

The ABC' S of Lent – Part 6

The Sunday readings throughout the year, and in Lent, are broken down into a three year cycle. (The Ash Wednesday readings and Lenten weekday readings are always the same every year). Year "A" is the year of Matthew, year "B" is the year of Mark, and year "C" is the year of Luke. During Lent, however, the Gospel of John is also used many times and mixed in all of the three years. Year "A" in the cycle is 2023, "B" 2024,, "C" 2025, 2026 "A", etc. Year "A" readings are always used when the elect and candidates are being scrutinized. Year "A" readings may be used on any Sunday of Lent even though we are in year "B" or "C." The readings of Lent serve to inspire us, explain the meaning of Lent, and guide us through the season.

For example, on Ash Wednesday in the second reading, we are told now is an acceptable time and today is the day of salvation. Because of this favorable time of mercy, we are encouraged to be reconciled to God. In fact, Paul begs us to get right with God while we have this gracious time (see 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2). In the Ash Wednesday Gospel, we hear Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. In this carefully selected reading, Jesus tells us about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which have become the three pillars of Lent. In each case, Jesus goes to the heart of each religious exercise and invites us to interior purity. The first reading from the prophet Joel agrees with this interior change when he tells us to "rend our hearts, not our garments." (Joel 2:13). The Ash Wednesday readings inspire us and guide us as we begin Lent. Lent is a time of grace. It includes reconciliation, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and interior change. All these aspects will be foundational as we journey throughout the Lenten season.

The First Week of Lent

The Sunday readings are critical in directing us through Lent also. Church attendance in the first week of Lent increases as people are looking for ways to "make a good Lent." Most are serious, enthused, and highly engaged at this time. We have just come through the high point of Ash Wednesday with new resolutions and determinations. We want this Lent to be different. We desire life-changing God moments.

Whether the year is cycle "A," "B," or "C," Lent begins as we journey with Jesus into the desert.

Each evangelist offers his own account of Jesus' desert experience. Mark is short and to the point – he has no explicit temptations. We are told: "The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him." (Mark 1:12–14). Mark's gospel is the shortest of all four as well as the original, although Mark is placed second in the Bible. He gets right to the point without adding much information.

Matthew and Luke both have Jesus led by the Spirit into the desert, have Jesus conversing with the evil one, and inform us about the three temptations. However, the temptations are ordered differently. The first temptation about turning stones to bread is the same. However the second temptation about leaping down from the temple and the third about being tempted with the whole world in Matthew are reversed in Luke. Matthew ends with angels ministering to Jesus, while Luke ends with the devil leaving him until an opportune time. (John does not have the desert temptation narrative in his Gospel).

The Holy Spirit

What do these three Gospel readings tell us about Lent? First, in all three accounts, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert. The word used implies being thrust or thrown into the desert. Lent cannot simply be

about our ideas and plans. Our Lenten strategies should be Spirit-initiated and Spirit-led. As you approach (or even as you progress) during Lent, ask the Holy Spirit to help you and guide you. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to sanctify us and make us holy. Remember, Lent is about purification and enlightenment. To "make a good Lent," we have to surrender to the plans and will of God's spirit. We do not need more resolutions that will be broken – we need a Spirit revolution. Rather than just our own willpower, we need willpower infused by the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God who can lead us, change us, and make this the most significant Lent ever. Pray to the Holy Spirit: "Holy Spirit, lead me, guide me, control me."

Especially before he ministered, Jesus' motives and strategies were being sifted and scrutinized. Even under intense duress and abundant offerings, he did not succumb to the evil's way of doing things. Instead, he surrendered to the Spirit in each case. The young Aloysius Gonzaga said: "It is better to be a child of God than the king of the whole world." Jesus shows us the way to true royalty. It is not by bowing to the devil and receiving riches. It is by discovering our true identity as sons and daughters of God.

Because he chose God's way over evil, Jesus braved the trail for us to be victorious over our temptations. Because Jesus resisted the devil's temptations to the point of shedding his own blood (see Hebrews 12:4), we can now have new strength in him. "God will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is right at this crucial point in Lent that our catechumens commit themselves and then become the elect of God. Candidates for full communion journey with them also. Along with them, the readings and season of Lent scrutinizes our motives and plans. We want to align ourselves with God's plan and his thoughts. Lent will examine every aspect of our being. We have already heard about interior change, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and reconciliation, but there is more.

The major foundations of Lent are purification and enlightenment. Growth in holiness/virtue and illumination in God is what Lent is all about.

