

The Recovery and Refocusing of Lent: A Time for Baptism Preparation and Discipleship Renewal

Eric T. Myers

Highland Park Presbyterian Church, Highland Park, Illinois

The Complex Origin of Lent

The origin of the period of Lent is complex and confusing. Lent is thought to have developed as a backwards extension of the one- or two-day (and later, one-week) preparation period of fasting before the celebration of Easter.¹ In other words, the early church prepared for the Paschal celebration with a one-day fast (Friday before Easter) or a two-day fast (Thursday and Friday). Soon the two-day fast was extended to include the whole last week before the celebratory feast that began with the Paschal Vigil, which occurred the night before Sunday morning. These periods of preparation for the Paschal celebration commemorated and marked the last days of Jesus' life on earth. Eventually, as the theory goes, the period of fasting and preparation before the feast and celebration was extended backwards to include forty days.

It is quite possible that "Lent" did not actually develop as preparation before Easter but rather as preparation before baptism and initiation into the church. In their examination of the baptism of converts in the church of antiquity (up to the fourth century), historians of worship Max Johnson and Thomas Talley reveal that preparation for baptism concluded with a period of intense instruction that typically lasted between three to six weeks. Those coming for baptism were instructed in the teachings and mysteries of the Church. This period of preparation was also extended to include those who had been excommunicated and who were preparing to be welcomed once again into the community. It would only be natural that eventually the baptized and confirmed would observe Lent as a time of renewal in sympathy with those being initiated and re-welcomed.

As stated above, the origins of Lent are complex and confusing. In their exploration of these origins, Johnson and others point out importantly that baptism into the Church concluded with an intense three- to six-week period of baptism preparation. This final period of preparation became associated with Easter as the Church "adopted" Easter (by the end of the fourth century) as the preferred time of baptism. As the Church moved away from baptism for adult converts to baptism of infants, making the period of preparation for baptism unnecessary, Johnson proposes that Lent took on "the sole character of preparation of the faithful for the events of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter."² Thus, what had been a period of preparation for baptism became a period of anticipation for remembering the last days of Jesus' earthly life. As Johnson remarks, "Such a focus—extremely penitential, and oriented in character and piety toward the 'passion of Jesus,' with little attention given to the period's baptismal and catechumenal origins—has tended to shape the interpretation and practice of the 'forty days' of Lent until the present day."³

But Lent is not a six-week long Holy Week. Lent is different from that important seven-day period when the Church *does* remember the events of the last days of Jesus' life, beginning with Palm/Passion Sunday and concluding with the Easter Vigil. Lent

is not six weeks of hearing and reliving the passion of Christ with all its horror-filled details.

Worship in Lent

But if Lent is not a forty-six day Holy Week during which the Church relives the detailed Passion of Jesus, then what is it? If our worship for the Sundays in Lent does not focus on the events of the last days of Jesus' earthly life, then what are the themes and foci of worship during Lent? As we have discussed, one possible answer to the origin of Lent is that Easter became the preferred time for baptism into the Church. Final preparations for baptism were made during the weeks preceding the event. Could our worship during Lent regain focus as a time of preparation for baptism? And for those who have already experienced the rushing waters of new birth, could Lent be a yearly time of renewal—a recalling to the baptismal life that Jesus exemplifies in his life, death, and resurrection?

Of course this shift in focus of Lent does not mean that the Church forgets or even de-emphasizes the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Church can never do that, for the death and resurrection of Jesus is central to all that the Church is and does. We cannot worship during Lent, or for that matter any time during the year, without keeping in our minds that what we are truly celebrating (as we gather on Sunday morning or Wednesday or Thursday or Friday), is the central doctrine of our faith: the Son of God, Jesus Christ, has been crucified and has been resurrected from the dead. Yet, that change in focus shifts the attention from the last week—the final days of Jesus' earthly life—to the broader baptismal call that is ours through the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus the Christ.

Lent: The Time of Preparation for Baptism and Renewal

Easter must once again become *the* time in the Church year for baptism and the welcoming of new members. From very early on, the Great Easter Vigil was the most important service of the year and was one of *the* times for initiates to be received into the Church. As Peter Bower states, "As the principal service of the year, since at least the second century, the Paschal Vigil celebrated the promise of new life, of forgiveness of sins, and of victory over death."⁴ These themes of new life, forgiveness of sins, and victory over death are central to this annual service as baptisms are either celebrated, new members welcomed, or baptisms are remembered by all the baptized present.

