



LENT

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, February 21, 2010

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I. The History Section

In the Western Christian tradition, Lent is the period of the liturgical year leading up to Easter. In the late medieval era, as church liturgy began to be given in the language of the people rather than Latin, the English word *Lent* was adopted. This word initially simply meant “Spring,” and derives from the Germanic term for “long” because the duration of daytime hours appear to visibly lengthen in the springtime.

Without question, Lent has been an important part of the liturgical calendar since the

second century CE. Originally observed as a time of preparation for new converts (catechumens) in the Catholic Church, it culminated in baptism as an annual rite of initiation during the Easter Vigil. Over the centuries, as the rigorous structure of the catechism waned, Lent became more permanently fixed as a penitential season of fasting and prayer during the more than forty days prior to Easter. Sundays are excluded in the count because they are viewed a weekly celebration of the Resurrection.

As a liturgical season, Lent is distinctive because of the personal commitments that the faithful make, specifically those that revolve around giving up old, harmful habits as well as taking on new, beneficial ones. In turn, more than any other period in the Christian calendar, Lent speaks directly to the possibility of the forgiveness of confessed sin. As such, the Lenten season is a time of acknowledging and confessing one's sin to God.

Given that historic understanding of Lent as a part of the Christian experience, it is a grave necessity to reassess the contemporary misconceptions about the season's element of self-denial. On the one hand, many young people seem to use the Lenten principle of fasting as a sacred version of a fad diet by seeing their efforts to deny themselves certain or all food as a weight-loss scheme rather than a worthy sacrifice. On the other hand, I have heard many young people say, when asked what they would give up for Lent, that they want to give up "doing homework" or "eating 'old folks' food" [aka, fresh vegetables and/or home-cooked meals]." Confusing sacrificial self-denial with avoiding tasks or meals a person finds onerous is ostensibly absurd, yet many people think this is a reasonable interpretation of the meaning of Lent. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Conventionally, it is described as being forty days long, though different denominations calculate the forty days differently. The forty days represent the time that Jesus spent alone in the wilderness before the beginning of his prophetic ministry. During that sojourn in the wilderness, Jesus endured temptation by Satan while also preparing himself for the death that changed history, which he was yet to face at Calvary.

II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

Music for the Lenten season should encompass themes such as preparation, penitence and prayer. Our first song that speaks to this moment (which we also offer via a video) is "He's Preparing Me." Especially during the Lenten season, we would be well served to view some of the challenging seasons of our lives as God's preparation time—the period during which the Divine transmits lessons through experiences that help make us more like our Mighty God.

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpJ_0IxNoUM

He's Preparing Me

He's preparing me for something
I cannot handle right now
(Handle, now)
He's making me ready

Just because He cares
(He's providing me with what I'll need)
To carry out the next matter in my life

CHOIR:

Preparing me
He cares for me
Preparing me
(For everything)
That comes in my life

He is preparing me
God is preparing me

LEAD:

He's preparing me for something
I cannot handle right now
(Handle, now)
He's making me ready
Just because He cares
(He's providing me with what I'll need)
To carry out the next matter in my life

CHOIR:

Preparing me
He cares for me
Preparing me
(For everything)
That comes in my life

He's preparing me
Because He cares for me
He's maturing me
Because He cares for me
He's arranging me
Rearranging me
He's preparing
Because He cares for me
He is training me
He is tuning me
He is purging me
He is pruning

Preparing me
He cares for me
Preparing me

(For everything)
That comes in my life

He's preparing me
Because He cares for me
He is growing me
Because He cares for me
He's arranging me
Rearranging me
He's arranging me
Rearranging me
He's preparing me
Because He cares for me
He is training me
He is tuning me
He is purging me
He is pruning me

Preparing me
He cares for me
Preparing Me
(For everything)
That comes in my life

He is preparing
He is preparing
He is preparing me¹

The second song, “The Light of the World is Jesus” by Phillip Bliss, was written in 1875 and will likely be unfamiliar to many. However, this easy to sing hymn states in clear and convincing terms what is our conviction for this Lenten season—that Jesus is the Savior of the world. That Jesus is the one who brought us out of darkness and into the marvelous light. Thus, during this Lenten season, we celebrate his life, ponder whether our lives comport with his life and beckon to those who could receive this Savior just now.

