

“From Ash Wednesday to Easter”
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This is the third Sunday of Lent, the forty days starting on Ash Wednesday and lasting until Easter Week. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant churches observe Lent as a period of prayer, fasting, and self-denial.

The ash on the forehead traditionally comes from the burning of the dried palms that the congregation had used the previous spring on Palm Sunday. A priest sprinkled the ashes with water and made a paste. A clergywoman once confessed to me that had she ran out of palm ash on Ash Wednesday. “What did you do?” I asked. She confessed, “It was in the middle of the service. I asked the congregation to wait and I ran into the church office and frantically looked around. I thought, I could burn some paper in a trashcan to make ash, but that would take time and likely set off the fire alarms. Then I saw the toner for the photocopier. I put the black powder in the bowl, went back into the church, sprinkled it with holy water and used it for my liturgical purposes.” I thought to myself, “At least I don’t need to worry about this!”

“Lent” originally was the Germanic word for the spring season. Lent and length have the same root, as in “the lengthening days” this time of year. In English, Lent has come to refer to the forty days preceding Easter.

The author of the gospel of Mark wrote that after John the Baptist baptized Jesus, “A spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, where he remained for forty days.” Forty days in the wilderness fits the pattern of Moses’ and Elijah’s fasts. Matthew and Luke developed the story. They say that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and was subject to three specific temptations, each of which Jesus answered by quoting passages from Deuteronomy.

The tradition of fasting for forty days before Easter first appears in written records 331 years after the birth of Jesus. According to one account, “Some abstain from every sort of creature that has life; while others of all the living creatures, eat of fish only. Others eat birds as well as fish; others abstain from fruit covered by a hard shell and from eggs. Some eat dry bread only, others not even that; others again when they have fasted to three o’clock partake of various kinds of food.” In the middle ages in Europe meat, eggs and milk were forbidden during Lent not only by law. The chief Lenten food was fish.

All this changed during the Reformation. In the 16th century, Calvinists and Anabaptists rejected Christian holy days. Regarding Lent the English Puritans argued that the Bible does not command or imply any such slavish obedience to a 40-day period of self-denial. They rejected these practices not explicitly commanded in the Bible because they felt these rituals led to a hypocritical breaking of foolish rules. Lent detracted from the importance of leading a moral and upright life all year round. Refusing to eat fish became an outward symbol of militant Protestantism.

“I have often noted,” wrote John Taylor in 1620, “that if any superfluous feasting or gormandizing, paunch-cramming assembly do meet, it is so ordered that it must be either in Lent, upon a Friday, or a fasting: for the meat does not relish well except it be sauced with disobedience and contempt of authority.”

During this time, the rejection of Roman Catholic traditions became so pervasive in England that the fishing industry went into a depression. To help the economy, laws were passed ordering people to eat fish.

The original Puritan church in Plymouth, Massachusetts is now a Unitarian church; most American Unitarian churches grew out of the Puritan tradition. As a result, most of our congregations ignore the practice of Lent.

For example, the Unitarian Universalist church I grew up in had no use for Lent. As a child, I felt strange and awkward around my Roman Catholic friends who appeared with ash on their foreheads near the end of February. Later, while studying for the ministry, I read and tried to understand the poem “Ash Wednesday” by the former Unitarian Thomas Sterns Eliot. Eliot dedicated the poem to his wife Vivian, and published it just before he separated from Vivian. It is speculation on my part, but I suspect that what Eliot was giving up for Lent in 1930 was his troubled marriage. I suspect he was thinking about his separation from Vivian when he wrote:

*And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain . . .
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us.*

As I have learned more about Lent, I have started to wonder if perhaps this artificial structure, this institutional ritual might have value for religious liberals. It can be about giving up an activity, a behavior, that we realize is not healthy for us. Of course, most of us have activities that we would be better off without, things we should give up.

The list of possibilities is long. Excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages. Excessive playing of video games. Smoking of tobacco. Gambling. Pornography. Sweets. An unhealthy dating relationship. What part of your life needs remedial work? Once a man told me that for Lent he was giving up his habit of blaming others. Half way through Lent, I asked him how it was going. He said it was one of the most difficult challenges of his life.

