



LENT

(Season of Lent: February 13–March 30, 2013) FOCUS ON FASTING

Sunday, February 17, 2013

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The unit you are viewing, Lent, is a compact unit. This means that it does not have a supporting cultural resource unit and worship unit. Instead, to enliven the imagination of preachers and teachers, we have provided a scriptural text for this moment on the calendar along with a sermonic outline, suggested links, books, articles, songs, and videos. For additional information, see Lent in the archives of the Lectionary.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Today's lectionary moment concerns Lent, which is observed during the liturgical year by many Christian denominations. Lasting for a period of about 40 days, Lent runs from Ash Wednesday to Maundy (or Holy) Thursday or Easter Eve (Holy Saturday). While celebration of the Lenten season is not unknown in African American Christian communities, it has tended to be overshadowed by other days of the liturgical calendar, not the least of which is Easter itself. In his 2008 Lectionary commentary, the Rev. John E. Guns beautifully captures the significance and history of Lent as a spiritual practice quite suited to helping us gain our bearings in a world marked by rampant materialism. He says:

As our culture and the church become more secular and driven by the seductive spirit of distorted materialism, the need for a healthy observance of Lent increases. Lent, which began in the fourth century, has endured several stages of development. In its origination, Lent served as a forty-day period of study and concentrated prayer in preparation for baptism, which would be held during the Easter season. Throughout the course of time, Lent has evolved to serve as a season of self-denial and intense consecration.

This aspect of Lent—"self-denial," usually in terms of fasting from food—has been taken up by many Christians, though the wider significance of this season of self-denial and intense consecration has been lost to view. Again, the Rev. Guns has spoken insightfully to this point as well:

While [self-denial and intense consecration] are worthy pursuits, the notion of redemptive service tied to self-denial has not been sufficiently presented from the modern pulpit nor embraced in Christian culture. *I believe it is important that Lent becomes a season, particularly in the African American church, of sacrifice and self-denial tied to the purpose of redemptive societal engagement.*

Rev. Guns makes a crucial point worth reiterating during the current Lenten Season. Being tied to the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ in which he reclaimed the world as in fact God's world that has not been abandoned by God, the Lenten Season invites us into a set of spiritual practices meant to sustain us in following Jesus in the work he did. This is the work of "redemptive societal engagement" and social care for the wounded, the scarred, the oppressed, and the hurting. I'll reference the Rev. Gun one more time, seeing that he so aptly makes the point I would like to make: "The Lenten season within the African American church context should not only be a time of self-denial but also a season of sacrifice where one is inspired to embrace the spirit of modesty and service." This truth is embedded in Daniel 1:8-20, which in the history of biblical interpretation has been a kind of go-to text for thinking and grappling with the significance of the Lenten Season.

II. Sermonic Outline

A. Sermon Focus Text(s): Daniel 1:8-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 8) But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. (v. 9) Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. (v. 10) The palace master said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king.' (v. 11) Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: (v. 12) 'Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. (v. 13) You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe.' (v. 14) So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. (v. 15) At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. (v. 16) So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. (v. 17) To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

(v. 18) At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, (v. 19) and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. (v. 20) In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

(v. 21) And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

B. Possible Titles

- i. The Meaning of Lent
- ii. Trial by Diet
- iii. Practicing Lent in Exile
- iv. Serving God in Babylon

C. Point of Exegetical Inquiry

Daniel chapter 1, which sets the scene for the book of Daniel as a whole and for chapters 1–6 in particular, makes two crucial points that press upon our imaginations during the Lenten season. In the story, the youthful Daniel and his three young companions find themselves in a condition of diaspora or dispersion from their homeland. They are in exile and find themselves in Babylon under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Removed from Palestine and chosen by the imperial ruler himself to be reeducated to be servants of the Babylonian world to serve within the Empire, Daniel and his comrades were being positioned both where they could help their people, those suffering under imperial oppression, but also where they ran the risk of succumbing to the gods of imperial power all around them. Abutting the possibility of being positioned in the king’s palace where they might be used of God to work for redemptive societal engagement is the very real lure, temptation, and seduction of idolatry.

Given this, Daniel 1:8-20 presses a series of exegetically rooted questions: What kind of discipline or cultivation of the self, what kind of discipleship is needed to resist idolatry or to bear witness through a way of living against the false gods worshipped of our world? How do we live into the fact that with God we are not helpless in the condition of exile? What kind of spirituality or holiness must we develop to sustain the work of redemptive societal engagement within our broken world?

