

The forty days of Lent help us to prepare for Easter, the greatest Sunday of all! Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and lasts five and a half weeks.

Praying, fasting, and giving to the poor are devotional acts that we are encouraged to engage in during this season. These are three important ways that help us love God and others more. Self denial in this way can be a truly worthy practice. It is no coincidence that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have some aspect of fasting, almsgiving, and reconciliation rituals. Giving stuff up is a path to reflection upon what we have and an opportunity to share from our abundance.

In the Book of Common Prayer (1979) we are called to observe a Holy Lent. We find special instruction on page 17 of the Prayer Book, “The following days are observed by special acts of *discipline and self-denial*: Ash Wednesday and the other weekdays of Lent and Holy Week, *except the feast of the Annunciation*; Good Friday and all the other Fridays of the year, in commemoration of the Lord’s crucifixion, except for Fridays in the Christmas and Easter Seasons; and any Feasts of our Lord that occur on a Friday.” (Italics mine).

In the 1928 Prayer Book these acts of discipline and self-denial were described as follows (in capital letters, no less!): “THE CHURCH REQUIRES SUCH A MEASURE OF ABSTINENCE AS IS MORE ESPECIALLY SUITED TO EXTRAORDINARY ACTS AND EXERCISES AND DEVOTION.”

How many Episcopalians know that such specific rules exist? Now that you do and if you want to follow them you may consider the Roman Catholic practice of abstaining from flesh meat on Fridays during the year, of having one full meal and one half meal on the weekdays of Lent; and an absolute fast from all food and drink until 6:00 p.m. on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Our prayer books, however, do not spell out the specifics. It is left to the discretion of each person to observe in an appropriate manner. St. Paul may be of help here...

*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (I Corinthians 9:24-27)*

I don’t think it matters whether you follow the traditional customs of fasting and abstinence or opt to undertake an additional spiritual devotion instead. I do strongly believe think it does matter that we all endeavor to find spiritual discipline in our lives, especially in this Lenten season. How will you observe the days of fasting and self-denial?

Warmly,

Father Rich+