

## First Sunday of Lent A - To plan our yearly spiritual life in Lent, the spring.

March 1, 2020

*On the way home after mass on the First Sunday of Lent, little Janet asked her dad: "Daddy, Father said we have to fast and abstain during Lent. Can I have one less butter cookie (her favourite) for snack and abstain eating broccoli (which she hates)?"*

The word "Lent" comes from the old English, "lencten," which means "spring." As the season always begins in mid-winter, it becomes confusing and gradually the word Lent, which originally meant spring, is confined to this liturgical use. In the Christian Church, Lent refers to the 40 days of abstinence preparatory to the Feast of Easter. For well over a millennium Lent has traditionally been a time of fasting. Communities would fast in various ways, abstaining from certain kinds of food, from various kinds of recreation and socializing. All of this resulted in **a fast that aided in spiritual preparation and also made the great Feast of Easter so much more exciting.** While Lenten practice now is often less vigorous than it was centuries ago, the spirit of this fast remains. Many churches forgo muffins at coffee hour after mass, or totally cancel coffee hour. Many individuals abstain from treats, social media, television, other kinds of entertainment or anything that can feel like a guilty pleasure.

The first reading for this Sunday features an invitation to abstinence. (Genesis 2:7-9 3:1-7) Adam and Eve were given very clear instructions not to eat of the fruit of good and evil. While living in paradise, they presumably were enjoying immortality, the physical presence of God and getting to eat from an abundance of delicious fruits. In the midst of abundance the rule around the tree of good and evil was an opportunity for them to abstain, to deny their desire so that they could remain in right relationship with God. They didn't. The Devil tempted them, they ate of the fruit and suffered the consequences. This reading makes sense on the first Sunday of Lent as we are reminded of just how blessed we are and how discipline in some things can increase our joy in all things and keep us closer to God. **Adam and Eve offer a cautionary tale for us as temptation creeps in.**

The Gospel passage for this Sunday (Matthew 4:1-11) affirms this message and adds to its importance. Jesus, the 'second Adam' called by the Apostle Paul, is led by the Spirit into a time of extreme fasting and temptation. While Adam and Eve had to avoid one delicious fruit in paradise, Jesus braved living in wilderness and consumed nothing. It is here that Jesus is offered three distinct temptations. Unlike Adam, Jesus resists all the temptations, passes the test, and goes on to live a ministry that changed the world and brings life to many. The message, in contrast to Adam, is clear: **spiritual discipline is good, so is abstinence.**

**Jesus abstained from materialism.** In the first temptation, Jesus is tempted to alleviate his hunger by using his power to turn the stones into bread. Jesus says no, citing that *it is not by bread alone that one lives, but by the word of God.* In this temptation Jesus denies the desire of the flesh to strengthen his focus on God. While avoiding cookies might be good for physical health it is not the path for everyone to strengthen their focus on God. Does giving up certain food actually give us the opportunity to focus more on God? Perhaps the offering is time in prayer.

**Jesus abstained from self-centred pride.** In the second temptation Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the Temple and invited to throw himself down in order that the angels may save him. Jesus again says no, refusing to put God to the test. In this one Jesus denied the opportunity to be reminded just how proud he is being the son of God. Jesus was in the midst of horrible isolation and, often times isolation can lead people to manipulation of those around them in order to feel their importance in their community. So what do we do when we aren't appreciated, or connected, or valued? It would be good to consider these things and think how we can embrace our community and seek connection in healthier ways.

**Jesus abstained from worldly power.** Finally, Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world, which are offered to him in exchange for worship. Jesus, on the precipice of embarking on his ministry and building his movement could have much more easily taught and influenced the world from this place but instead said no again, affirming the need to worship God and only God. Jesus, again denied personal power so he could continue to embrace power with God. While power with God does not offer the same pride benefit and certainly made Jesus' life and ministry more difficult it ultimately saved our world. In this we come to understand how embracing power with God, as opposed to power without God, can ultimately enrich our lives and ministries.

And so, given all these, our call is to live a Holy Lent, beyond fasting and abstinence, to embracing the truths that will set ourselves and our churches free to live out the fullness of God's mission. I always think this Holy Lent should not only be the 40 days but should be whole year round. As an old Chinese saying goes, "*The best time to plan the year is Spring.*" **May we all seek to find the abstinences that will strengthen our focus on God and find ways to meet the hunger needs of others. May we all seek community this Lent and give our time to give companionship to those who are particularly isolated, maybe we all consider how we might empower each other and have power and influence together in order to create positive outcomes for the world. May all the church, with God's help, engage in Lent this way. *It is this kind of Lent that will truly live into the Spirit of Spring; regardless of what the weather might be. It is this kind of Lent that will take us towards an Easter Season full of resurrection and new life.***