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Why Lent? Why Now?

“And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

Mr. Beaver in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

CS. Lewis' Narnia is a magical land that is always cold. The White Witch has kept Narnia under her spell creating a permanent season of snow, ice, and death. It was “always winter and never Christmas” in Narnia. That was until Aslan came back to bring freedom and “shake his mane”.

Like Jesus, Aslan the lion king represents freedom from death's snare and release into joy. When Aslan is on the move in Narnia, winter begins to melt and life comes into bloom. For us in the real world, Lent is very similar. Lent means “springtime” and it marks our exodus from winter into the dawn of spring. For us as Christ followers, Lent reminds us that Jesus is on the move and the joyous season of spring is here. He will provide

for us a, “crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isaiah 60:3).

Our culture has shaped us into people who, so often, appreciate instant gratification over long-term satisfaction. Many of us think, “If it takes too much time, it isn't worth it” However, the season of Lent calls us to be patient and wait in fasting. Lent reminds us of the journey; the journey Christ took to the cross and our own journey alongside him. Lent calls us to a holiness that only comes through resolve. Lent challenges us to deny “instant” and embrace “process”. This joyous season of Lent shapes our character toward the reconciliation between the suffering of death and the resurrection of life.

Lent is the original *40 Days of Purpose*. It is about spending time meditating on suffering and life and discovering the joy of both. For Christians since the 4th Century, the Lenten season has taken on different meanings, yet the purpose has remained the same: to remember Christ's journey toward death on the cross, and to embrace the new life we all find in his resurrection.

The traditional Scripture readings for Lent begin with the account of Jesus' baptism, which makes sense. Baptism is death. From the moment he emerges from the Jordan River, Jesus is on a collision course with the Cross. His baptism is a point of no return. As Christians walk through the Lenten season with Jesus, we do so as those who have also been baptized. "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3).

After Jesus was baptized and filled with God's Spirit, the first thing he did was spend 40 days fasting and praying in the desert. The passion of all Christians is to walk in Christ's footsteps, so from very early on in the history of the Church believers began to observe a Lenten fast in imitation of Jesus. Lent is a 40 day season (not counting Sundays) beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding on Maundy Thursday, the beginning of Christ's Passion. It is a season where we, with Christ, fast and empty our lives of impurities, shaking off everything that hinders us from the race (Hebrews 12:1).

Springtime represents life in abundance and for the Christ-follower, Lent is no different. As we emerge from sin's winter, we present ourselves to God's springtime a more focused and purposeful people. We revel in the coming of Easter, but also affirm the journey

toward Easter. For us to have a resurrection celebration, we must first acknowledge the cost—the cross of Christ!

A tendency we sometimes have is to deny the richness of our Christian heritage. It is so easy to forget that our Christian holidays have a season of preparation leading up to them. Lent is the season of preparation that leads us to Easter's celebration. Just as Jesus entered the wilderness to fast and be tempted, readying himself for ministry, we join Christ in his sufferings in our own fasting, our own emptying.

If we Christians want to drink deep of our Lord's cup, we must embrace the entire journey of our Christ. We must take up our cross and follow him. We must with resolute purpose, pursue our constant refinement into Christ's image. This purpose is marked with suffering, and John the Baptist was one who clearly understood this. He said about Jesus "He must become greater; I must become less" (Jn. 3:30). Simply stated, Lent is about decreasing so that Christ increases.

When we fast and deny ourselves privileges that we're used to having, time seems to move slowly. As the length of a fast builds an appreciation for that which is being denied, we become a more refined and pure person. Jesus knew this and his fast not only prepared him for ministry toward the cross, but also empowered him to stand in the face of Satan's temptation.

In the busyness of life – and many of us could say we lead busy lives – fasting slows us down and builds in us an appreciation for the work of Christ. Fasting also empowers us to be kinder toward one another. The Scriptures from Isaiah tell us our fasting should bring freedom and justice, and through fasting we are ready to join in communion with the Lord (Isaiah 58). In the same way, the prophet Joel

calls us to fast and repent, and in doing so, we are thrust into the reality of God's love and grace (Joel 2:12-13). In the context of Lent, the fasting we do before Christ's crucifixion comes before the feasting we do in celebration of Christ's resurrection. We fast so we can feast!

Within the ancient tradition of Lent, people eliminated all animal products from their diet during this season. This is why "Shrove Tuesday" (called Fat Tuesday, also *Mardi Gras*) is traditionally ushered in by a pancake feed – it uses up the dairy products and fats in the home. To become a vegan during Lent in this century may seem extreme to some, which is why the nature of the fast is now left to the individual believer. Like all fasts, there ought to be no legalism. Some people give up sweets, others more material accoutrements like television or movie rentals. Regardless of what one may choose to give up during Lent, the ultimate purpose is to instill a greater focus and awareness of Christ's death and resurrection, thereby drawing one closer to him.

Ultimately, a Lenten fast is to help us, not hinder us. The author of Hebrews illustrated this point clearly, "*...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The Apostle Paul tells us he was "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). For us to be crucified with Christ, we must die to ourselves. If we want to rise with Christ on Easter, we must follow him to death on the Cross. At the foot of Christ's cross we come naked, stripped of "everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles". Lent prepares us for the

death of Christ, for Good Friday. This season draws our attention to our purposeful emptying of self and our death to sin, so that when we approach the Cross of Christ we come with lives that are empty and ready to be filled with God's resurrection life. That is how we are crucified with Christ.

Why Lent? and why now? Because everything about our culture screams 'complacency'. Our adversary, Satan, wants nothing more than for God's people to forget the Cross of Christ. Satan does not want us to stand – and stand firm – but to assume a spiritual fetal position. Satan wants us to forget the significance of Christ's death. Lent is about the resolute purpose of remembering that Jesus has come and "shaken his mane". God's springtime is here and Satan's winter has melted.