We discover in this story of Daniel and his friends answers to these questions. And central to the answers provided in the story is what might be called “self-sacrifice.” Here self-sacrifice is not about exploitation or religiously sanctioned abuse, which often makes use of the language of sacrifice. Womanist biblical scholars and theologians such as Delores Williams and M. Shawn Copeland have warned us against this. Rather, as borne out in this story of Daniel and his friends’ aims at the imperial king’s court, self-denial and self-sacrifice aim at cultivating a witness in the midst of Empire to the true God, the God beyond power, and against the false imperial gods of materialism and spiritual idolatry. And on the other hand, sacrifice and self-denial speak to developing the spiritual fortitude and practices—what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the strength to love”—needed to work for societal redemption and “not get weary in well-doing” (cf. Gal. 6:9) in the midst of oppression and exile.

III. Introduction

Today we recognize the season of Lent in the Christian calendar. It's the season that sets us up for or prepares us for the Easter Season that begins with Maundy Thursday and goes through Good Friday and Holy Saturday and then culminates on Easter Sunday. But also, it is a season commemorated by many and varied Christians—be they Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, or what have you—around the world. But make no mistake: the season of Lent is a season of deep significance not just for these Christian traditions. It has deep meaning and resonance for African American Christians too.

What then is the significance of Lent? Is Lent just about giving up certain of your luxuries or the creature comforts? Is it just about denying yourself your favorite reality television show—*Chicagolicious*, or *Honey Boo-Boo*, or *Bridezilla*, or the *Housewives of Atlanta*—for six weeks? Is it just about not checking out any of the March Madness (OK, some of the March Madness) games for the six weeks of Lent? What is Lent all about? Is it just about denying yourself coffee, candy, or sweets for the six weeks of Lent so that you can get what you want from God?

Well, from our text in the prophetic book of Daniel, we are given a glimpse of the meaning and the significance of the season of Lent. We learn from the story of Daniel and his three friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—that Lent is a season of anticipation. It is a time of hope about what God is going to do in the midst of the difficult time of exile and oppression in a strange land. Lent is a time of preparing oneself to be used by God, to participate in God's work of caring for God's people during the moment of oppression, difficulty, exile, and social stress and strain. It is a time of preparation for how God will involve me in God's work of change. In other words, Lent is about self-cultivation. It's about getting yourself together for how God is going to use you in God's work in the midst of the oppression and social difficulties all around us. And this means that Lent is also a season of anticipation.

In Lent we are anticipating how God is bringing about a future beyond what we now see and that God is using us in the process of social transformation and societal redemption. The message of this story is that in Daniel and the other three Hebrew boys' trial by diet, God was preparing them, and giving them the inner spiritual strength, to be able to work within our broken world but not be conformed to it. In their trial by diet, they were cultivating the kind of self, the kind of persons they needed to be, in order to work within the world around them, in Babylon—near power and in places of influence—and always remember they are in such places to work for the transformation of society and bring about God's societal redemption and to bear witness to the true God and against idolatry. We see all of this in this opening story of Daniel's trial by diet. This story raises the question for us, Why practice Lent in exile? What does Lent mean in a world of oppression, exile, and injustice?

IV. Moves/Points

Move/Point One – The Purposes of Lent (v. 8)

Before there is self-denial, there is first resolve or commitment to the true God in the face of the false and seductive gods, the idols, of power, prestige, and significance all around us in Babylon or any place of exile. These false gods, the idols of our world, seek to capture our love and desire by giving us “rich food,” as it were, and have us forget why, even in the place of exile and oppression, God places us in high places: to be witnesses to the true God who has not abandoned God’s people and to be positioned to work as God’s agents of societal redemption and transformation. This “rich food” was a problem because with it also came a pledge of allegiance to the gods of power and materialism. In other words, the rich food was about idolatry and confusion about the true God. Lent begins with faith in God to resist idolatry.

a. Lent begins not with what you physically or materially deny to yourself. It begins with faithful resolve and dogged commitment to follow God and God’s purposes, most especially while in a strange land.

b. Lent is about which god you will love. It is about where our commitments are—to the true God or to the false gods and the meals they offer us. In short, the Lenten season is about the transformation of our loves and desires.

c. But this commitment of the heart never remains a matter just of the heart. Lent is not spirituality *without* social action. Lent is the spirituality *of* social action in the world, in the places of exile and oppression. This spirituality is rooted in a commitment to the true God.

d. As we are faithful to God, the true God proves also to be faithful to us. We stand in the favor (*chesed*) of God. God will be in the struggle with us.