The Light of the World is Jesus

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin;
The Light of the world is Jesus;
Like sunshine at noonday His glory shone in;
The Light of the world is Jesus.

Chorus:

Come to the Light, 'tis shining for thee!
Sweetly the Light has dawned upon me;
Once I was blind, but now I can see;

The Light of the world is Jesus.

No darkness have we who in Jesus abide;
The Light of the world is Jesus;
We walk in the Light when we follow our Guide;
The Light of the world is Jesus.
(Chorus)

Ye dwellers in darkness with sin-blinded eyes;
The Light of the world is Jesus;
Go wash at His bidding and light will arise;
The Light of the world is Jesus.
(Chorus)

No need of the sunlight in heaven, we're told;
The Light of the world is Jesus;
The Lamb is the Light in the City of Gold;
The Light of the world is Jesus.
(Chorus)²

The final song, "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," is a well known and beloved classic in African American worship. The master song writer Fanny Crosby, ever aware of the human condition (sin) pleads, as should all believers, for God to never pass us by.

Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior

1. Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

Refrain:
Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry,
While on others Thou are calling,
Do not pass me by.

2. Let me at a throne of mercy
Find a sweet relief;
Kneeling there in deep contrition,
Help my unbelief.

3. Trusting only in Thy merit,
Would I seek Thy face;
Heal my wounded, broken spirit,
Save me by Thy grace.

4. Thou the spring of all my comfort,
More than life to me,
Whom have I on earth beside Thee,
Whom in Heav'n but Thee.³

III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text(s)

Historical Information

It is traditionally believed that Jesus lay in the borrowed tomb for roughly forty hours. This, in turn, established the standard for the forty hours of total fast that preceded the Easter celebration in the early Christian Church. One of the most important ceremonies at Easter was the baptism of the initiates on Easter Eve. The fast was initially undertaken by the catechumens to prepare them for the reception of this sacrament. Later, the period of fasting from Good Friday until Easter Day was extended to six days, to correspond with the six weeks of training, necessary to give the final instruction to those converts who were to be baptized.

Traditionally, on Easter Sunday, Roman Catholics may end their fasting and resume again whatever they gave up for Lent, after they attend Mass on Easter Sunday. Fasting during Lent was more severe in ancient times than today. Even now, the Egyptian [aka, Coptic], Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches continue the practice of avoiding all animal products including fish, eggs, poultry and dairy derived from animals (i.e. goats and cows) for the entire forty-six day period of the Lenten season.

IV. This Lenten Season (Prayer and Fasting)

Instead of just letting this Lenten season roll by in forty days as have so many others, why not use this season as one in which you and even your family and friends fast and pray. If it is acceptable according to the traditions of your faith community, you may even want to ask a group with which you work in your church to participate. To focus your fast and prayers, select a great need in your community. Then, commit to regularly pray and fast throughout the Lenten season for that need to be fulfilled. Yes, you can later also take direct action to fulfill the needs of your community. However, the main focus during this period is to put you back in touch or more in touch with the revelatory ways that God moves and speaks when we pray and fast. To be safe, be sure to have all who are to participate consult a physician before engaging in a fast; especially participants on medication, and those with medical concerns or questionable good health. If you are unsure how to begin, consult the web for numerous examples of groups that commit to communal fast for a variety of reasons.

Notes

1. "He's Preparing Me." By Daryl Coley and Carol Antrum
2. "The Light of the World is Jesus." By Phillip Bliss
3. "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior." By Fanny J. Crosby. [African American Heritage](#)

Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #435