Christ Church Parish
Tacoma, Washington

Lent Quiet Morning 2021
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Let us begin this Lenten season with delight.
Let us fast from passions as we fast from food,
taking pleasure in the good words of the Spirit,
that we may be granted to see the holy passion of Christ our God
and his holy Pascha, spiritually rejoicing.
Your grace has arisen upon us, O Lord,
the illumination of our souls has shown forth;
behold, now is the acceptable time;
behold, now is the time to be repent. Amen.
(Monday Vespers of the First Week of Great Lent).

First meditation

Throughout the world this year, millions of Christians are studying, reading, and listening to the Gospel of Mark during Sunday worship. Mark, as we know, was the first gospel composed some forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Biblical scholars are unanimous in their claim that Mark offers the most *human* portrait of Jesus among the gospels. He becomes hungry and needs food and drink. He sweats and becomes fatigued. While he is clear and bold in his proclamation of the presence of the Reign of God, he also expresses fear and, as he dies, he thinks God has abandoned him. If we read this gospel carefully, we see that he experiences criticism and is dismissed by people skeptical of his teaching and his abilities. His disciples, not the brightest group of students – for that is what the word "disciple" means – repeatedly misunderstand who he is and his purpose. He becomes angry and impatient with them, even churlish. There are moments when he seems to mock strangers who come to him for assistance.

This gospel, with its very human portrayal of Jesus, is a most appropriate one for us as we enter into the season of preparation called Lent for it asks you and me to reflect on our own experience in the previous year, we very human creatures of God. As a child and teenager, I experienced Lent as six weeks of focusing on sin as disobedience to God – a bringing to awareness of the petty and frequently frivolous crimes of a teenager – and my need to be forgiven so that in the end

I would go to heaven and not be separated from my loving parents. There was an almost judicial or legal color to the season.

It is somewhat different for Christians in Eastern Orthodoxy, for in the season they call Great Lent, one hears of the solemn joy that runs through the days and weeks leading to Holy Week. “Solemn joy?” you ask. What could be so joyful about this season that is shrouded in the West with dark purple?

Perhaps this different view has to do with the Orthodox prayer addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God as the Orthodox are wont to call her, the prayer that begins these days: “Heal my soul, made weak by attacks, most pure Queen, who gave birth to Christ the healer.” Certainly there can be joy in the experience of being healed and made whole. The prayer thus begs the question: **What needs to be healed in your life?** What calls out for the healing presence of Christ in your life? Taking our cue from the Gospel of Mark, we might ask: Have you experienced being dismissed, not heard, avoided? Have you been misunderstood or derided? Have you experienced crippling fear or undue anxiety in the previous year?

Or this: Have you become impatient with others and their apparently dim-witted understanding of your good intentions? Have angry words escaped your lips, words that cannot be retracted? With Jesus in his frustration, have you directed mocking sarcasm at others? Or, in your comfort, has complacency toward those in need seeped into your life?

All these are forms of wounding: wounding received from others, and regrettably, wounds we may have inflicted on others and ourselves. And yet there is another form of wounding, one that we all may have experienced in the past year: the injuries inflicted by voices and forces in our culture. Consider the indifference of national leaders to a pandemic that has violated our lives and killed hundreds of thousands. The failure to care for those most in need. The casual disregard for the call to protect others with simple measures. The illegal effort to overturn the will of the people in a legal election. The fear that arises as unemployment and food insecurity increase and the unwillingness of those in positions of authority to relieve this pain. The scarlet gash of racial injustice that wounds the victim and the perpetrator. If we grasp that our lives are connected with the lives our fellow citizens, then none of us are immune to the harm, great or small, that injures our common life.

As any physician, therapist, or spiritual director worth her salt will tell you: healing can begin when we honestly recognize the need for it. As Episcopalians, we do not hold that human beings are drenched in sin or, as some churches say, "by nature sinful and unclean." As the Catechism of the Prayer Book notes, we are created in the image of God and thus we are "free to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God" – and, at the same time – we are mortal, subject to our own frailty and bruised by life with others and the world in which we live.

