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The Roots of Our Lenten Season

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights. . .” Matthew 4.1-2a

The first three Gospels all agree: Immediately following his baptism Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days and nights. Early in the church’s history, as new converts increasingly came from paganism, with little or no knowledge of the history of Israel and the roots of Christianity, it became necessary to have them learn and practice the life that the church expected of them for two years or so before they could be baptized. Those who were ready for baptism were then presented to the congregation on a Wednesday three and a half weeks before Easter. Generally, baptisms were held on the night before Easter Sunday. That was the pattern that developed in the second century.

Several generations later, the situation had changed radically. In the fourth century, under Emperor Constantine, the church became the favored religion of the Roman Empire. Soon after that, most people within the Empire were baptized, and their children were baptized in infancy. As this change was taking place, the western half of the Roman Empire fell to the various invading Germanic tribes, and in the midst of the ensuing chaos, the church was left as the only uniting force.

A new pattern developed, largely based on the verses mentioned above. Wednesday was kept as the beginning of a period of pondering what it meant for Christians to be baptized, but the period was expanded to forty days. Thus, Lent, with its beginning on Ash Wednesday, became the norm in the Middle Ages. It is this pattern that most churches in the West have inherited, and it can be very helpful.

What is always important in the Christian life can easily be forgotten if there is no special time to remember it. The church year gives us various times to remember and meditate on different aspects of the Christian life. Let us consider what Lent can help us remember.

Jesus was baptized and then tempted. We, too, discover that baptism does not end temptation but often increases it. The more we seek to be disciples, the more we find in the world around us that challenges our discipleship. As we seek to follow Jesus more closely, we discover that it is easy and dangerous to compromise with the surrounding culture. If it seems easy to be a Christian, we probably have missed something important in the Gospel message!

Therefore, the Lenten season can be a useful time for the church to concentrate on what it really means to



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follow Jesus. What does discipleship entail? What does our baptism mean for our daily lives? What is the way of the cross that Jesus began when he overcame the temptations he faced in the wilderness? What is the cost of discipleship for us? What does it mean to gain the world and lose our lives? These are appropriate considerations for Lent. They are appropriate for the whole year, but if we do not focus on them at a particular season they may be lost from view.

The lectionary—the suggested passages to be used on Sundays throughout the year—focuses on these aspects of the Christian life and can be a helpful resource. What is clear is that a Lent spent in contemplation of baptism and discipleship can lead to a more meaningful Easter and a more intentional Christian life.

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