

Lenten & Easter Seasons in 2010 @ CiB

At CiB we've been particularly aware of the liturgical year and its flow from Advent to Easter. While we don't follow the lexicon (the book of prescribed passages for each Sunday of the year), we do pay attention to the overall flow of the Christian calendar. And in a week and half, we enter into a very special time, the Lenten Season of preparation for Easter.

Traditions and practices associated with Lent have varied as widely as our many types and experiences of faith and church. From the very complicated fast and special "feast days" of the Eastern Orthodox Church to a complete disregard of Lent by many Protestant Churches, we can find all kinds of variations of fasting and praying in the timeframe leading us to Easter Day.

Let's start with something that most all of our Christian brothers and sisters have agreed upon from the start: ***the resurrection of Jesus is a pivotal and life changing event for us.*** Because the event of the resurrection has carried such weight for us, a period of preparation for the celebratory day of Easter seemed quite natural. And though the math is often hard to understand, the forty or so days of the Lenten period is set to resemble the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. (Luke 4)

The resurrection is one of the central transformative images for a follower of Christ: **life to death to new life.** We believe that Jesus was intended to defeat death for several reasons, all of which have bearing on our lives today. Among the many streams of meaning surrounding the resurrection, Jesus died and resurrected to free us from the spiritual bondage of sin, to establish his lordship over all things including all powers and even death, and he was resurrected to establish once and for all a newness of life and a transformation of the human soul that is possible through faith.

Annually, through the rhythms of the Christian calendar, we are brought again to a time of contemplating that transformation, and to a chance to renew our faith and celebrate the newness of our lives in Jesus Christ.

The newness of life in Christ never fades or loses its power, but we need the rhythm, we need the reminder. So, in this time of Lent we have some long-standing Christian traditions of prayer and fasting, and these will be the subjects of the next few pages.

***"Saving God,
May we, through these Lenten and Easter Seasons, know in fuller and deeper ways the love and life for which you have made us. Amen."***

Romans 6

³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, ***we too may live a new life.***

⁵ If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.



2 Corinthians 5

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Ash Wednesday

The traditional beginning for Lent, for most of the church universal, is Ash Wednesday. A recognizable part of Ash Wednesday is the “imposition of ashes,” when worshippers have the sign of the cross put on their forehead in ash. Ash Wednesday is a day of **repentance**, and ashes have been seen from through ancient times as a symbol of mourning.

But repentance is not just “**feeling bad**.” Repentance is not a guilt trip. It’s an oft mentioned, but under-taught, biblical theme. Repentance is a process of moving allegiance and desire from other things back to God. Easily said, but longer and harder to live. It’s associated in scripture with the forgiveness of sins and baptism. Though we can never earn or achieve the grace of God, we cannot ignore that we are playing our part in the “drama of reconciliation.” Repentance is one of the ways that we play our part; it’s our beginning and on-going response to the grace of God.

So, on Ash Wednesday we take a few special moments to reflect on the graces of God and the next steps of our own lives of movement away from darkness and into light. We are sorry for the times we’ve failed to let the will of God move us, and we reaffirm our desire to let God’s mission reign in us, again.

Our Ash Wednesday service is at 7pm and will include music, scripture readings, prayers and the imposition of ashes. It is also the beginning of a special period of prayer and fasting, if you’ve chosen to fast through the Lent.

**“In repentance and rest
is your salvation...”**

Prayer and Fasting

For many Western Christians fasting is not a usual spiritual discipline. Some of you have been active in fasting, and some of you haven’t. We’re going to discuss just a few things about the act of fasting and how you might follow a Lenten fast this year.

Fasting is about denying our body and soul, our senses and desires, of certain things. We intentionally remove pleasures and distractions from our lives so that a sharper focus is possible with the most meaningful things of God. It’s worthy to note that there’s very little scriptural support for the idea that fasting is **commanded** of Christ’s followers, but instead it seems to be **expected**. I don’t know how you respond to that, but I find myself moved by it. Jesus doesn’t say, “You will fast...” but instead says, “**When you fast...**”

One inescapable truth of fasting is that our scriptures actually say very little about it. There’s no single great treatise on how to fast. There’s mention of lots of people fasting, and some wonderful commentary on their fasting. It’s in that commentary we find our most meaningful help, words from the prophet Isaiah and from our Christ. But before we look at their words and start to dig deeper, let’s cover a few beginning points.

Isaiah 30

¹⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says:

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.”

