

# Anticipating Easter

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Community Worship Service - February 19, 2023

## Introduction

- Next week Wednesday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, is Ash Wednesday, a day when millions of Christians around the world begin their observation of Lent.
- On Ash Wednesday many Christians will attend a worship service in which ash will be put on their foreheads in the shape of a cross, and the words "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" will be said to them or the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."
- Lent then runs from Ash Wednesday until the Thursday before Easter or until Easter Sunday.
  - It's forty days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, if you don't count the Sundays.
  - Lent is meant to commemorate the forty days and forty nights that the Lord fasted in the wilderness when He was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11).
  - Lent is observed by different people around the world but one of the most common ways people observe it is by fasting or giving something up for the period of Lent.
- That's interesting but you may be thinking, "Why we are talking about this in a New Church worship service? We don't do Lent, right?"
  - The official title of this sermon is "Anticipating Easter" but the unofficial title is "Lent for Suspicious General Church People".
  - There are good reasons to be suspicious of Lent – and we'll talk about those – but I think there's also a good argument to be made for using the time leading up to Easter in an intentional way.
  - Let's get into it.

## Some History

- Let's start with a bit of history.
- If you search back through old issues of *New Church Life* you can find a few mentions of Lent as part of a larger discussion of how many of the different days in a typical Christian calendar should be used in the New Church.
  - In 1919 Bishop W.F. Pendleton wrote,
    - Shall we have a Calendar... for the Christian year? .... Should it be based upon the Lord's life on earth, like that in use from an early period in Christian denominations? We have already adopted the latter in small part, namely, in the Christmas and Easter celebrations. Shall we extend it further, so as to include Epiphany, Lent, Whitsunday, and other similar days? It would not be possible or desirable for us to adopt the entire Christian year as it stands. ("Notes on the Service and on Ritual in General." *New Church Life*. 1919. p.246)

- He was saying, "Even though we've followed the typical Christian calendar in the way we celebrate Christmas and Easter, it's not a good idea for us to copy all of the days that other Christians observe in their calendar."
  - He doesn't say it explicitly in this article but this thinking might in keeping with the principle from *Apocalypse Revealed* that in the New Church there will be no external element of worship without an internal (*Apocalypse Revealed* 918).
    - We don't want to have some ritual that we mindlessly do because of tradition; we want to have all the external things we do to worship the Lord come from something internal.
- But then, W.F. Pendleton went on to write, "But we can in part [adopt a calendar like this], as we have already done [with Christmas and Easter], and we might even extend it further. Our object in this note is merely to raise the question for future consideration." (*Ibid.* p.247)
  - Alright, it's now over a hundred years later, let's give Lent some consideration.

## The Dangers of Fasting

### *Fasting to Show Off*

- Let's start by talking about the dangers and then the benefits of fasting.
- The Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, had some things to say to people about fasting.
  - Matthew 6:16-18
    - <sup>16</sup> "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>17</sup> But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."
- The Lord was directly addressing that unfortunately familiar tendency to do something religious or spiritual as a way of showing off.
  - Let's say that you decided that, for Lent, you were going to fast from being on your smartphone between dinner and bedtime.
    - Would you be able to do that fasting with a smile on your face?
    - Would you be able to resist telling other people about this praise-worthy thing you were doing?
      - It might be hard.
- Now, intriguingly, the Lord does not say here that fasting is wrong.
  - Just because something can be done badly or for the wrong reasons does not mean that it shouldn't be done.
  - The Lord is talking here in a way that assumes people will be doing fasting – He's just encouraging them to do it for the right reasons, for internal reasons, for reasons that only our Heavenly Father can see.
- One of the definite dangers of fasting is that we can do it in a meritorious, showing-off kind of way but it doesn't have to be like that.

## *Fasting as a Distraction from the Real Work We Need to Do*

- Another danger with fasting is that we can use it as a distraction from the real work that we should be doing.
- Imagine a businessman carefully not eating any chocolate for all forty days of Lent and feeling pretty good about himself but meanwhile he's constantly bullying and mistreating the people who work under him.
  - This practice of doing some religious ritual while ignoring the real spiritual work we need to be doing is unfortunately an ancient problem.
- Listen to this passage from Isaiah, written over 2,500 years ago.
  - The people are feeling indignant that Jehovah didn't seem to notice how good their fasting was.
    - <sup>3</sup> "Why have we fasted," they say, "and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?"
  - But then the Lord responds by saying,
    - "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure,  
And exploit all your laborers."
  - ....
  - <sup>5</sup> "Is it a fast that I have chosen,  
A day for a man to afflict his soul?  
Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush,  
And to spread out sackcloth and ashes?  
Would you call this a fast,  
And an acceptable day to Jehovah?"
  - <sup>6</sup> "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:  
To loose the bonds of wickedness,  
To undo the heavy burdens,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
And that you break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:3, 5-6 (NKJV, modified))
- The real thing that the Lord wants us to fast from and fast from permanently is wickedness and oppressing our neighbors.
  - That's the work of repentance and we'll talk about that more fully in a minute.
  - Before we go there let's consider the potential benefits of fasting.

