

Preparing Lent and Easter

What images come to mind when you think about Lent? I think of fish dinners at the Roman Catholic Church on my block. Fish instead of red meat on Friday is traditionally known as a sacrifice of sorts and has been a Lenten tradition for years. I also think of people giving up such things as chocolate, coffee, or something else as a discipline to accentuate the penitential nature of the season. Giving up something for Lent as a spiritual discipline has been practiced for centuries.



The idea of giving something up for Lent has its roots in the early church where people did penance in order to “reenter” the church after denying the faith, most likely in the face of violence or threat of death. They went through this penitential discipline as catechumens¹ prepared themselves for baptism. This time of preparation to enter (through baptism) or reenter (reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant) into full participation in the church was called Lent. This intense preparation was the primary “reason for the Lenten season” that ended Maundy Thursday. Baptisms and reaffirmations then occurred as part of the Easter Vigil.

The season of Easter was a continuation of the Lenten season and known as a time of mystogogy (learning the mystery of living life as a baptized follower of Christ and one who breaks bread in Christ’s name with all the faithful). We might learn something from going back to these ancient roots of the season and reclaiming Lent not only as a time of preparation, but also as a part of the larger season. Lent/Easter is a continuous journey to the font and into the mystery of baptismal living.

I wonder if in the midst of war, natural tragedy, unacceptable health care, and overwhelming poverty rates, giving up chocolate or eating catfish on Friday can be considered much of a sacrifice—especially when so many people are suffering without the basics of a life of dignity. Many of our brothers and sisters go without much of what we take for granted each day. They are suffering for daily bread and thirst for living water. Perhaps we should wade deeper into the ancient waters of our faith and reclaim this season of Lent/Easter as one continuous journey of preparation, encounter, and discovery in hopes that our lives and our community will be better equipped to live into the life to which Christ is calling us: a life of service and love for those who are in the greatest need.

Lent/Easter is a journey to Jerusalem where we hear Christ’s commandment (Maundy comes from the Latin word for commandment) of love and service, and encounter the depth of pain and suffering of Christ. We celebrate the rising of Christ along with our own dying and rising from the waters of baptism (either by baptism itself or a reaffirmation of baptism) at the Easter Vigil. Throughout the season of Easter we continue to remember our baptism by encountering the mystery of a life in Christ and breaking bread together.

Here are some ideas for reclaiming Lent as a time of preparation. Take time to add corporate daily prayer to the routine of your day. Invite others to join you. You may wish to begin each day with Morning Prayer and also have a midday prayer during the lunch hour and end the day with evening prayer. This practice may begin during Lent and become a part of the culture of your church.

As we travel through the most holy days of the church, called the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil and Sunday services), we change our emphasis from preparation to a renewed and revitalized practice. We celebrate and explore what it means to be people who are living into the mystery of a life in Christ. We enter into the life of Christ in baptism by dying to the old way of life and rising anew. The rhythm of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter is the rhythm of baptism: hearing the commandment of love, dying to the old way of life, and rising with Christ to show this love to all. This is the most important holy time or holiday for the church. Throughout the season of Easter we want to continue to remember, embrace, and celebrate this new life we have in Christ.

Throughout Easter we explore the wonderful mysteries of living into our baptism, known as mystagogical catechesis. We learn how to live into this life through participation in the sacraments and preaching that unfolds these mysteries in ways that apply to our daily lives. It is important to engage the sacraments along with the Word read and proclaimed each Sunday, especially during the season of Easter.

“ . . . anyone who is in Christ is a new creation . . . ”

“in baptism we have died with Christ, and from it we are raised to share in his resurrection. The old life has gone and a new life has begun.”



*Adapted from an article by Chip Andrus, Associate for Worship in Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (USA).
(<http://www.pcusa.org/ideas/06spring/lenteasterworkshop.htm>)*

1. *Catechumens: People preparing for baptism and full entry into the church*