Luke 15

⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Fasting is not a weight loss program. It's also not about malnutrition, starvation or dehydration. Please, don't think that biblical fasting is a divine plan to be ready for beach season, which hits just a couple months after Easter. And it is not about doing injury to oneself. There's a real difference between denying yourself of something and causing yourself a physical or emotional injury.

Fasting is always present in scripture with prayer. It's part of praying. Fasting, as an act of self-denial, delivers a clear image of remorse and repentance. Fasting, as an act, is intended to change the way we are behaving and thereby change the way we are thinking, so that *fasting raises our awareness.*

“...fasting raises our awareness.”

We're all about awareness these days, aren't we? We have little magnetic ribbons on our cars, rubber bracelets and enlightened pop stars running awareness tours. That's all good stuff. Fasting is simply old-school awareness-raising. If I am fasting from meat, then something is to be taking the place of meat, in my thoughts and daily process. Fasting alone is just “fasting from” something. Fasting with prayer carries us forward to the idea of “*fasting to*” something. Fasting and prayer is a process of visioning and bringing a new reality into being. Fasting and prayer is actualizing the presence of God's Kingdom.

Here's biblical fasting in a concise, easy to follow process...

1. Reflect and pray about the state of the world, yourself and your neighbor. How is God's will being seen and followed, or not, in your life or the lives of everyone around you? That is, is the fullest life that God intends for us all being realized? Has something taken root in your life to blunt the will of God?
2. Having seen that fullest life is not being experienced in your own journey, or in a neighbor's, and having identified that there is something in the way of realizing God's grace, you begin to pray. Your prayer is for something lacking to be made present, or for something obstructing to be removed.
3. To help you in your prayer, you choose to fast. You look around in life and realize that there are things that have come to monopolize your time or consume your desires and senses... you bring one or more of these to God in a fast. Or you simply decide to chose something in life that when removed will cause you to focus on something better. I often fast from meat in Lent, not because meat is bad or causing me to sin or neglect God, but because when it is removed I cannot help but notice that change and be reminded that I am to be praying.
4. Now, with a prayer in mind, and a fast chosen, you are ready to intentionally enter a period of fasting that is given to God.

In scripture, fasting is a matter of giving up food and drink. Today we have recognized that fasting comes in many forms, and in our materially glutted and hectic lives, many forms of fasting have been found to have benefit. So, today we might fast from a food or a pleasure, from TV or from Facebook, from romance novels or vampire films. We are responsible for taking stock of our own lives and making these decisions as best suit our pursuit of God in our time and experience. We choose a fast which will best reorient our days and moments to prayer.

Words of Wisdom

Isaiah gives us the best picture of fasting as a reordering of the world. The passage to the right from Isaiah 58 is a straightforward condemnation of self-centered fasting. Fasting is not just about us and our piety, but it is about bring God's will and truth to bear on the world around us. Fasting is not just a divine self-help program to aid us stop smoking or drop a few pounds. Fasting is a present practice of loving God and our neighbors.

Most often when I've practiced a fast and then thought, "*Hmm? That really didn't do anything for me.*" it's because my fast was just that, **all about me**. I'm ashamed to say it, but I've fasted many times without a thought for my neighbor.

God calls us to change the world by our fasting.

Then Jesus rolls along and brings home the point that we aren't **spiritual superstars** when we fast. How many times have you thought, "*If I were a better Christian I'd fast more?*" I hope no one's ever said it to you, but it's possible you've heard something along those lines. Ever seen a Christ follower who is making a big deal of their fast? Jesus lays it out pretty clearly, **"This is not about your getting the accolades."**

The short teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount is actually freeing and refreshing. We can almost fast like secret agents, off the radar, and without anyone knowing we're fasting right next to them! Sneaky, eh?

The commentary on fasting from scripture is such that we are invited to change the world by allowing God to change us. This is a biblical fast. It's invitational, real and relational. It's for the world, but between you and God.

Beginning with that prayerful process of reflection and observation, we can each identify a focus for the Lenten Season, and then choose a fast, one that leads us to a greater love of God and our neighbor.

"May God, the God who loves you and your neighbor alike, lead you into a period of time that focuses your spirit and mind on the transforming love and presence so needed in our world. May God be present in you to loose all chains, unite all cords and end all oppression. Amen."

Isaiah 58

³ 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ ***Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?***

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard."

"Then your light will break forth like the dawn."

Matthew 6

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.