



February 23, 2021

A Different Question for the Season

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“What are you giving up for Lent?”

This seems to be the question that is often asked at the start of this penitential Church season. When asked this question, we immediately scramble to think of something to give up, anything that might seem not-so-good for us in our lives – junk food, alcohol, chocolate, smoking, too much technology. Sometimes we even tack on long-term goals to our Lenten fasting – losing weight or stopping an addiction.

I grew up in churches in which every Lent, I was asked what I was giving up. I would feel the guilt building up to pick something, so I generally chose some kind of food or TV program to give up. Then I spent time wondering if that was a “good enough” thing to give up. Eventually, I had to start planning how to accomplish the fast. It did not take me long to find loopholes and questions:

- “Well, if it’s dark chocolate, is that okay?”

- “Sundays are okay for breaking the fast, so I’ll eat the junk food I’m craving on Sunday.”
- “As long as I’m not watching my *favorite* TV program, it’s okay to turn on the TV to watch the news or something else, right?”
- “I don’t really need to give up anything. I can just add something, and it will be the same effect.” On this, it’s important to note I never generally added anything.

This is the way our self-oriented, sinful minds work. My Lenten fasts were rarely successful. Perhaps the problem is that we often think of Lent in the wrong light.

Lent is not a self-help season. Lent is not meant to be a “success” for us.

The lesson for us, though, is not really about giving up something. Fasting is one of the primary ways, all throughout Scripture, that the people of God sought to turn from their ways, draw closer to God, and hear what God was saying to them. Jesus even fasted when he was seeking to draw closer to God the Father in strength and prayer.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.” (Matthew 4:1-2)

Fasting can still serve that important purpose today of drawing us closer to God.

The issue is when fasting becomes about us, and what we can fix through it. Are we seeing Lent like we view New Year’s resolutions – as a clean slate, a way to start over and try again to make things right? Maybe we are thinking that this time we are determined to succeed, and this time, we will finally be the best version of whoever we think we are supposed to be.

But, again, Lent is not about self-help. It is a time for us to recognize our utter dependence on God and to realize that we, alone, cannot help ourselves. It is a time to realize that the whole reason God came among us is because we could not help ourselves. God knows that. God loves us so much that He did not leave us utterly helpless. Jesus would give up the

greatest thing, his own life, that we would not be left in our helplessness and hopelessness.

In this past year, we have had to give up an awful lot. Because of this, I have heard people within the Church say, "Maybe we should all give up Lent this year." I believe this misses the point of Lent. If anything, we might observe Lent even more this year, to realize how fragile and limited we are without God.

In falling short of our goals, ultimately in failing to help ourselves, we realize that God is there, and that God has done more for us than we could ever do for ourselves. Lent is not about us and what we do, but about how much God loves us and what God has done through Jesus.

So, perhaps a better question for the season is not "What are you giving up for Lent?" but "*Why* are you giving up something for Lent?"

If you start there, no matter how you decide to live into this season, you'll remember that Lent is not about success in meeting goals or becoming more self-sufficient. It is about remembering that only the power of Christ working in us can sustain us. Thanks be to God, that is more than enough.