

## **The First Sunday Of Lent Sermon – Luke 6:1-13**

Most of us have favorite holiday seasons. For some it's Christmas, with the family get-togethers and presents. For others it's Canada Day and summer, filled by a sense of national pride and beach vacations to boot. But each year at just about this time, it strikes me that very few of us would pick Lent, a season that seems to most of us as grim as the weather that usually attends it.

Think about it: crossing off days on the calendar until Ash Wednesday; leaving work just a little early, saying "I've got to get my Lenten shopping done;" advertisements on billboards and television reading "only twelve more days 'till the day of Ashes;" or little kids going to bed, asking their parents, "How much longer 'till Lent is here?" It just doesn't happen.

### **Lent's Problem**

The trouble with Lent, I think, is fairly clear. It's buried right in the heart of the primary reading for Ash Wednesday, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

(Sigh) Actually, you don't have to read the whole verse, as the brunt of Lent's problem is in the first four words, "And when you fast...."

And when you fast?! Really? Except for the occasional crash diet before summer vacation, who fasts anymore? And there it is in a nutshell, you see, the trouble with Lent: it feels like this strange, weirdly antiquated holiday that celebrates things we don't value and encourages attitudes we don't share. No wonder that each year fewer and fewer churches observe this age-old (fourth century!) tradition – it's too old-fashioned, too "Roman," too medieval for many contemporary Christians to handle.

So let's face it. Lent's in trouble. I mean, even among those traditions which do honour the season, rarely is there the same kind of enthusiasm or expectancy which greets Advent. Notice we don't sponsor Lenten Adventures for our kids; We don't pine to sing Lenten hymns ahead of time. Lent's in trouble.

I don't know, maybe it's that there are no presents at the end, and no fun and games along the way. Or maybe it's that Lent asks us to give up things. I mean, my word, haven't we had to sacrifice enough already to get our kids through college, to save for retirement, to put that new roof on the house, thank you very much, why should we give up anything more for Lent?

Or maybe it's Lent's themes that trouble us. Penitence. Sacrifice. Contemplation. These are the words of Lent, and I, for one, have a hard time believing they were popular even with the Puritans – you remember, the folks that actually held competitions to see who could resist the greatest temptation or avoid the most pleasure – let alone now.

Lent; it's in trouble. And so each year, as I listen to my non-Lent-observing friends knock it as "works theology" and my Lent-observing friends complain about it as a pain in

the butt, the same question inevitably demands loudly to be answered: Why Lent. Who really needs it?

### **Lent's Promise**

But you know what? Each year, whatever my feelings approaching Lent may be, the same answer comes whispering back: I do. Just maybe...I need Lent. We need lent. Just maybe we need a time to focus, to get our minds off of our careers, our social lives, our next projects – and a hundred other things to which we look for meaning – and center ourselves in Meaning itself.

Just maybe we need a time – is forty days really enough? – to help clear our heads of the distractions which any involved life in this world will necessarily bring and re-orient ourselves towards the Maker of all that was given for our pleasure and which we have let become merely distracting.

Maybe we need the opportunity – and perhaps deep down we crave the chance! – to clear our eyes of the glaze of indifference and apathy which comes from situation after situation where we feel nearly helpless so that we can fasten our eyes once more on the almost unbearable revelation of the God who loves God's children enough to take the form of a man hanging on a tree.

And maybe, just maybe – and this takes the greatest amount of imagination of them all – maybe Lent really isn't ours to do with whatever we please. Perhaps Lent isn't even the Church's, to insist upon or discard at will. Maybe Lent isn't any of ours, to scoff at or

observe. Maybe Lent is God's. Maybe Lent is God's gift to a people starved for meaning, for courage, for comfort, for life.

If it is – if we can imagine that Lent is not ours at all but is wholly God's – then maybe we'll also begin to recall, at first vaguely but then more strongly, that we, too, are not ours at all, but are wholly God's – God's own possession and treasure.

Seen this way, Lent reminds us of whose we are. The "sacrifices," the disciplines, these are not intended as good works offered by us to God; rather, they are God's gifts to us to remind us who we are, God's adopted daughters and sons, God's treasure, so priceless that God was willing to go to any length – or, more appropriately, to any depth – to tell us that we are loved, that we have value, that we have purpose.

Yes. We need Lent. We need an absence of gifts so that we might acknowledge the Gift. We need a time to be quiet and still, a time to crane our necks and lift our heads, straining to hear again what was promised us at Baptism: "You are mine! I love you! I am with you!" We need Lent, finally, to remind us of who we are – God's heir and Christ's co-heir – so that, come Easter, we can rejoice and celebrate with all the joy, all the revelry, all the anticipation, of a true heir to the throne.

And so yes, We need Lent. You see, if Lent's in trouble, it's only because we're in trouble, so busy trying to make or keep or save our lives that we fail to notice that God has already saved us and has already freed us to live with each other and for each other all the rest of our days. And so we have Lent, a gift of the church, the season during which God prepares us to behold God's own great sacrifice for us, with the hope and prayer that,

come Good Friday and Easter, we may be immersed once again into God's mercy and perceive more fully God's great love for us and all the world and in this way find the peace and hope and freedom that we so often lack. Amen.