as we journey the season of Lent, let us take heart as we remember that at the end of his desert experience of being tempted by Satan, “Jesus returned . . . powerful in the Spirit.” Luke 4:14 The Message

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Wishing you Lenten blessings, – *a resurrected newness that you and I can feel in our gut, bones, and heart! May we return “powerful in the Spirit.”*

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Sources

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