

Lent is many things to many people. For some, it's a time for contrition and repentance, a time to dwell on our sinfulness and ask for God's forgiveness and grace. For others, it's a time for remembrance, a time to look at the last days of Jesus' life and recall all that He suffered on our behalf. For still others, particularly Lutherans, it's a time to focus upon our baptism. To see our Old Adam buried with Christ on Good Friday and resurrected to new life on Easter morning.

All of these are true. All of these are good things to associate with Lent. But, unfortunately, I think, for the vast majority of the country, Lent is none of these things. No, for the average American, Lent means only one thing: eating fish.

Yes, that's right. Eating fish. Everybody knows that Lent is the season of fish fries. People who have never stepped into a church in their entire lives, who have never even heard the word "Lent," even they know that for six weeks every year, there will be fish specials at their favorite restaurants. I'm sure to them it's some sort of arcane springtime marketing ploy. But no, it's Lent.

As most of you, I'm sure, are aware, we can credit Catholics for this strange focus on seafood. The Roman Catholic Church has long insisted upon enforcing a Lenten fast from meat for its members. Just as Christ fasted in the desert for 40 days, we also should fast for the 40 days of Lent, so they say.

How that's expressed depends on the individual church you go to. Many say no meat at all on Fridays, and since fish are not considered meat in Roman Catholic dogma – don't ask me why – we get the Friday night fish fry. Others say no red meat at anytime during Lent, which makes fish an appealing addition to the monotony of poultry. Some say both. Whatever the case, fish is back on the menu during Lent.

The Lutheran church has, historically, taken a middle ground on this issue. We disagree with the practice of requiring Lenten fasting on the grounds of Christian freedom and a general lack of Scriptural mandate. But, at the same time, Lutheran churches do generally encourage the practice of Lenten fasting as a valuable one. Whether that's giving up meat like the Catholics. Or actually going a day without any food at all. Or, the current fad of giving up a luxury like chocolate or Facebook during Lent.

Whatever it is, it should be something you're going to miss. Something that you are going to crave once it's gone. Why? Well, because that's really the underlying principle of any fast. Whether it's food or luxuries or technology. Fasts are meant to be distracting.

You see, fasting isn't really about suffering or deprivation or sacrifice. Fasting isn't about our works at all. There's nothing inherently holy about giving up God's good gifts for a time. No, in reality, fasting is actually about prayer.

If you do a quick survey through the Bible, you'll find that there are 38 different passages that discuss the practice of fasting, give or take one or two. It's a common occurrence for God's people throughout the ages. But what's interesting, is that almost all of them are tied to prayer or some similar form of worship.

Simply put, there is no such thing as fasting. There is only "fasting and prayer." "Prayer and fasting." It's the Bible's default way of talking about fasting, to the point that you could easily say that prayer is part of the definition of fasting.

So how does praying have anything to do with not eating for 24 hours, or giving up chocolate for 6 weeks? Well, because it serves as a reminder. It becomes a sort of string around your finger. Every time you feel a pang of hunger, you pray. Every time you crave that luxury, you pray. Every time you're tempted to live on bread alone, as so many of us do, you pray.

And, during Lent, you pray in particular about what Lent means to you. About repentance for your sin or grief at Christ's crucifixion or thankfulness for your baptism. Or all three. The point is that the Lenten fast redirects your attention away from daily life back on to the Lenten season.

Which is all valuable. Christ himself said in our Ash Wednesday Gospel reading, “When you fast.” Not “if.” When. He assumes that his disciples will engage in fasting. He doesn't mandate that we do it for these exact 6 weeks every year. But, overall, Jesus approves of fasting. And so we do it.

Yet, I wonder how much we're really being honest with ourselves in our Lenten fasts. Because we've gotten pretty far away from where they originated. As I said, the Lenten fast was originally designed to emulate Christ's fasting in the desert for 40 days. We read about that in our Gospel lesson for today.

But it's interesting how Mark's Gospel looks at the event differently than Matthew or Luke's Gospel. Matthew and Luke give us a much fuller account of the event. They specify more details and the type of attacks Satan used and all sorts of stuff. Mark, as he tends to do, keeps it simple. Jesus goes out into the wilderness and he's tempted for forty days. No mention of the fasting at all.

Why? Well, I think Mark is trying to direct our focus a little bit. He's trying to highlight what was most important about the event. And what he wants us to see is that Jesus was tempted. The perfect, divine, incarnate Son of God was tempted by sin. And not just any temptation. Tempted at his weakest, most lonely moment, by the greatest tempter the world has ever known, Satan himself.

And He didn't give in. He resisted. He fought back. He turned to prayer. He turned to God's Word. And He refused to sin, for 40 days. That's what Mark wants us to see most. Not simply that Jesus defeated His human weakness for food, but that he defeated His human weakness for sin as well.

And I wonder whether that would be a better fast to undertake this Lenten season. Instead of fasting from meat or luxuries or technology, fasting from sin for 40 days. Fasting from lust by carefully guarding every image that meets our eyes. Fasting from greed by giving away every spare penny we earn. Fasting from selfishness by serving the Lord and our neighbor in ways we've never before attempted. Fasting from sin and truly learning what Christ suffered for us.

It'd be an interesting exercise. A valuable one. But mostly because we wouldn't get very far. No matter how hard we tried, we'd fail. Miserably. We might make headway on one sin for a few days, but plenty of others would be right there to take its place.

No, you don't fast from sin to succeed. Honestly, you fast from sin to knowing that you'll fail. You fast from sin to see yourself for what you really are. A person, as St James says in our Epistle, who is “lured and enticed by his own desire.”

I love how the NIV translates that verse: a person who is “dragged away” by their desires. Like an animal capturing its prey. A person in whom desire has given birth to sin and sin has given birth to death. Our own death. For that's the end result of all sin. Death and the grave.

But also a person in whom God has given a rebirth through the word of truth. A word that says, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” The Word made flesh. Who has fought every temptation on our behalf.

Who not only fought every temptation of Satan in the desert. But also, who resisted the temptations of Caiaphas and of Herod and of Pilate and of whips and nails and scorn and who resisted temptation even as he hung on the cross itself. Who heard the words hurled at him, “If you are the Son of God, save yourself.” And who had every bit of power to save himself. And then chose to die for us.

The Word of Truth, who resisted every temptation for us. That instead of death being born in us, His Spirit might be born in us. Making us the firstfruits of His new creation. A new creation of soul and spirit. Of body and flesh. And a new creation of all creation.

We are the beginning of a new earth. Where there is no temptation. Where there is no need for fasting. Where there is no need even for prayer. Because faith will be sight. And hope will be fulfilled. And the Lord who taught us what it means to be righteous will lead us in righteousness for all eternity.

Lent is many things to many people. But maybe most of all, Lent is the season of anticipation. Anticipation of death. Anticipation of life. And anticipation of new life with our Lord forever. Amen.