## **The Benefits of Fasting**

- There's a handout in the worship bulletins today that has some suggestions of things you could consider fasting from:
  - alcohol, caffeine, TV, sugar, certain foods, social media, watching or reading the news
  - This is not to suggest that it is, by default, morally wrong to consume any of these things.
  - It is an invitation to choose to intentionally deprive yourself of something to learn about your relationship with that thing or to make space for other things.
- One thing that fasting accomplishes is that it gives you more awareness of that thing in your life.

- When you try to cut out sugar you will suddenly become much more aware of how many things you eat with sugar in it and you will also become aware of your sugar cravings.
  - That's useful information.
- Another thing that depriving yourself of something does is that it allows you to have a real picture of what life without that thing in your life could be like.
  - Some people found that when they cut out caffeine they were much less anxious than when they are consuming caffeine daily.
  - You don't really know what life without watching TV in the evening could be like, without trying it out.
  - You don't know what life without drinking alcohol could be like until you've tried doing without it for a while.
- Another thing that fasting from having something can do is make you appreciate and feel grateful for having that thing normally, even something as mundane as chocolate.
- Yes, these are physical things and we don't want to delude ourselves that just depriving ourselves of some physical thing makes us right with God.
  - But, nor do we want to delude ourselves into thinking that repentance and spiritual work are just a matter of will power and internal work.
    - No, real spiritual change will descend all the way down into what we do with our bodies.
  - For example, if I'm struggling with getting unreasonably angry at my children, it could be useful for me to have the humility to go to bed earlier.
    - I might need to fast from watching TV between 10 and 11pm.

### ***Making Space for Other Things***

- One other big benefit of fasting is that it allows space for other things.
  - Let's say you were wanting to get into a habit of reading the Word each day but feel like there's no time for it.
    - If you cut out checking social media, you might find that you've got 5 minutes to spare for reading the Word.
  - Or another way of looking at it is that any time you are choosing to add something good in, you are also choosing to make a sacrifice.
    - If you choose to attend church more regularly, that is a choice to sacrifice having a more relaxed Sunday morning.
- I know the feeling that there's no space to add anything else in.
  - Sometimes that is true and sometimes the Lord wants us to realize that we are distracted by much serving and need to spend a bit more time sitting at His feet (Luke 10:38-42).
  - Sometimes we can fit a new spiritual practice in by choosing to let something else go or choosing to let something be a lesser priority.
- The General Church is offering Easter readings that you can receive via email that will be starting on Ash Wednesday and coming each day through Easter.
  - You can sign up at [newchurch.org](http://newchurch.org) and maybe find time for those readings by reading one less news article.

- So there are a few thoughts about the potential benefits and dangers of fasting.
  - And if any of that resonates with what you feel like the Lord might want you to work on, awesome!
  - But the real case for Lent from a New Church perspective, isn't actually about fasting at all.

## The Case for Lent

### *The Case for Other Religious Holidays?*

- If you're attending this service, in-person or online, chances are you are already observing a religious calendar over the course of your year.
  - You probably have certain things that you do to prepare for and observe Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Church Day, and maybe Good Friday, and Easter.
- Those are good things but it's intriguing to realize that those things that we do are not explicitly taught in the Old and New Testaments or the teachings of the New Church.
  - There's no passage that says, "Here are the annual religious holidays that you should observe."
  - There were prescribed feasts in the time of the Children of Israel but not today.
  - Someone could say, "the teachings of the New Church don't teach in favor of observing Lent."
    - And that's true but they also don't teach in favor of observing Christmas or even New Church Day.
      - There is some precedent for Thanksgiving in the Jewish feasts and Easter or "Christian Passover" is mentioned in one passage in *True Christianity* but that's not really the point (704).
- We do these things and it's interesting to think about why we do them, what use those traditions serve in our lives, and what role they play in the cycle of our year.
- Another interesting question is, "Is there anything missing?"

