

LENTEN MEDITATION – 2008

At TPC, we follow the main features of the traditional "catholic" church calendar. Obviously, the church calendar (other than weekly worship on the Lord's Day) is not strictly commanded. It is voluntary. But God did give a special calendar to ancient Israel to both commemorate and anticipate his redemptive work. In the Old Testament, we find that the Jews had the freedom to add to and modify this calendar as appropriate (e.g., adding the Feast of Purim in the book of Esther; adding the Feast of Lights in the inter-testamental period, which Jesus attends in John 8). Thus, the church has seen fit through the centuries to develop a redemptive calendar, based on the life of Christ. Those Christians who refuse to follow any kind of church calendar do not go calendar-less; rather, typically, their civil calendar (e.g., President's Day, the 4th of July) becomes increasingly prominent. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having a civil calendar with special days too. But we are Christians first, Americans second, and therefore it makes sense for our year to be highlighted more by remembering God's great acts in history than by remembering great people and events in American history.

With that being said, here are some pastoral thoughts on Lent....

Lent is a very odd time. It really struck me this year at the Ash Wednesday service, during the 'ashing' ceremony. Usually, when pastors speak directly to the people, they use words of encouragement. "Your sins are forgiven!" "The body of Christ given for you!" But on Ash Wednesday, it's "From dust you came and to dust you shall return." Not exactly encouraging, eh? These words are normally part of the funeral liturgy. (The full text from one version of the *Book of Common Prayer* is, "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust; we commit the soul of our brother to you O Lord of life and his body to earth, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection.")

But Lent's oddness is precisely why we need it. There is something very *wise* about the observance of Lent. (This is why Lent shouldn't just be for Roman Catholics!) Without Lent, it's all too easy to be sentimental about Easter. Without Lent, it's easy for those of us who are healthy and prosperous to ignore life's fragility. The fact is, no matter how healthy we are, how fit we stay, how careful we are about our diet, how much money we have saved, how good our health insurance policy is, *we are all going to die*. In the end, there is no defense against death. Because death is an inescapable reality, it good to be reminded, from time to time, that death is stalking each and every one of us. Every day it draws closer. It is good to be honest with ourselves about death instead of numbing ourselves to its reality. Solomon certainly understood this, which is why he wrote "it is better to be in the house of mourning [e.g., the funeral parlor] than the house of feasting" (Ecc. 7:20). Solomon was a realist about death: it comes when it comes, and you have to face it square when it does. The same final end overtakes each one of us. Death is coming, ready or not -- and it's much better to be ready! Might as well face the facts. Something healing, maturing, and even therapeutic happens when we "get real" about death.

All that sounds very morbid. But there is good news shot through Lent's focus on death. The good news is that *we're already dead*. Yes, that's right: *We have already died*. Christians have already passed through death and come out the other side. Thus, Paul says "if One died for all, then *all died*" (2 Cor. 5:14). He says "we have been baptized into His death...Therefore [we have been] buried with him in baptism..." Dead and buried! If you've been baptized into Christ, you've already died. You've already been buried. And indeed, as disciples of Christ, we are called to die

daily. We take up our crosses each day (Lk. 9:23). Paul writes, "As dying, yet, behold, we live" (2 Cor. 6:9).

Christians are walking dead men. The Christian life is a kind of living death. We are learning to be broken, even as Jesus was broken. We are learning to give ourselves in costly sacrifice, even as Jesus did. We are learning to live the cruciform life. We are learning to give life to others by dying to ourselves, our desires, our agendas. Yes, the reality of bodily death awaits us. But having already died in Christ, we can approach our bodily death with hope, knowing that while death remains a foe, it is a defeated foe, and now serves our ultimate good. Death has defeated death, so, dying we live. Lent emphasizes that we live our whole lives under the sign of the cross -- *and in this sign we conquer!* When you've already died, you have nothing left to fear. You are prepared to fearlessly serve God. You are set free to live for the glory of God and the good of your neighbor. You know ultimate victory over death is secure. You know nothing that can happen to you without serving your ultimate good.

Lent is not just a time for reflecting on death -- the death we have *already* died in Christ makes Lent a time of preparation for victory and triumph. Death never has the last word because our God raises the dead. Lent is about ashes -- *but it's ashes in the shape of a cross*. In the cross, our hope rests. In the cross, all fears concerning death are buried. In the cross, death has been transformed from a merciless enemy to a stepping stone to greater glory. The Lenten ashes are a sign of our mortality -- but, by faith, they also become a sign of our *immortality* in Christ. In Christ, life swallows up death and claims the final victory. We move from death in this world, to the provisional glory of heaven, to the final ultra-glory of resurrection life in a new creation. What could be sweeter?

One theologian (I don't remember who right at the moment) points out that Lent is perhaps the "manliest" season of the church year. During Lent, we face the brutal realities of life in a fallen world. We face the reality of suffering. We face the depths of evil that remain in our own hearts. Lent is a time to gird ourselves for war, and to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil more intensely than ever. It is not a season for the faint of heart, or for those who like a watered down, truncated version of the Bible's doctrine, or for those who want a softer, gentler, effeminate faith. Obviously, the church should always be authentic and faithful to the biblical message -- but Lent imposes upon us the darker, hard-edged themes of the Christian life, which we (preachers included!) would just as well ignore if we could.

Lent has several theme songs, including "Christ the Life of All the Living" (which is about as cheery as it gets during Lent) and "The Son of God Goes Forth to War" (a hymn about martyrdom, and one my favorites). If you're looking for some Lenten reading, N. T. Wright's new book *Surprised By Hope* is out. It's a sequel to his fabulous *Simply Christian* and it looks great. For listening, I strongly recommend Bach's *Matthew's Passion* and *John's Passion* (especially if you can find them sung in English -- it's more edifying if you can understand the gospel texts!) and, of course, heavy (though discerning) doses of the man in black, Johnny Cash.

A common Lenten practice is to "fast" from some good thing, since depriving oneself of luxuries in a world of luxury is good discipline for the soul and reminds us of our dependence on God. But if you do give something up for Lent, keep in mind the wise words of C. S. Lewis:

One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting every one else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons - marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.

The point of a Lenten fast is not to deny the goodness of creation but to deny ourselves things we ordinarily enjoy. It is a way of proving that we are masters of our desires, that we can exercise self-control, that we can go without. If you do choose to give something up for Lent (it's strictly voluntary, of course), you might try to find some way of connecting your abstinence with the mission of church, rather than just self-improvement. So, for example, if you give up sweets or soft drinks, take the money you saved at the end of Lent and give it to a good cause.