Progression in these areas is a lifelong process. In Lent we focus on where we are going in life. Early in Lent we read about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit thrusts Jesus into the desert. Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit. Lent is a preparation for Easter, and Easter culminates in Pentecost. Rather than a linear process, the journey is cyclic and harmonic. The Spirit is not something we arrived at when we complete a process. The Spirit is a major part of the process itself!

Enlightenment has to do with God. We know that the Holy Spirit comes with gifts such as knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and counsel. We are illumined with grace and new abilities as we awaken to our spiritual self. However, the greatest illumination is communion with God himself. We begin Mass with the greeting: "The communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all..." Communion with God is our greatest joy and our ultimate destiny.

The Holy Spirit is not simply a power to be used to reach a certain goal (greater holiness, gifts of wisdom); rather, the Holy Spirit is the goal. The greatest enlightenment we can receive is communion with the one who loves us and dwells within us. Lent is the time of self-discipline in order to achieve a greater awakening and intimacy with God's Spirit.

There are many expressions which results in an awakening with the Holy Spirit: baptism in the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit, being anointed with the Spirit, as well as the release of the Spirit. You begin to realize in a tangible, experiential way, that God is real and living within you. Actually, it is "in God we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

You may not think of yourself as a spiritual person, but if you seek and pray for wisdom and turn away from your sins, you may have an awakening towards God and self. Once you encounter God, you discover your true self. You begin to realize that in your heart of hearts, you are a spiritual person. Pierre de Chardin stated the following: "We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a physical experience."

At our core we are spiritual beings made for God. We are simply incomplete without God. Our eternal destiny is a glorious spiritual existence in God. We will have an awareness and depth with God exponentially more than what we have here. Lent is meant to not only sharpen our spiritual senses, but to deepen whatever level of communion we already enjoy with God. This is a lifelong process of awakening.

If you want to have the best Lent you ever had, seek first the Holy Spirit and day by day communion with him.

Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit and do not tire of asking. Believe that God wants to give you more, and out of your heart will flow rivers of living water. (See John 7:38). Remember the saying of Jesus: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ...If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9, 13). Simply believe that this "something more" is for you too. God has promised.

Besides the knowledge and understanding we may gain by reading and learning, the Spirit of God is the enlightenment we are looking for. The number one truth the Spirit brings is a personal, in-depth relationship with God. Secondly, his role is to make us holy. Remember, the Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Not only is God's Spirit set apart from evil and possessing of all virtue, he comes to set us apart, to purify us.

"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord." (Zechariah 4:6). That verse tells us that determination and willpower alone will not give us the ability to overcome an addiction or give us lasting significant change. It is the Spirit of God who has the efficacious power, might, and ability to bring us sobriety, recovery, holiness, and purification. In our belief, surrender and cooperate with the inner working of the Holy Spirit, miraculous changes can and will occur. We have within us the power and person of the Holy Spirit. This wonderful grace can revolutionize our lives.

Remember that the workings of the Holy Spirit are often not felt, and we do not sense thunder and lightning. Most times the Spirit comes as a gentle dove, barely noticeable yet still powerful in his effects. Pray that you will go from the superficial to the supernatural in your journey of Lent. Try to gain a greater sense of yourself as a spiritual being. At every Mass, the greeting is directed to us in the following manner: "The Lord be with your spirit."

Lent is trying to get us in touch with our spiritual side. Jesus is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit to commune with the Spirit. His primary activity was prayer. He was not just praying out loud all this times, although there were great moments of his praise of God. Jesus was a contemplative, a mystic, and his solitude was all about transcendence, depth, and mysticism. He was communing with God's Spirit. The 3

human Jesus was discovering who he was in God. He was being illumined by the Spirit and developing his personal relationship with God. He was being endowed with the power that would typify his ministry. We are also anointed to know God and be empowered to live a victorious, passionate life.

Good vs. Evil

As Jesus spent time in concentrated prayer, his struggle with darkness emerged. This is a truth taught to us in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius wrote that the exercises "have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment." You do not have to journey far in the spiritual exercises before you realize that you must discern and struggle with "evil spirits." The impressive thirty day Ignation retreat is a time when people search for God and end up wrestling with good and evil. For those willing to dedicate such time to pray, the retreatant comes to grips with the dark side of him/herself that lies within. Those dedicated to spiritual progression must face their shadows and "false self." Most of us live on the surface, oblivious to such truths.

One way of looking at Lent is as an extended retreat. Jesus was retreating in the desert. In every retreat, we experience consolation, but we must also wrestle with our sinfulness and blindness. We all have a sinful, dark side that must be dealt with. The Bible calls this "the flesh." Because of the fall, we have inherited Original Sin. We develop traits we do not necessarily want, such as anger, selfishness, lust, and pride. During Lent, we identify these areas and give the Spirit permission to work in us and to purify us. We can be regenerated and restored to our original innocence.