### *Self-Examination and Repentance, Once or Twice a Year*

- There is something that we are taught that we should do at least once a year.
  - It's taught in many different passages.
  - It is to examine ourselves and repent.
- Here is one of the passages:
  - *True Christianity* 567:5
    - Active repentance is examining yourselves, recognizing and admitting to your sins, accepting that you are at fault, confessing them before the Lord, begging for His help and power in resisting them, stopping doing them, and living a new life. All this is to be done as if you were doing it on your own. Do this once or twice a year when you are about to take Holy Communion. Afterward, when the sins for which you are at fault recur, say to yourselves, "We do not want these, because they are sins against God." This is active repentance.
- The handout lists some suggestions of things you might want to repent from: taking revenge, lying, resentment, contempt for others, envy, controlling other people, taking what isn't yours, adultery.

- The teachings of the New Church are very clear about the importance of doing this work of repentance.
  - Another passage says this:
    - *True Christianity* 510
      - As we go through the early stages of our lives, there are many things that prepare us for the church and introduce us into it; but acts of repentance are the things that actually produce the church within us. Acts of repentance include any and all actions that result in our not willing, and consequently not doing, evil things that are sins against God.
- Repentance something we're meant to be working on all the time but, once or twice a year, we are meant to give it some special attention.
  - Maybe it's already part of your annual routine to do this in preparation for taking Holy Supper a couple of times a year.
  - If you don't already have it built into your year, it might be worth considering doing it every year in the time leading up to Easter.
    - Maybe that feels arbitrary to schedule spiritual work.
      - We don't get to pick when things are easy or things are hard.
    - But sometimes it's useful to have something external to encourage you to do something that you intend to do.
      - Think about Thanksgiving.
        - We should be grateful throughout the whole year but there is also a value of having a particular time of year where the traditions encourage us to reflect on things we're grateful for and express that to other people.
  - It feels like a fitting thing to have the time of year when we're thinking about the Lord dying on the cross and rising again as a time to recommit to taking up our cross and following Him.

## A Resource to Help You With Repentance

- There are resources to help you through all of the steps of repentance.
  - Be sure to check out the Begin a New Life program at [beginanewlife.info](http://beginanewlife.info).
  - There are lots of different useful documents on that website but the real core of the program is a 12 page PDF that walks you through taking an honest look at yourself, accepting responsibility for what you've done, praying to the Lord for help, stopping doing what's wrong and learning to do what's good instead.
  - It's a daunting process and it's ultimately hopeful and beautiful.
- I would recommend that you download or print the PDF and then work through it at whatever pace seems best for you.
- That's part of the beauty of having a period of time like Lent to work on it.
  - Not that we're going to go back to our old ways when Easter comes around.
  - But to give yourself time to really figure out what to work on.
  - And time to try to do better and mess up and have to figure out a new approach to changing your behavior.

- So that, potentially, by the time you get to Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter, you can take Holy Supper with gratitude for how the Lord, with His love and wisdom, is helping you to get free from the slavery of sin and "loose the bonds of wickedness."
- And on Easter you can celebrate His resurrection and the new life that He's giving you.
- And then each year around this time it will be another opportunity to do this work and go through this process again, each time growing in your relationship with your Lord and God.

## Conclusion

- Who knows whether Bishop W.F. Pendleton would have been convinced by this argument in favor of using the period of Lent in our church calendar?
- Regardless of that and regardless of whether you choose to use to observe Lent in some way this year or not, we *can* be sure that the Lord does want each of us to work on repentance and that He will help us in that process, every step of the way.
- We'll end with a few more passages from the Lord's Word that reinforce these points.
  - Then [Jesus] said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross daily, and follow Me." (Luke 9:23)
  - Repentance becomes effective if we practice it regularly.... [I]f we abstain from one sin or another that we have discovered in ourselves, this is enough to make our repentance real. When we reach this point, we are on the pathway to heaven, because we then begin to turn from an earthly person into a spiritual person and to be born anew with the help of the Lord. (*True Christianity* 530:3)
  - The Lord was leading us in our self-examination; He disclosed our sins; He inspired our grief and, along with it, the motivation to stop doing them and to begin a new life. (*True Christianity* 539)
  - And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)
- Amen.

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## Worksheet to Help You Get Ready for Easter

Find a worksheet with some readings and suggestions of ways to get ready for Easter at [brynathynchurch.org/lent](http://brynathynchurch.org/lent)

## Easter Readings and Online Groups

Sign up to receive daily Easter readings, starting February 22nd at [newchurch.org/easter](http://newchurch.org/easter) You can also sign up to join a weekly online group to discuss these readings.