

A Different Fasting for Lent

Sister Eileen White, GNSH

Presidents' Day and Ash Wednesday fell in the same week this year. I can't recall any story about Washington or Lincoln getting ashes at the beginning of Lent, so I will not torture anyone by trying to make that connection! Instead, let me reflect a little on Lent, since today is the 1st Sunday of the Christian season we call Lent.



For many Christians, Lent is an invitation to a 40-day preparation for the celebration of Easter and faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In my Catholic Christian tradition, we focus on three aspects of preparation: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, or giving “alms” (financial support and work for a more just world). I doubt that anyone would pretend that most Catholics today are particularly strict about fasting, certainly not in comparison with some of the Muslims I have known, who rise at 4 o'clock in the morning to eat before fasting until sundown from food and water, even when Ramadan falls in summer's worst heat. But, we do make an effort to give attention to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Ordinarily, we think of fasting as refraining from eating and drinking. In these extraordinary times, I am considering another kind of fasting: fasting from hopelessness, fasting from discouragement, fasting from negativity, fasting from being judgmental. The pandemics we are experiencing may call for this kind of fasting. By pandemics, I mean Covid-19, of course, but also the pandemic of uncovered and unacknowledged racism, the pandemic of unbridled crudeness and lack of respect for others, and the pandemic of disregard for truth. Perhaps you, like me, are discouraged and hopeless and tempted to give up. Or stuck in a negativity flight pattern, forgetting how to appreciate goodness, generosity, and beauty. Or maybe you, like me, are overwhelmed with the realization of white privilege and your own complicity in keeping anyone different out of your circle, without even knowing it.

Ash Wednesday will be different this year for many of us. Many of us are not ready yet to risk being with hundreds of people in an enclosed space, and so we may not go to church on Wednesday and be marked with the sign of ashes, reminding us “You are dust and to dust you shall return” or hearing that invitation, “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” Many of us are still isolated from others and both addicted to and weary of TV and computer screens. Lent provides us with a wonderful opportunity to restore perspective. Giving time to prayerful silence, meditation, reading instead of the chatter of advertisers persuading us we need one more item – this could lead us to hopefulness and generosity of thoughts and actions. Fasting from anything or anyone that leads us to negativity could open us again to notice how kind and caring people can be, to see how much progress has been made in combatting the disease of Covid as well as the disease of racism and the disease of disrespect of each other.

I said I would not try to connect Presidents' Day and Ash Wednesday, but the blessing of living in a nation where people are free to live by whatever faith they choose or none at all, where we can say what we wish, even criticize our government, without fear of arrest – these are some of the blessings that Presidents Washington and Lincoln helped secure for many of us and eventually for all of us, even those initially deprived of freedom. Lent invites us to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – for the purpose of re-orienting ourselves, turning toward God, God-ness, and goodness. We are invited to metanoia – a change of heart. As individuals, we receive this invitation. So, also, as a people, as a nation. What are we called to turn away from and toward as a nation? What are **you** turning away from these days? What or whom are **you** called to turn toward?