Perhaps today's church could recapture the rich drama encapsulated in this historic service as it "reinstates" the Easter Vigil either on the evening before Easter morning or early on Easter morning itself. The revised worship materials of several denominations include orders for the Vigil along with helps for planning and implementing this involved service. Today, churches of all denominations and traditions can and indeed are recapturing the splendor of the excitement of this most important service of the year. With pre-planning and education, members of faith communities of all sizes can become excited about participating in this stirring worship experience in which the story of our redemption is heard and celebrated as new members are baptized and received into the fellowship of believers.

As the Church prepares for the upcoming principal service of the year, the Great Vigil, newcomers to the faith are prepared for baptism and initiation as others in the church are called to a reawakening and renewal. The themes of baptism come to the

forefront: metanoia or to change one's mind/repent and death and resurrection into the life of Jesus Christ through our baptism are important.

Again, the traditions of the ancient Church can inform our theology and practice of today. Egeria, a fourth century nun from Spain or Southern Gaul, gives an account of baptism and initiation practices in Jerusalem that she witnessed while on pilgrimage there. She describes the enrollment of those who were being prepared for baptism that would take place during the Easter Vigil:

I think I also ought to tell you how instruction is given to those who are baptized at Easter. Those who give in their names do so the day before Lent begins; the presbyter writes down the names of all of them. This takes place before the eight weeks during which, as I told you, Lent is observed here. When the presbyter has made a note of all the names, later on another day in Lent, the day on which the eight weeks begin, the bishop's chair is set up in the middle of the great church, the church of the Martyrium. The presbyters sit on either side of the chairs and all the clerics stand. Then the candidates are brought in one by one, the men with their "fathers," the women with their "mother." Then the bishop one by one asks their neighbours: "Is he a good-living man? Does he respect his parents? Is he a drunkard or untrustworthy?" He asks them like this about every vice, at least the more serious ones. If the bishop finds that the candidate is free from all these faults about which he has questioned the witnesses, he writes down the candidate's name with his own hand.⁵

It is interesting to note the serious depth of the questions that are asked not of the soon-to-be candidates but rather of the "neighbours."

Today, some traditions are basing the initiation process on the practices of the early Church. The Roman Catholic tradition produced the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (R.C.I.A.) in 1972. Professor Jim White describes the resource: "The R.C.I.A. recovers the process of the *Apostolic Tradition* of the third century. A congregation leads converts through a long process of stages of training, prayer, and examination of life until final initiation is reached in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and first communion."⁶ Today's rites differ significantly from the ancient rites as witnessed by Egeria, for today's rites are centered on prayer to God for those preparing for baptism. The church intercedes for direction, healing, and strength in the lives of the catechumens—those being instructed and being prepared for baptism. The Church has explored the early traditions of the Church and has adapted contemporary practice from those traditions. By marking significant moments in the conversion experience in public worship, the Church is recapturing the seriousness of the initiation process

Other traditions are slowly recapturing the richness of these rites as well. Churches in which traditional confirmation classes are held can include prayers for those involved in the process. Those enrolled in the process can be invited to be part of the worship experience by helping to lead worship or by sharing stories of their faith journey, including their "wondering" questions and significant growth moments and experiences.

For those not going through the final stages of preparation for baptism or reception

into the Church, Lent can still be a significant time of growth and renewal. Worship during Lent can be a time when we are reminded of our baptismal calling, our need for repentance, the gift of grace, and a time when we are given the opportunity to commit ourselves once again to the life of Christ. Planners of worship should intentionally prepare worship to include an emphasis on our baptismal call to discipleship. Especially during the season of Lent, the confession sequence in many worship orders of today's revised resources can voice our shortcomings as disciples yet call us once again to be followers of Christ's different way. God's act of redemption through the death of Jesus on the cross is proclaimed. God's forgiveness is declared loud and strong. God's call to lead a life that is loving toward and forgiving of others is heard. Water poured into the font or lifted up by the worship leader can be a stimulating reminder of our baptism call into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

During the season of Lent it is appropriate to include in the order of worship a time of invitation in response to the Word proclaimed. The response following the sermon can be a calling for recommitment; many of today's worship resources recognize the importance of this element. For example, in the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Service of the Lord's Day order includes "Invitation—An invitation may be given to any who wish to make or renew personal commitment to Christ and his kingdom."⁷ Similarly, the worship resources of the United Methodist Church include, "Response to the Word—This should include an Invitation to Christian Discipleship...Responses may also include: 1) A first commitment to Christ, which may be followed if appropriate by enrollment in a preparatory group for baptism or confirmation 2) Reaffirmation of Faith..."⁸

The worship of the Church during Lent emphasizes our call to the baptized life. An invitation to recommitment is most appropriate during the season of Lent as the baptismal call is heard. Our call to discipleship is stressed. We are called to repent and to renounce the power of evil in our lives. Opportunities are given for people to respond to this call in public ways.

