

In the early days of the Church, Christianity was an illegal religion and the penalty for being a Christian was death. The stories about feeding Christians to the lions are not fiction. One paid a severe price for following Jesus. Therefore the Church existed in secret and fear was very much a part of Christian life.

In the face of this fear, some, even many would turn away from the Church and revert to pagan practice. Sometimes the guilt from doing this was overwhelming. The Church provided a means for those who had fallen away, called “the lapsed,” to return. They did penitence for a period before Easter and then, on the night before Easter confessed their sins to the gathered Church. They were restored to the Christian community and received Holy Communion, again, at the first mass of Easter Day. It is in this practice that Lent has its origin. At some point it became fixed at forty days, to reflect our Lord’s forty days in the wilderness.

Lent also served another purpose early in the life of the Church. Those considering becoming Christians were called “seekers.” Because of the cost of being a Christian, a cost that quite literally could mean taking up the cross to follow Jesus, Lent served as a time for seekers to pray and meditate with great intensity and, considering the risk, ask themselves if this was something they really wanted to do. If the answer was yes, they would be baptized on the Saturday evening before Easter Day and, with the sunrise, be received into the fullness of the community of Christ and receive their first Holy Communion.

Thus, Lent came reflect, to symbolize not only the sacrificial nature of Christianity, to reflect the reality of human brokenness in the face of sacrifice, but also to reflect the hope of redemption, through confession and reconciliation and reflect the promise of eternal life symbolized in the Holy Eucharist. The body and blood of Christ, received in the Eucharistic bread and wine, convey the promise of redemption and eternal life in the family of God.

We observe Lent, today, as a period of prayer and meditation, study and fasting as we prepare for Easter. Lent incorporates both the themes of penitence and reconciliation and preparation for discipleship. The forty days reflect the days our Lord spent in the wilderness following his baptism, days spent fasting, meditating, praying and preparing for his redemptive work. Jesus was lead by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness and in the wilderness he was tempted by Satan, constantly, for forty days. The Church purposely teaches that Jesus was subject to every temptation that we are. The wilderness story reminds us that at any moment Jesus could have chosen the easy and self-serving way, yet he stood against temptation and never sinned. He chose grace.

I would say to you that our lives are like that, too. We begin our Christian journey filled with the Spirit, filled with faith and hope, filled with a commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads us. But we, too, enter the wilderness of life. We, too, are tempted by the devil to take the easy road that abandons Christianity; to take the road that abandons commitment to discipleship, to love, to serve, to give of the self for the glory of God by service in the name of Christ to others. We are tempted to walk away from grace, to choose the easier way. If we think it will lead us to fullness, we are mistaken. It leads us only to a spiritual death.

Lent is a microcosm of life. Forty days for knowing the self, forty days of preparing for Easter, just as life must be a preparation for our eternal Easter. *Amen.*