Move/Point Two – The Trials of Lent (vv. 8b-16)

Commitment to God positions us to be used by God. It equips us for the work of God precisely in the places of power and oppression. Self-denial is a vehicle of God proving God’s faithfulness to us. This is the trial of Lent, which is the trial of faithfulness.

a. There comes a time when our faithfulness to God, to not turn to the false gods around us, will be put to the test.

b. The test will take place at the level of the everyday things that we do (in Daniel’s case, what he was to eat).

c. The test has the purpose of demonstrating God’s faithfulness.

Move/Point Three – The Blessings of Lent (vv. 17-21)

Lent is not only a season of self-denial; it is a season of blessing. Lent is about the reminder and the reassurance that we constantly need that God will bless us with the resources needed—far beyond what the idolatrous “rich food” could ever supply—to do God’s work and to endure and continue on in the work.

a. Lent’s blessing comes in the form of knowledge, wisdom, and the skills needed to understand the times and to work for redemptive societal transformation.

b. Lent’s blessing is to put us where we need to be in order to further the work of redemptive societal transformation.

c. Lent’s blessing is the blessing to endure, to continue on, and not give up in the work of societal redemption.

Celebration

We’ve learned several things from Daniel’s Lent and about the season of Lent from this passage. We’ve learned about the special purposes of the Lenten Season. We’ve learned that the trials of Lent and the self-denial in Lent are about preparing us for the work of God, for how God wants to use you in God’s work of societal transformation in a strange land and in the places of exile and oppression. But most importantly Lent provides us the message that God has not abandoned us in Babylon. God has not abandoned us in the places of pain, difficulty, and exile. God has not left God’s people without a witness that God is still with us in the very places where we might feel most alone and most abandoned. In fact, Lent provides the message that precisely in the places of oppression we need not sell out our souls to the false gods all around us trying to seduce us to trust in them. No. Lent tells us that precisely in the places of exile and as we’re faithful to God’s work of transformation in those places, God will make us “ten times better” to press on in God’s work. This is the message of Daniel’s Lent.

Thank you, God, for the Season of Lent. Thank you for your faithfulness. Thank you for the strength that you give us to press on and continue on in your work. Thank you for giving us what we need to accomplish your work.

V. Songs to Accompany This Sermon

A. Well-known Song(s)

- He Never Said a Mumblin’ Word. By Moses Hogan
- Ain’t Got Time to Die. Traditional
- Jesus Is Lord. By Andraé Crouch and Patrick Henderson

B. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2005–2012)

- No Greater Love. By Noel Hall, Fred Hammond, and Kim Rutherford
- Create in Me a Clean Heart. By Donnie McClurkin
- Just Because You Are/I Will Sing My Praise to You. By Candi Staton

C. Spiritual(s)

- In Remembrance. By Ragan Courtney. Tune by Buryl Red
- Change My Heart, O God. By Eddie Espinosa
- Victory in Jesus. By Eugene M. Bartlett
- Water Flowing Free. By Gennifer Benjamin Brooks. Music by Mark A. Miller

D. Liturgical Dance Music

- I Surrender. By Darrell Evans and Scott Griffiths
- At the Cross Medley: At the Cross/O the Blood of Jesus/The Blood Will. By Andraé Crouch, Israel Houghton, Aaron Lindsey, Ricardo Sanchez Y Sus Moonlight, and Isaac Watts

E. Song(s) for the Period of Prayer

- Shout to the Lord. By Darlene Zschech
- Zion (Zion Is Calling). By Stephen A. Hurd

F. Sermonic Selection(s)

- Time to Seek the Lord. By Twinkie Clark-Terrell
- Bless the Lord. By Richard Smallwood

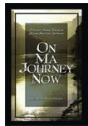
G. Benediction Song(s)

- He Touched Me. Traditional
- Another Blessing. By Doug Williams and Melvin Williams

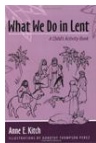
VI. Videos, Audio, and/or Interactive Media

- An informational video on Lent. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gn4U33VGbUA> accessed 26 November 2012
- Visual meditations for worship services during Lent. Online location: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lei6rR_pcSc accessed 26 November 2012.

VII. Books and Articles to Assist in Preparing Sermons, Bible Studies, and/or Worship Services Related to Lent



Brown-Felder, Gwendolyn. On My Journey Now Leader: A Lenten Study Based on African American Spirituals. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.



