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Lent Clarifies Christian Identity

In the Christian liturgical calendar, the season of Lent involves forty days of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. Although the practice of Lent is a post-biblical Christian development, it is deeply rooted in the scriptures. It arose in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the desert when he suffered and was tempted by the devil (Mk1:12-13; Mt 4:1-11; Lk4:1-13). These stories of Jesus in the desert, in turn, echo the wilderness struggles of Elijah, Moses, and the people of Israel.

Jesus' forty-day retreat clarified his life mission. The Spirit "drove him out into the wilderness" (Mk1:12). There the devil tempts the fasting Jesus with food, and in response, Jesus focuses on true nourishment. Not from bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4; Lk4:3-4). If Jesus will only worship him, the Devil promises him lordship over all the nations of the earth. To this, Jesus asserts his radical obedience to God alone (Mt 4:8-10; cf., Lk4:5-8). Finally, the devil mocks him, daring him to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple to force God to send angels to save him (Mt 4:5-7; Lk4:9-12). Jesus declines the aggressive and flashy use of power in the world around him and at the end of his forty days is ready to embrace a different kind of mission as one who derived his power from single-minded worship of God?

Such is the call of Lent. Jesus' 40 days of prayer and fasting showed him who he was. It turns out that his mission more closely resembles Isaiah's poetic portrait of the Suffering Servant than the Devil's vision of greed and abusive power. Rather than the glittering, aggrandizing behavior of an autocrat, Isaiah imagines a humble figure, a rejected figure, a human being:

"He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
And as one from whom others hide their faces
He was despised and we held him of no account"
(Isa 53:3 see also 42:1-9; 49:17; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12).

Lent took root among Christians during historical times when few people could read. Yet they could still follow Jesus' path in the desert. They could pray and fast, meditate and do penance. They could follow Jesus with their minds and bodies, with the fullness of their lives, praying, repenting, fasting, and giving alms to the poor. Lent surely persisted because believers could find their own suffering mirrored in Jesus' suffering and death and be drawn into compassion for the suffering around them.



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Despite long-standing traditions that reduced Lenten practices to individual penance and contrition for sin, Lent's deep call to modern Christians is not to hatred of the body, self-deprivation, or self-mutilation. Lent invites us individually and communally to make time to reflect on and practice the good news of Jesus Christ, to embrace the power of love and mercy.

Perhaps more than ever, this Lenten season invites us to a cultural power inversion, again in the words of Isaiah:

Is this not 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? (Isa 58:6)

Isaiah urges religious people to share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our house, and to cover the naked, to put aside our religious hypocrisy. "Then your light will break forth like the dawn" (Isa 58:8), and Easter will pour forth new life.

– Kathleen M. O'Connor

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