

Grace Episcopal Church
 Jefferson City, MO
 First Sunday in Lent, RCL, C: March 9, 2010

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.

Last Wednesday, at the beginning of the Ash Wednesday service, Bill invited us to observe a holy Lent. And like a good pastor, he didn't stop there. He didn't leave us wondering *how* to accomplish what he invited to do. Instead, he told us several ways that we might go about observing a holy Lent. Here's the actual invitation, from the Prayer Book: |

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent,
 by self-examination and repentance;
 by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
 and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

Did you hear the last part? The list? They are three sets of concrete, practical suggestions. Each one is an action, a spiritual practice. Here they are again

self-examination and repentance;
 prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
 reading and meditating on Holy Scripture.

Let's pause a moment this morning, together, and think about that list. It contains specific and specifically religious practices that the church has recommended for as long as it has existed. Two of the practices involve stopping something, discontinuing some activity or other, and the rest are just the opposite: actions, doing something, engaging in specific activities with particular contents. So the invitation before us, here at the beginning of Lent, is to do some things and to not do some other things. It's all about behavior. Lent is all about what we do, ceasing some activities and engaging in others.

That realization leads to another realization. The cessations and engagements that we are invited to as we enter this new liturgical season are in fact cessations and engagements that we enact regularly, already, as a part of our on-going faith lives. We do not limit our spiritual practices to the season of Lent. These practices are not annuals; they're perennials. We pray and read the Bible regularly. We examine our lives, and we choose to turn our backs on and move away from those attitudes and actions that are detrimental to our Christian vitality ... an we do it year round; at least *ideally*. Our best selves engage in these practices all the time.

And that means it might be better to think of this special season of Lent, these 40 days before Easter, as the time for recommitting ourselves together, liturgically and devotionally, to our definitive Christian disciplines. They're definitive, right? They define what we are as Christians. *Formative* might be a better term than *definitive*, for we are not definitions. We are people, and we are formed by prayer, bible reading and meditation, self examination, and repentance.

At the very beginning of the Ash Wednesday invitation, we were also reminded of the purpose of Lent. The invitation mentions the reason why early Christians invented and practiced Lent. They did so because they connected Lent to Easter. They used to observe Easter, the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, with great devotion. They were serious about Holy Week; so serious, in fact, that they prepared for it. They created a 40-day season of preparation, and what they were preparing to do was to fully participate in the paschal mystery of Christ as enacted liturgically during the week leading up to Easter. And that, by the way, is a religious concern. It's what elevates Lent above health concerns, or self-help concerns, or re-commitment to good habits and our struggles against bad habits. Lent is connected to Easter, and both Lent and Easter are essentially about our relationship with God. Easter and Lent have to do with our salvation.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and we have already begun accepting the invitation that Bill extended to us from the prayer book, from our ancient religious tradition. We have begun engaging in the practices that the church has always considered means to a holy Lent. We have confessed our sins and repented of them, asking the Holy Spirit to help us turn our backs on them and walk away from them. We have prayed together, and we'll pray together some more before we're finished here this morning. We've read the scriptures together, and right now we're meditating on them, together. Just like the invitation said.

We read the story of Jesus, our great example and Lord, entering into his own 40-day season of self-denial and examination. We heard how he prayed and relied on holy scripture in resisting the schemes of the devil. That time of temptation in the desert was like a holy Lent of Jesus, and it can serve as an example for us during our Lent.

Jesus wrestled valiantly with temptation in the desert, and he came out of that wrestling match victorious. He won the victory, and thank God that he did. Because his victory is our victory. Because of him, in him, we are able to struggle victoriously over our own personal, behavioral obstacles to our own vital lives in God's kingdom. In him we are able to die to the obstacles and rise triumphantly over them. And there's the Easter connection again.

It's time for us to RSVP. Let's accept the invitation, and in the strength of the Holy Spirit, let's (continue to) observe a holy Lent. Amen.