



Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne For the Life of the World

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Good Lent!

By Larry A. Peters

Sing His Bleeding Love: Hymns and Church Music for Lent and Easter

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Easter: Life Overcoming Death

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The church looks different in Lent, with violet paraments in the chancel and on the pastor's vestments. The church sounds different. We omit singing "Alleluia," and we hear music that we do not hear other times of the year. ... Easter, with its dazzling white paraments, plenty of lilies, and festive music from churches large and small, provides a feast for the senses beginning at the Easter Vigil and then magnifying on Easter morning.

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This hope of new life in Christ—this is how the Christians of old faced the wickedness of their time. Although the world seemed to be crumbling around them, they did not despair, for they knew that their lives and the world itself was being remade in Christ. For us, too, the resurrection of Christ gives us an indomitable hope, no matter the social or personal trials we suffer.

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Cover Photo: Luther Statue on Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne Campus. By Richard Woodward.

Good Lent?

By Larry A. Peters

“Good Lent!” came the greeting from an orthodox friend. Hmmm. That is not exactly the way Lutherans greet one another during Lent. Growing up I would not have called Lent good—it was a time when additional worship services were added to the mix and favorites were removed from daily diet and life. The more I think about it, Lent is a good time of the year. It is less the somber and solemn season of my remembrance but more the time of focus upon the basics of the faith and on the renewal of our life together as the people of God by baptism and faith.

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When I was growing up the focus of Lent was almost exclusively about the cross. We heard sermons about the people around the cross, the places on that journey to the cross, details of the cross in words and images and the meaning of the cross. It was not uncommon to turn Lent into an extended look into Holy Week and what happened from Palm Sunday through Good Friday.

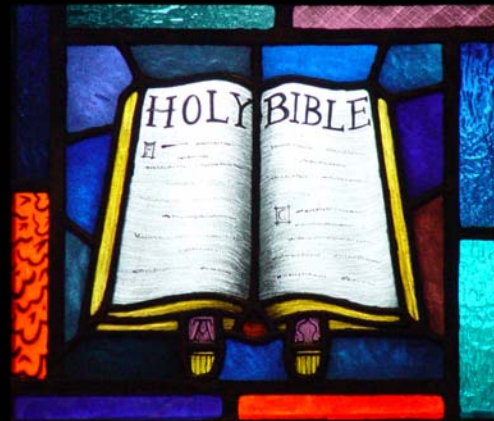
Today Lent is more commonly seen as a time of catechetical renewal—the focus more on renewing the faith than remembering the details of what happened and when it happened as our Lord was crucified. I have used both as a common overall theme for Lent, but I tend to appreciate more and more the broader focus on catechetical renewal.

Good Lent begins appropriately enough with one of the most solemn days in the Church Year—Ash Wednesday. Whether ashes are used or not (more and more the imposition of ashes is becoming routine in our parishes on Ash Wednesday), Good Lent recalls how David lamented over his sins. This internal repentance is often

accompanied by outward actions such as ashes or giving up a favorite food or activity for Lent. Such outward actions are neither sacramental nor the focus of Lent, but merely an attempt to coordinate externally what is to be the inward focus of the heart and mind.

Though Sundays are IN Lent but not OF Lent, this season finds us voluntarily setting aside for a time a few of the more festival elements of the Divine Service (specifically the Hymn of Praise). This symbolic gesture has the subtle effect of making us want even more what is set aside, and in this way anticipating what is to come when the Hymn of Praise is sung anew in response to the commemoration of our Lord's victorious resurrection. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, at least that is what they say, and here the setting aside of the *Gloria in Excelsis* or *This Is the Feast* (depending upon the Divine Service you use) draws attention to what these hymns proclaim.

During Lent many Lutherans give up the familiar Alleluia Verse for the Common Verse for Lent: “Return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and



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merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Good Lent never wanders far from this theme verse of Lent (Joel 2:13, Num. 14:18, Ps. 103:8, 145:8 and Ex. 34:6).