Giving up deeply ingrained behaviors is hard. It causes suffering and pain. The structure of Lent says, give up the behavior for forty days. Do it in the spring when things are looking up. When

the snow is melting. When there is more sun, more warmth. When the flowers are starting to appear.

Now in the spring, give up one bad habit for forty days. If you have a deep affinity for Jesus, see him as your model. According to the story, he went into the wilderness for forty days, fasted and resisted the temptations. When we give up something for Lent, we also are resisting temptations.

Then Easter comes. Perhaps we think to ourselves “I have given up this thing, this behavior for forty days, and, although I miss it, although it has been very hard to give it up, over all, I feel better. I feel better emotionally, physically and spiritually. So I choose not to go back to the way I was before.” In other words, Lent can be a spiritual discipline that leads to a healthier life.

Now you may object that we should not depart from our Puritan roots and return to a Roman Catholic practice that our spiritual ancestors rejected four hundred years ago. I would only point out that another Christian ritual our spiritual ancestors rejected was Christmas. Yet today we have big, joyous Christmas celebrations. Christmas is the time when we ask the question “What am I going to get?” In contrast, Lent is the time when we ask, “What am I going to give up?” This may explain why Unitarian Universalists enjoy Christmas and ignore Lent. I suggest that support and encouragement to give up bad habits may be just what we need in 2010. “Life is not all getting—it is also giving and letting go, sacrificing and sharing, changing and growing, beginning again in a new cycle of love and hope, of sadness and joy.” (Richard Fewkes)

About letting go, Eliot wrote a kind of chant in his poem “Ash Wednesday,”

*Although I do not hope to turn again
Although I do not hope
Although I do not hope to turn*

He is saying, I think, “I am letting go of the past, hoping not to turn back but to move forward with my life.” And he writes,

This is the time of tension between dying and birth

Notice that he reverses the normal order; he does not say “This is the time of tension between birth and dying.” Ash Wednesday, Lent begins in the cold of February and ends in the warm spring of Easter. “This is the time of tension between dying and birth.” By giving up something for Lent something is dying. For Eliot his first marriage was dying. However, after a time of tension there was birth, there was spring with its new life.

Pick one thing in your life that has been troubling you. Ask yourself, “Can I let go of it? Can I put it behind me and in Eliot’s words, not turn again to these matters that with myself I too much discuss, too much explain?” There is tension of course, the tension between dying and birth. However, spring is a wonderful time to let go. A time of hope. A time to let an unhealthy habit die, and to celebrate the rebirth of your spirit.

This the central question of Lent. Where are you in your life? Where are you on your religious journey? The beginning of spring is an opportunity, inviting us to focus on our lives, to let go of what is not working. Spring is a season that invites us to grow physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Of course, it does not have to be in spring. For Jews Yom Kippur is the time of fasting, self-examination, making amends, and resolving to do better. In the Islamic tradition during Ramadan, Muslims ask forgiveness for past sins, pray for guidance, and try to purify themselves through self-restraint and good deeds.

Whether it is Lent or Yom Kipper or Ramadan, each religious tradition invites us to ask the same questions: Where am I in my life? What are the areas of my life that need work? What do I need to let go of, what do I need to give up to renew myself? While it is good to ask these questions all year round, it may be that in the northern hemisphere spring is the best time because the season encourages feelings of hope and renewal.

I want to close with the same passage I used as opening words, by Howard Thurman:

*Listen to the long stillness:
New life is stirring
New dreams are on the wing
New hopes are being readied:
Humankind is fashioning a new heart
Humankind is forging a new mind
God is at work.
This is the season of Promise.
Amen*

Source: Some of the key ideas in this sermon I found in the excellent sermon “Lent for Religious Liberals” given March 3, 2002, by the Rev. Richard Fewkes.

<http://personal.tmlp.com/hayesboh/uu/sermons/mar0302.htm>