One of the beloved gospel readings in the Lenten season is drawn from the Gospel of John, the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well. A close reading of the story reveals a significant theme: after each conversation, the woman seeking water at the well experiences ever-growing enlightenment as to who Jesus is and that he is a friend, not a stranger, the One who offers living water that gives life. Perhaps this story of enlightenment – one in which the truth of her life is revealed but revealed with kindness rather than judgment – inspired the vesper hymn for the first Sunday in Great Lent: "Enlighten our souls, O Lord, so that we might see Christ the healer."

Second meditation

Eastern Orthodoxy is called "eastern" because it is a form of Christian faith and life that emerged in the eastern Mediterranean, in those lands that had been significantly influenced by Greek or Hellenistic cultural values and practices. It was in Greece that the ancient Greeks worshipped the god Apollo, the *god of light* and the *god of healing*. Indeed, it was Apollo's chariot that drew the sun across the sky each day bringing life giving light to the planet. That Apollo would represent both light and healing is not surprising as we know that sunlight is a preeminent source of life and can be a source of healing.

The connection between light and healing and should not surprise us. "The Lord is my light and my salvation," sings the psalmist (Psalm 27:1). The prophet Malachi writes, "For you who revere my name," says the LORD, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2). The prophet Isaiah announces this word of the LORD, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly" (Isaiah 58: 6a, 7-8). Or this: "The Word of God was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:2-4).

On the first Sunday of Great Lent, we hear this exhortation in the Orthodox liturgy: "Let us begin the all-holy season with joy. Let us shine with the radiance of the holy commandments of Christ: with the brightness of *almsgiving*, the splendor of *prayer*, and the joy of *fasting* with the strength of good courage. Clothed in garments of light, let us be *healed of Adam's infirmity* and hasten to the resurrection of the new Adam, Christ our God." Did you hear that? Let us be healed of Adam's infirmity.

In the history of the Christian West, the season of Lent has been cast as a time in which human beings, disobedient toward God and thus distorted in relationship with other human beings, can do *penance*, that is, engage in spiritual exercises that will be found pleasing to God and thus win them forgiveness. In rejection of that more juridical or legal view of Lent, a good many Christians have opted for a far more optimistic view of human nature and thus see little purpose in attending to the practices of the season. The human being as *a wretch* (that's how we're named in the well-known funeral hymn "Amazing Grace") or the human being as an *angel* (that's how we're named in one of the psalms): are these are only options?

The Orthodox view of Lent offers a third path that focuses on the human need for healing – healing for us, our relationships with others, and the world in which we live. We are neither wretches nor angels: we are creatures who are easily wounded by the world, other people, and ourselves. It should not surprise us, then, that during the Lenten season, the Orthodox refer to the community of faith as **a center of restoration and recovery where the divine physician is at work** mending what is broken, anointing what is bruised, loosening what is tense, cleansing what is soiled, warming what has gone cold, and cooling what is inflamed. No wonder a Byzantine bishop said that the church is not a museum of saints but a hospital for people wounded by life, a community in which we serve each other as nurses and physicians of the soul.

What, then, is the therapy, the medicine that might assist us? One way to participate in this process is to claim a healing affirmation by reminding God of what God has done in the past and asking that such healing continue in the present:

- As you raised Peter's mother-in-law from sickness, so heal me.
- As you enlightened the woman at the well, so give me your light.
- As you raised Lazarus from the tomb, so draw me into your light and life.
- As you calmed the fear of your disciples, so ease my anxiety and stress.

The Orthodox liturgy gives us this simple prayer: "All-holy Trinity, have mercy on us and heal our infirmities." And this prayer, too: "Lord, have mercy." And this one as well: "O God, help me."