In addition to what we omit, Lent is also distinguished by what we add. Here I mean the great Lutheran chorales of Lent and many other hymns and songs that focus more acutely upon the cross and the suffering of our Lord for our redemption. Who can read or sing the words to “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”; “O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken”; “Jesus, I Will Ponder Now”; “Upon the Cross Extended”; “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted” or “A Lamb Alone Bears Willingly” and not be moved?

These hymns are sung more frequently in part because of the addition of mid-week services that extend the Lenten character to Vespers, Evening Prayer and other non-Eucharistic formats. Here the individual commitment to a renewed personal devotional life intersects with the additional services scheduled for the whole congregation. All of these help make Lent into a Good Lent—a time of renewal and refreshment for us as Christians and for Christians in their lives together around the Word and Table of the Lord.

Good Lent is also a way to describe our renewed focus upon confession and absolution. Both the general act of confession and the general absolution that serve as the ordinary prelude for the Divine Service take on new significance within the Lenten season, but this is also a time in which we rekindle our focus upon private confession and absolution. Nothing says confession like naming the sin out loud, and nothing says absolution like the forgiveness which is attached directly to your name. Luther put it this way:

If you believe that it is really true that Christ has suffered for you and saved you, then you can say “If Christ has my sin, that means it is no longer mine simply because Christ has it.” He has torn the sin from my heart and from my conscience where I had a register of sins in which the following was written: “You have been an adulterer, a murderer and a thief.” However, as I have the Word:

“Christ has taken my sin upon Himself”, you will therefore not find my sins in any register or book neither in heaven nor on earth. They have all been written onto the Son of God; that is the only place I will see them and that means nowhere else. (Luther Brevier: Worte fuer jeden Tag, Wartburg Verlag, 2007, p. 270)

These words are framed and posted on the wall above the *prie dieu* in the Vestry where I normally hear confessions.

Good Lent is less and less about recounting the details of our Lord’s Passion (as important as these are) and more and more about general catechetical renewal. I find myself preaching less exegetically and topically and more doctrinally during Lent and especially during the mid-week services of the Lenten Season.

Lent is a great time to be Lutheran. We have a rich tradition of Lenten hymnody and additional service opportunities to accompany the individual acts of personal study, almsgiving and prayer during this season of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. We have a rich experience of symbol and sign to draw attention to what we believe and confess (everything from mid-week services to ashes on Ash Wednesday to the specialized services of Holy Week).

Of late there has been some discussion in certain quarters about preaching doctrine. Given the weak state of catechetical instruction, I believe that Lent affords us a time to preach doctrine to our people. This does not mean failing to preach the Gospel and preaching about the Gospel instead, but it does mean that our people are daily bombarded with more and more that has less and less to do with the faithful creeds and the Lutheran Confessions. We do them a grave disservice if we fail to teach them properly so that they may discern the truth from error. We seem to spend less time in catechesis than we feel we ought,

and Lent affords us a time to renew our corporate attention to what we believe, confess and teach, and why.

There is no pastor alive who is not aware of the press of time and the constraints we face in trying to do too much in the limited time available to the average person. The additional time during Lent affords us the rare opportunity to treat doctrine in a more in-depth manner, to teach as well as preach the faith. Good Lent is time spent renewing our focus upon the Six Chief Parts, preaching and praying the Small Catechism and refreshing our faith. We spend the whole year doing more with less time; Lent offers us a chance to do more with a bit more time and latitude granted to us by the hearers in the pew.

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Good Lent means we are intentional and deliberate about mining fully these rich veins of experience, tradition and devotion. Every parish can benefit from the time and attention paid to utilize more fully the season and its resources to renew our faith and our life together under the cross. Every pastor owes it to his people to use the time wisely, to plan appropriately and to explain the why behind these practices so that it may truly be a good Lent. 🏰

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