

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The First Sunday in Lent – February 14, 2016

“The Way of Lent”

Scripture: 1 Lent C, RCL

So I decided I wanted to explore this strange season of Lent that the Church endures every year, to see what I could discover about it, so I began my exploration where any intelligent and reasonable person might begin...

I went to the household dryer. And I pulled out of the so-called “lint trap” this wad of fuzz and feathers and dust, and I thought “Well, this is lint, and it is rather dusty and unpleasant, but it can’t be the Lent we are talking about in church, right? So I kept searching...

And then I began to recall how often I hear people talk about chocolate during Lent, specifically about not eating it, so I thought, “Maybe Lent is all about chocolate.” After all, at the grocery store I would often see all these beautiful colorfully wrapped chocolate candies, and right there at the top in big letters it said “LINDT.” But then I thought “This can’t really be what we are talking about in church, right?” So I checked things out further and confirmed that Lent is spelled LENT and not LINDT like the chocolate.

So I decided to check out the word Lent, and this is what I learned... Lent is a word from the very old English language, so old that we don't even use anymore, except in Church, and all it really means is SPRING. Right. Springtime. Apparently the word lent just means "a lengthening," and days are getting longer in the spring, and the old word for spring is LENT, so the church just called the season LENT. But that didn't sound all that ominous, or bad, or difficult, or sorrowful like a lot of the things we tend to talk about in Lent...

But I remembered that the Bible says that Jesus was driven out into the wilderness to be with the devil, pushed out there by the Holy Spirit, for FORTY DAYS with the wild animals and the scorpions and the burning hot days and freezing cold nights with little if any food or water, and I thought, hmmm... now that's more like it. Sacrifice, hardships, difficulty, temptation, the devil. That's what Jesus got for 40 days. 40 days... just like our season of LENT. So now I'm thinking I'm onto something...

So I decided to look into the wisdom that comes from the desert, the desert like Jesus where Jesus was, so I studied the desert monks, those religious hermits who actually live out there in the desert, to learn what they said about sacrifice and hardship and all that kind of thing, and I learned that Abbot Antonio was asked by

another monk if sacrifice and hardship was the way to heaven, and Abbot Antonio said there were two pathways in life that you can try. The one path would have a person believe she is very bad and sinful and that there is no real way to be good and that all people deserve to be condemned to hell, and so she does her penance in Lent and gives up things she likes (like chocolate), and beats herself down for being so bad, and she feels very, very guilty. “But,” said the Abbot Antonio, “God does not dwell in guilt, so that pathway goes nowhere.” Hmm... condemnation, deprivation, guilt leads nowhere.

But the other path is the one on which a person knows the world isn't perfect as we may want it to be, that she sometimes, maybe often, chooses the wrong thing and does what is hurtful. And yet the world is also filled with blessings, and love is real, and so she prays in Lent and doesn't give in to temptation and asks for forgiveness when she does wrong, and instead does things to make the world around her a better place. So she feels that she is loved and forgiven. “And,” said the Abbot Antonio, “since God dwells in the love and forgiveness that makes the world a better place, she will find the way to heaven.” Hmm... Blessings, love, forgiveness, heaven?... This is what Lent is all about?

And then it began to make some sense to me. Lent isn't just a bad, hard time before the good times of Easter. Lent is really more like the beginning of the

celebration of Easter. One of my old teachers (Bob Hughes) used to say that it was good to begin the Easter party with a time of soul-searching, for being sorry for what was wrong, what we had done wrong, not because we are afraid of God or because we're a bad person, or because we are supposed to be unhappy. Quite the contrary. We do LENT because we know that when we have done wrong, we can be forgiven, we are never NOT loved by our Creator, and so our time of LENT, of fasting, of overcoming temptations, of being sorry for our sins, of working to make the world a better place, is just a good way to straighten ourselves up and tell God "thank you." Listen for the words in the Communion prayer today and you will hear what I mean. We say...

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. You bid your faithful people cleanse their hearts, and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast; that, fervent in prayer and in works of mercy, and renewed by your Word and Sacraments, they may come to the fullness of grace which you have prepared for those who love you.

Of course, we do have some work to do in Lent. It's a good idea to do our part and try to avoid the temptations that await us every day.

There's the story of the little boy whose father had told him not to swim in the local canal, and the boy agreed to abide by his father's wishes. But that evening he came home damp with a wet bathing suit in hand. And his father asked where he had been, and he said, "Swimming in the canal."

"But didn't I tell you not to do that?" asked his father.

"Yes, sir," admitted the boy.

"Then why did you go swimming?"

"Well, you see, Dad," said the boy, "it's like this. I had my bathing suit with me when I went by the canal, and I couldn't resist the temptation.

"Well, why did you have your bathing suit with you then?" asked his father.

And the boy replied with a grin, "So, I would be prepared to take a swim, in case I was tempted."

Try not to lead yourself into temptation. The devil does a fair job of it without our help. Strengthen your spirit by prayer and worship and good works. Remember that God is present even in the desert times of our lives. In fact, by the grace of God we may be stronger and more faithful people for having endured them.

And that is what I discovered about LENT.