Kitch, Anne E. What We Do in Lent: A Child's Activity Book. Nashville, TN: Morehouse Publishing, 2012.

- “Prayer: Promise and Assurance, A Lenten Reflection,” by Rev. Clarence W. Davis. Online location: <http://blackandchristian.com/articles/pulpit/davis-02-04.shtml> accessed 26 November 2012
- “Lent Begins: Ash Wednesday,” by Tyora Moody. Online location: <http://blackandchristian.com/articles/shining/moody-02-04.shtml> accessed 26 November 2012

VIII. Links to Helpful Websites for Lent

- Fasting for Lent. Online location: <http://www.imby.net/easter/fast.html> accessed 26 November 2012
- Lenten traditions from around the globe. Online location: <http://www.osv.com/OSV4MeNav/ChurchSeasons/ACatholicLent/LentenTraditionsfromaroundtheglobe/tabid/8551/Default.aspx> accessed 26 November 2012

- Questions and answers about Lent. Online location:
<http://www.stpaulskingsville.org/lent.htm> accessed 26 November 2012

IX. Notes for Select Songs

A. Well-known Song(s)

- He Never Said a Mumblin' Word. By Moses Hogan
Location:
Brown, Angela. Mosaic: A Collection of African American Spirituals with Piano and Guitar. Albany, NY: Albany Music Distribution, 2003.
- Ain't Got Time to Die. Traditional
Location:
Canton Gospel Soul Children. Canton Gospel Soul Children. Metairie, LA: Mardi Gras Records, 1996.
- Jesus Is Lord. By Andraé Crouch and Patrick Henderson
Location:
Crouch, Andraé. More of the Best. Nashville, TN: Vanguard, 1982.

B. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2005–2012)

- No Greater Love. By Noel Hall, Fred Hammond, and Kim Rutherford
Location:
Hammond, Fred. Free to Worship: Live at the Potter's House. New York, NY: Verity, 2006.
- Create in Me a Clean Heart. By Donnie McClurkin
Location:
The Essential Donnie. New York, NY: Verity, 2007.
- Just Because You Are/I Will Sing My Praise to You. By Candi Staton
Location:
I Will Sing My Praise to You. Middleburg, FL: Emtro Gospel, 2008.

C. Spiritual(s)

- In Remembrance. By Ragan Courtney. Tune by Buryl Red

Location:

African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #685

- Change My Heart, O God. By Eddie Espinosa

Location:

Zion Still Sings for Every Generation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
#178

- Victory in Jesus. By Eugene M. Bartlett

Location:

African American Heritage Hymnal. #261

- Water Flowing Free. By Gennifer Benjamin Brooks. Music by Mark A. Miller

Location:

Zion Still Sings. #193

D. Liturgical Dance Music

- I Surrender. By Darrell Evans and Scott Griffiths

Location:

Motor City Mass Choir. Revival in the House. New York, NY: Integrity, 1999.

- At the Cross Medley: At the Cross/O the Blood of Jesus/The Blood Will. By Andraé Crouch, Israel Houghton, Aaron Lindsey, Ricardo Sanchez Y Sus Moonlight, and Isaac Watts

Location:

Free Chapel. Power of the Cross. New York, NY: Columbia, 2009.

E. Song(s) for the Period of Prayer

- Shout to the Lord. By Darlene Zschech

Location:

Bryson, Peabo. Songs 4 Worship: Soul. Pueblo, CO: Time Life Music, 2009.

- Zion (Zion Is Calling). By Stephen A. Hurd

Location:

A Call to Worship Live in DC. New York, NY: Integrity, 2004.

F. Sermonic Selection(s)

- Time to Seek the Lord. By Twinkie Clark-Terrell
Location:
The Clark Sisters. Count It All Joy/He Gave Me Nothing. Detroit, MI: Sounds of Gospel, 2002.
- Bless the Lord. By Richard Smallwood
Location:
Verity Gospel Greats Live, Vol. 4: Men of Gospel. New York, NY: Verity, 2000.

G. Benediction Song(s)

- He Touched Me. Traditional
Location:
Caesar, Shirley. He Touched Me. Detroit, MI: H.O.B. Records, 1994.
- Another Blessing. By Doug Williams and Melvin Williams
Location:
The Mighty Clouds of Joy. Mighty Clouds of Joy: Super Set. Nashville, TN: Light Records, 2004.