For those who pray the Divine Office, there are ample affirmations in the psalms that can orient us throughout Lent to the curative presence of God in our lives:

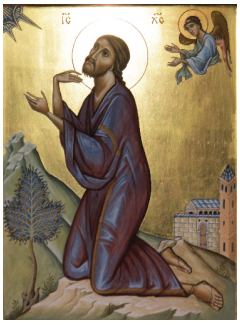
- "I am languishing, O Lord; heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror" (Psalm 6:2).
- "O Lord, be gracious to me; and heal me" (Psalm 41:4)
- "Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint" (Psalm 61:1-2).
- "God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

Here we find in Scripture, healing affirmations that we can carry with us through the day and through the week: mantras we can pray or sing, invoking the presence of the Divine Healer in our lives and the lives of those around us.

Third meditation

In the gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, we hear this exhortation from Jesus: "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when *you* fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret" (Mathew 6:16-18). The preeminent Orthodox practice of Lent is fasting, but not fasting as we in the West have inherited it – fasting as giving up a special treat *or* fasting as a healthy dietary practice *or* fasting as a small imitation of the suffering of Christ who had no food, no drink on Good Friday.

Among the Orthodox, the practice of fasting includes refraining from the consumption of meat, wine, olive oil, and all dairy products – except on Sundays in Great Lent. But such a fast is only for the *body*. The more important fast in the Orthodox tradition is for the *soul*. And this fast is more challenging than the refusal of a pork chop, a glass of wine, or a fine cheese for the six weeks of Lent. This fast is two fold.



First, it is a fast from *or* a conscious **taming of the passions** that can harm others: a conscious taming of words or actions that can harm others. The prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, a prayer that is repeated among the Orthodox throughout Great Lent speaks of this fast from injurious passions: "O Lord and Ruler of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, meddling, lust for power, and idle talk. Give me, your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love. Yes, O Lord, help me to fast from my failings and help me to refrain from judging my brother and sister, for you are blessed from age to age. Amen."

We are living in the midst of a pandemic that has upended what many of us simply took for granted. We are living in nation sorely divided by extreme political positions. And we dwell in a history marked by economic and racial injustice: the demonization of those who struggle with poverty and those whose race or ethnicity is different than our own. Given the ever-present power of social media, in which the passions of idle or harmful talk and negative judgment run free without restraint, we, too, can be drawn into assuming that patience, humility, and love are simply weak options to consider rather than virtues to claim. To fast then from damaging passions is to resist the power of cultural wounding that can seep into our consciousness.

The second dimension of this fast invites us, if you can imagine, to a feast. The evening prayer for the first day of Great Lent presents the invitation in this manner: "Having despised the fullness of passions, my humble soul, be nourished with **the food of good deeds** ... and be enriched forever." On the one hand, then, *fasting from* the passions that harm others and the self and, on the other, *feasting on* good deeds that benefit one's brothers and sisters. The prayer continues, "Take joy in the sweet feast of mercy," of merciful works that benefit one's brothers and sisters in need.

The Orthodox practice of Great Lent adds another rich layer of meaning to this season of *fasting* and *feasting* when it invokes the image of clothing. Keep in mind that the preparatory season of Lent leads us to the Great Vigil of Easter when Holy Baptism is celebrated. In Orthodox practice, infants are baptized naked and adults are frequently baptized while wearing only a swimming suit. They are then clothed in a gleaming white garment, the alb, what the Orthodox refer to as the wedding garment of those who are united to Christ, the Bridegroom, in Holy Baptism. To the Christian faithful, this Lenten exhortation links the baptismal garment with the fast and the feast: "Let us shed the grievous garments of indecency and be clothed in the radiant garments of good works."

This sweet imagery should come as no surprise to us since it is one of the prominent ways in which Christian identity is presented in the New Testament, that is, being clothed in Christ. What's so interesting about the Orthodox use of the image is that it links our Christian identity, bestowed in Holy Baptism, with an ethic of care for other people, their communities, and the earth. That is my prayer for us as we enter this holy season: that we who have been clothed in Christ may take joy in the sweetness of fasting and be nourished by the food of good deeds.