The Evil One

Besides our human darkness, we are in a battle with the evil one himself. Every Lent, at the very beginning, we are reminded about the reality of Satan. Whether you realize it or not, humanity is involved in the epic, cataclysmic battle between good and evil. The war we are engaged in is clearly taught in the Scriptures. One such group of verses is Ephesians 6:10–17: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12). This battle takes place in unseen spheres. Our minds are affected. We experience temptation. Like gravity, just because we cannot "see" it does not mean that it is not real. We still experience gravity as well as evil's affects.

We are then taught to put on the armor of God and stand strong. We can be victorious, but if you do not know that we are in a battle, how can we know how to win the war?

The Word of God is our weapon. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, attend Mass, practice fasting, and giving up time to prayer. Understand the role of Mary as intercessor and the act of praying the rosary as ways for us to be victorious. Paul the apostle, also lists weapons of warfare, such as the belt of truth (not being confused) and the breastplate of righteousness (knowing who you are in Christ). Other ammunition includes the shoes of the Gospel of peace (not being agitated and upset) and the defensive shield of believing in Jesus that quenches the flaming darts of doubt that evil throws at us. Furthermore, the helmet of salvation (knowing you are saved in Christ) preserves our minds from worry and anxiety. The Word of God is an offensive saber sword by which we, as did Jesus, counteract the temptations and strategies of evil that are used against us. We have armor to protect us and weapons to use!

We are all engaged in a battle between good and evil. The cosmic struggle rings so true as we look at our world. Our Scriptures tells us humans were tempted by evil and fell away from God. Because of Original Sin, great chaos has been unleashed upon our world. We are all infected with this fall and the effects of sin. Our bodies grow old and decay. We suffer and eventually die. Even though we know better, we sin and do not always do the good we want to do. We watch the nightly news in disbelief. We continuously hear of murders, abortions, mass shootings, wars, poverty, human trafficking, holocausts, and diseases, such as cancer and epidemic outbreaks. Our world is experiencing earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, fires, and climate change. We all have personal experience with pain, suffering, disappointments, heartache, and loved ones dying. Our world is in the grip of evil.

While our fall from grace and Original Sin is the cause of this chaos, the first cause is the evil one himself who caused the fall. He is the instigator of all anxiety, turmoil, and worry. He is the cause of all suffering, pain, and discord. Lent always reminds us that the devil is real and that his goal is to steal your soul. If he cannot have your soul, he will work overtime to make your life miserable. He is pure hate and wants to pull you away from God, kill you, and abort your destiny.

Take heart from Revelation 20:10: "The devil was thrown into the lake of fire and will be tormented day and night forever and ever." When he reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.

Satan's determine future aside, Jesus had to deal with his opponent and so too, we must deal with the one who accuses us before God.

One of the major ways evil seeks to steal our soul or at least attract us away from God is through temptation, although we cannot blame all temptation on the devil. James 1:14 tells us: "Each person is tempted when they are lured and enticed by their own desire." In addition to our own wayward desires, evil himself tempts us to sin. He used his trickery on Jesus but failed.

Another subtle but very real demonic strategy is to try to make people think that he does not exist. Our culture portrays the devil as a cartoon character wearing a red suit with a tail, horns, and holding a pitchfork. Most people in our modern, sophisticated culture think the idea of a personal devil is absurd.

The simple truth is, whether through our own fallen desires or because of the evil one himself, we, like Jesus, are tempted to sin. Remember it is not temptation that is sinful. Even Jesus was tempted. But it is when we are weak and succumb that sin enters the picture. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told his disciples twice to pray that they would not "enter into" temptation. In other words, pray that you won't succumb to the temptation being offered. In the words of the "Our Father," the petition is to lead us not "into" temptation. We are praying that we will not give in to what is being offered.

Jesus was tempted in grandiose ways, such as being offered the whole world. This enticing offer was perhaps behind his teaching: "What would it profit a person if he were to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Mark 8:36). The sad thing is people are not selling their soul for the whole world but losing it for a little piece of the world. Idolatry is rampant. Lust is prevalent. Greed predominates. When it comes to temptation, evil does not have to offer us millions of dollars or magnificent mansions on faraway islands. Rather, most of us are tempted away through the lure of money in its false promises. We are all tempted to self sabotage by not eating right, drinking too much, smoking, and/or failing to exercise. We are tempted to reject ourselves and develop a poor self image. We succumb to negativity and give up on pursuing our dreams. Temptations are sly and tricky. Often, we are not even aware we are being tempted. Satan is portrayed as a snake because he is sneaky.