More Resources for the Shift from Holy Week to Baptismal Emphasis

The emphasis on Lent as a time of baptism preparation, renewal, and recommitment is enhanced by some of the components of worship already discussed, such as giving emphasis to the confession sequence each week or including a call to discipleship following the sermon. Both those preparing for baptism and those who are baptized members already hear the words of confession, forgiveness, and invitation to new or renewed life in Christ. Likewise, other worship "resources" such as Scripture, prayers, and hymns can enhance the worship life of the Church during the refocused season of Lent.

Scripture

The lectionary readings for the season of Lent as found in the Revised Common Lectionary focus on the covenant between God and God's people, the promise of baptism, and our calling as disciples.

The Old Testament readings for Year B tell the story of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 9:8-17; Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16), the giving of the commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), the impatient Israelites and their confession (Numbers 21:4-9), and the re-establishing of the Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). In the hearing of these readings, we

hear our place in the family of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

The readings from the epistles tell of Christ's suffering for all and the saving waters of baptism (1 Peter 3:18-22). We also hear of the "foolishness of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) and the new life in Christ that is ours by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:1-10). Jesus as the source of salvation for all who obey him is proclaimed (Hebrews 5:5-10). In the readings we hear what it means to be a follower.

The Gospel readings tell of the baptism of Jesus, his wilderness experience, and his struggle with temptations (Mark 1:9-15). Jesus tells the crowd what it means to be a disciple—"denying themselves and taking up their crosses" (Mark 8:31-38). John's Gospel tells us of Jesus' anger at the events of the temple (John 2:13-22). We also hear Jesus' words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:14-21). Jesus also tells us of his impending death and proclaims that his death is indeed "glorified" (John 12:20-33). The Gospel readings during Lent point us toward the cross yet do not take us there quite yet.

The readings call us to a life of the covenant as they remind us that we are children of Abraham and Sarah, that we are baptized in Christ, and that we are called to live the life of Christ here on earth as we await the final glory—the glory that will be revealed through the cross of Christ.

Prayers

Revised denominational worship resources offer prayers and litanies that focus on the themes of turning around, repentance, and the call to the baptized life. In the *Book of Common Worship* the prayers of the day for the various Sundays in Lent include the words, "Give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save..."⁹ and "Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory..."¹⁰ The theme of the day is set forth in the Prayer of the Day as the hearts and minds of the people are collected together as one. Renewal, deliverance from sin and temptation, and redirection are included as petitions.

Hymns

With a quick glance in some of the current denominational hymnals one could very well discover no section of the hymnal entitled, "Hymns for Lent." What one could discover by looking in the topical index of the very same hymnals is that for Lenten hymns, one is referred to the section entitled, "Passion and Death"! Perhaps one might look elsewhere for hymn suggestions during this refocused season of Lent.

As we prepare for baptism during this refocused season, hymns that center on baptismal themes are often appropriate even if the water sacrament is not celebrated. Words from Ruth Duck's hymn, "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters" exemplify the theme of renewal: "God, renew us, guide our footsteps; free from sin and all its snares, one with Christ in living, dying, by your Spirit, children, heirs."¹¹ The theme of call to discipleship is heard in many of the hymns found in the sections of hymnals entitled, "Missions" where one will find hymns such as, "Today, We All Are Called to Be Disciples."¹² Hymns that focus on life in Christ such as "Lift High the Cross" often give praise to God for the redemptive act celebrated as resurrection people. Other hymns, like "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," are more contemplative prayer songs that ask for God's help in following Christ's way. Though these hymns are not found

in the section entitled “Lent” or “Passion of Christ,” they are very appropriate in helping us recapture Lent as a time of baptismal preparation and renewal in Christ.

The Worship of Lent: Renewed and Refocused

We cannot worship during Lent without remembering that our faith is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But our worship during Lent can be refocused to include the broader themes of baptismal call, repentance, and renewal rather than on the details of the passion—the last days of Jesus’ earthly life. Our orders of worship can and should reflect this shift. The resources are abundant to help us reorder and refocus our worship services during the holy season of Lent. The Scripture readings heard, the sermons preached, the prayers prayed, the hymns and songs sung can prepare us for baptism and help us to be renewed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the one whom we celebrate during Lent.

Notes

1. For more detailed information concerning the origin of Lent, see Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 207-22.
2. Ibid, 221.
3. Ibid.
4. Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press/Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2003), 106.
5. Edward S.J. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 8-9.
6. James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 150-51.
7. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 63.
8. The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 24.
9. *Book of Common Worship*, 242.
10. Ibid, 246.
11. The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 605.
12. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 434.