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PREFACE

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Every year I look forward to Lent. But I am not sure why. There is certainly nostalgia. I grew up in a Catholic neighborhood where Lent was a community affair. Everyone, adults and children, tried “giving up something.” Although one girl in my sixth-grade class gave up her little brother, most people denied themselves some culinary delight. But the forsaken could be indulged in on Saint Patrick’s Day when all bets were off. Lent was a deep breath that you took in, held for six weeks, and let out at noon on Holy Saturday. Part of me hankers after those yesterdays.

There is also the hope for some slight signs of improvement. I fantasize there are people who do not need Lent. They manage to eat right, pray right, and treat their neighbor right year-round. They yawn at the idea of repentance. However, I am not one of them. I am always on the lookout for a better self. Lent triggers an “I can do better” tape and connects with my early childhood memory of the little engine that could. *I think I can, I think I can, I think I can....*

Most of all there is a need, throughout my whole being, to shake free and start again. Resurrection is present from the beginning. Throughout the year I have collected barnacles, and I need a good scraping. Our skin does this by itself, a model of rejuvenation. However, our soul needs constant attention. It grows world-weary. We do not even notice how we have ceased to rejoice, and thus we carry each day as an intolerable burden. So during Lent I pray:

ASH WEDNESDAY

Now Is the Time

Many Ash Wednesdays ago, my mother and I received ashes in the afternoon and headed directly to the mall to shop—real American religion. As we passed the permanent convention of teenagers gathered at the center of the mall, one of them saw our smudged foreheads and announced in a megaphone voice, “Hey! The Catholics are giving out ashes. Let’s go.”



AGNUS IMAGES

ASH WEDNESDAY

There is something universal about Ash Wednesday. Although it is primarily a Catholic ritual, it appeals to many people. Even the unchurched may find themselves in line waiting to have someone's thumb blacken their forehead.

There are many reasons for this attraction, but I favor the explanation that ashes are a gentle reminder of our death and we welcome that gentle reminder. Although death is a constant companion, we do not have to think about it every day—but neither can we totally deny it. In the brief ritual of Ash Wednesday, we acknowledge our mortality in a way that does not debilitate us. Harsh reminders we push aside; gentle reminders we accept.

In fact, this ritual can embolden us. We are jolted out of drift, realizing our present life does not go on forever. It will end; and so we must make the most of it now. Time is the opportunity to love and we must seize it.



Discovering Your True Mission



As Christians begin Lent, they remember how Jesus, after his baptism, was driven by the Spirit into the desert and fasted for forty days. This story validates fasting as a spiritual practice for the Lenten season, but it also raises a puzzling question. What does *fast* do that *feast* does not?

What is the purpose of denying the very appetite that sustains life?

In contemporary culture, any talk of feasting and fasting is viewed with suspicion. It smacks of swinging from one excess to another, from too much to too little. The real culprit is excess, and it is to be avoided in all its forms. Binge eating leads to obesity; binge fasting leans toward anorexia. The task of relating to food is to learn to eat healthily and moderately. The contemporary ideal is to subordinate eating to the higher value of a long and healthy life.

This practical attitude of aligning food to serve the higher value of life helps us reconsider Jesus' fast in the desert. Jesus' refusal to eat is not about fasting from nourishment. It is about the temptation to see ourselves as only physical beings whose overwhelming drive is to keep the stomach full. Satan suggests that Jesus use his Spirit-suffused power to turn the stones into bread, signaling that his relationship to God comes down to the privilege of not being hungry. When Jesus refuses to feed himself, he points to a larger purpose that is the real mission of his life. As important as sustaining our physical life is, Jesus does not live by bread alone.

Neither do we. And every time we do not take food, we remember this truth and seek a higher purpose.

Find your true mission.

Staying Hungry



It is always fun to try to name the besetting sin of our age. We round up the usual suspects. Since we live in a time of unprecedented information flow, our foremost sin is deception, filling our communication channels with falsehoods and disinformation. Since we live in a time of globalization, our foremost sin is exploiting the majority of the population to create more wealth for the minority. Since we live in a time of nuclear weapons, our foremost sin is the way those who have them intimidate those who do not have them. Since we live in a time of terrorism, our foremost sin is the killing of innocent people. We could go on and on. There are many candidates.

But there is also the impact on us of so many candidates. So much sin has the cumulative effect of making us resign ourselves to the current wretched state of affairs. We give in to what is. We cease to hunger for what is not yet. We lose our zest for a better life. Our desire for the kingdom of God departs. In this way, another candidate for the besetting sin of the age is born—a tiredness in the bones that keeps us from desiring and enacting the good.

In medieval spirituality, this condition was called *acedia*, the sloth of the soul. This sloth is often compared to physical bloatedness. The soul is too fat to move and has become a couch potato. Therefore, the spiritual admonition to the soul is to stay hungry.

Revive the desire for adventure.

What the Water Washes Away



The Gospel of Luke insists Jesus was baptized with all the people. It is a singular event in his life, but he is not alone. His baptism is not an experience that makes him completely different from the other people in the water. He is participating in dynamics that affect “all the people.”

These dynamics concern how we let go of sins. Instead of holding onto all the wrongs that have been done to us and all the wrongs we have done to others, we let them go. Our sins are washed away in the waters of baptism.

The result is we lose our identity as a sinner. If we were strongly connected with sinful actions, their sudden disappearance leaves us empty. There is a moment when we do not know who we are anymore. We are between identities. Something has ended, but has anything begun?

It is then, with our sins forgiven, that we are open to hear the word of love. It is only after Jesus has been baptized that he hears the voice from the sky that tells him who he is: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

We will hear the same word.

Let go of who you are not.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

On Not Being Fulfilled

We are a bundle of needs, and we do our best to get them met. When our physical, social, and psychological needs find some fulfillment, we sense we are loved. Fulfillment and love seem a natural coupling, but most lives are a combination of fulfillment and deprivation, of needs met and needs unmet. What happens to our sense of being loved when our needs go unmet?



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FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

This is the situation that confronts Jesus in the desert. Satan encourages Jesus to meet his physical needs for food (stones into bread), his social needs for importance and power (the kingdom of the world), and his psychological needs for safety (float down from the Temple). Jesus refuses to meet his own needs. Yet he insists that even lacking physical, social, and psychological fulfillment, he remains the Son of God and knows he is loved. Jesus does not need everything to go right all the time to know he is right with God.

The love of God may be revealed in times of blessing, but it persists in times of burden. We must get beyond always looking for evidence of love in what is happening to us. Love is there, at the center, in the innermost core of who we are. We must believe it and live our belief.



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BEGIN EACH DAY this Lenten season with a *Day-breaks* meditation. Find a quiet place where you can be open to the peaceful presence of God. These reflections take only a few moments of your day. Allow time for the words to sink in, for the message to unfold. Consider how these ideas might change your life, challenge your attitudes and beliefs, and inform your heart. Lent is a season of conversion. This is the journey of Lent and Easter.

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