We are all spiritual people. And Lent teaches us that we are in an epic struggle between good and evil. We are responsible for overcoming our temptations. Satan is real and has power; thus, like Jesus, we must discern where he is tempting us and what his strategies are. He had nothing in Jesus (John 14:30), and more and more he must have nothing in us.

Please contemplate this. One of the greatest lessons of Lent is that we are all in a spiritual battle with evil.

Lent invites us to sobriety and the realization of what is truly happening. The fall, Original Sin, the reality of Satan and evil, inner darkness, temptation, personal sin, and the battle of good and evil are not just myths, fables, and fiction. Although the facts are not friendly, they are still the facts. Even though evil exists, we are still responsible for our own choices. Being aware of the truth is half the battle. The other half is up to us. We are equipped to be victorious. Put on the armor of light. Be strong in the Lord and the power of his might. You are destined to be victorious over the evil in your life. You are more than conquerors through God who loves us. Lent invites us: "Be sober and alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, solid in your faith." (1 Peter 5:8–9).

Lenten Lessons:

- Allow the readings to guide your Lenten journey
- The Holy Spirit Is the Soul of Lent
- You are a spiritual person
- The devil is real
- We are all in a cataclysmic spiritual battle

Lenten Action:

- Pray directly to and for the Holy Spirit every day of Lent

Stations of the Cross

In just about every Catholic Church you will notice the stations of the cross. Usually, they are placed on the left and right walls of the church. These stations depict the way of the cross or the path Jesus travelled on his way to Calvary (or Golgotha). The stations may take the form of statues or icons or paintings showing the various sufferings of Jesus. There is a long history regarding the stations. Some attribute the stations to St. Francis of Assisi since he bore the stigmata. Even today, the Franciscan religious priests and brothers have custody of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land.

The stations of the cross, start at the Church of Flagellation and ends at the tomb of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Sometimes there is a 15th station – the empty tomb. Pilgrims in Jerusalem today walk the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering. As it was in the day of Jesus, so it is today. There are people buying and selling, visitors, vendors, and much commotion. When you walk the stations in Jerusalem, do not expect quiet. But, after all, it was not quiet when Jesus was forced to carry his cross to Calvary. Jesus was crucified on a hill in a spot where it would create a spectacle to the many who would pass by.

Walking the stations of the cross is a traditional devotion, especially during Lent. This can be done on any day, but especially on Fridays. The stations are usually accompanied by a devotional booklet of some sort. Praying the stations is a great way to meditate upon the Passion of Jesus Christ, especially on Fridays, the day our Lord suffered and died for us.

Marvel at the love and at the depth of pain Jesus bore for our salvation. Reflecting on the stations helps us to remember that God is also speaking to us. How many miracles have occurred through the centuries as believers as well as unbelievers remembering Jesus' sufferings?

St. Paul of the Cross taught that reflection on the Passion of Jesus is the shortest and most effective means of becoming holy. Remembering Jesus' passion certainly brings compassion for and union with Jesus. Walk and pray the stations of the cross, if possible, several times during Lent. You can do this alone, with or without a booklet. You can also gather with others. Most churches have group stations during Friday evenings of Lent. Meditating on the sufferings of Jesus will help you become one with him and enable you to have a fruitful Lent.

May the Passion of Jesus Christ Be Ever in Your Hearts!

The Stations of the Cross

1) Jesus is condemned to death. (He bore our condemnation)



2) Jesus is made to bear his cross. (He carries our burdens)



3) Jesus falls the first time. (He knows what it is to fail)



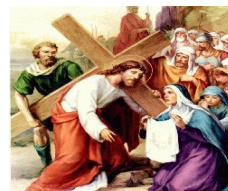
4) Jesus meets his mother. (No greater suffering)



5) Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross. (We too can carry his cross)



6) Veronica wipes Jesus' face. (See Jesus' face in the hurting)



7) The Lord falls the second time. (His falls redeemed our fall)



8) The women of Jerusalem weep over Jesus. (We are sorrowful as we remember his Passion)



9) Our Master falls the third time. (His falls are our redemption)



10) God's Son is stripped of his garments. (He bore our shame)



11) Jesus is nailed to the cross. (Jesus' sufferings are our salvation)



12) Jesus dies on the cross. (We preach Christ crucified)



13) The Lord is taken down from the cross. (Jesus' death brings us new life)



14) Jesus is placed in the sepulcher. (We were buried with him in baptism)

