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## Lent: It's not what you find in your clothes dryer

By Reverend Jack Buteyn

**MANY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AROUND THE WORLD** celebrate the season of Lent religiously and passionately. Many other churches never talk about Lent at all. What really is most important is that as we approach Holy Week and Easter, we think about its meaning and impact on our lives. It doesn't matter if we call it Lent or something else.

Lent is literally the 40 days before Easter, not counting the Sundays. This year Lent began with Ash Wednesday, which was the 9<sup>th</sup> of February. Lent, as a word, has no religious context whatsoever. It was used to mark this season because it was the Old English word for spring, *lencten*.

Even the name Easter comes from the name of a druid goddess named Eastre. She was the goddess of fertility and the spring. The date of Easter varies from

mid- March to the end of April. The date of Easter, and hence the dates of Lent, are based on the first full moon on or after March 21st, the first day of spring. All of this shuffling makes it hardly seem like a religious holiday at all unless you are a druid and worship the moon.

What is amazing is that a Christian tradition with such a deep history and varied experiences can sometimes develop traditions and practices that are bizarre. At the same time, there is so much of this Lenten season that is spiritually rich and beautiful.

Maybe the most unusual part of the season of Lent takes place before it even begins. They call it "Carnivale"... "Shrove Tuesday"... "Fat Tuesday"... or "Mardi Gras," depending on where in the world you are celebrating. What makes these celebrations so strange is that the season of Lent is based on the idea of fasting and self-denial. What has evolved over the centuries for the Tuesday before Lent begins is this huge "bacchanalian feast" of total self-indulgence. Theoretically, this "bash" is supposed to prepare you for the austerity and self-denial of the days of Lent. You eat and drink yourself silly, because tomorrow you can't.

Without sounding pious, it just seems like Mardi Gras has evolved into an excuse to party hearty. As much fun as it might be and as appealing as it might be, for some it seems, Mardi Gras cheapens the spiritual meaning of preparing oneself for Easter.

The truth is, that in many ways the early Christians had to accommodate their religious holidays and celebrations to the pagan society around them. The date of December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen to celebrate Christmas not because that was the exact day Jesus was born. It was chosen because it coincided with a big Roman festival. Tradition proved that the Roman soldiers and Roman authorities were so drunk that Christians could conduct their clandestine celebration of the forbidden "Christmas" without risking persecution or the danger of

being punished.

Then why Lent? In its early roots in the Catholic Church, Lent was a season of self-denial and sacrifice. It was even proscribed exactly what you had to give up. The idea was that by experiencing personal sacrifice, we could be much more in tune with the depth of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Churches that celebrate Lent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century now approach it in many different ways. Some more traditional churches still look at Lent as a season of self-denial. The question that occurs almost as frequently as "What are your New Year's resolutions?" is "What are you giving up for Lent?"

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Many other churches don't specifically dictate to their members this great act of self-denial and fasting. Instead, the kind of preparation for Easter that may take place in some churches is a kind of spiritual and emotional preparation. Its purpose is to be uniquely conscious of how great the gift of Jesus Christ really was. It is preparing by thinking of what Christ gave up rather than focusing on what we have given up for a proscribed 40 days...

If in fact we, as Protestant and Catholic Christians, are going to celebrate Lent, it seems like the operative question ought not to be, "What are we giving up for Lent?" Instead, the question that should be front and center in our thinking is, "What have I received as a consequence of the life and the sacrifice of Christ?"

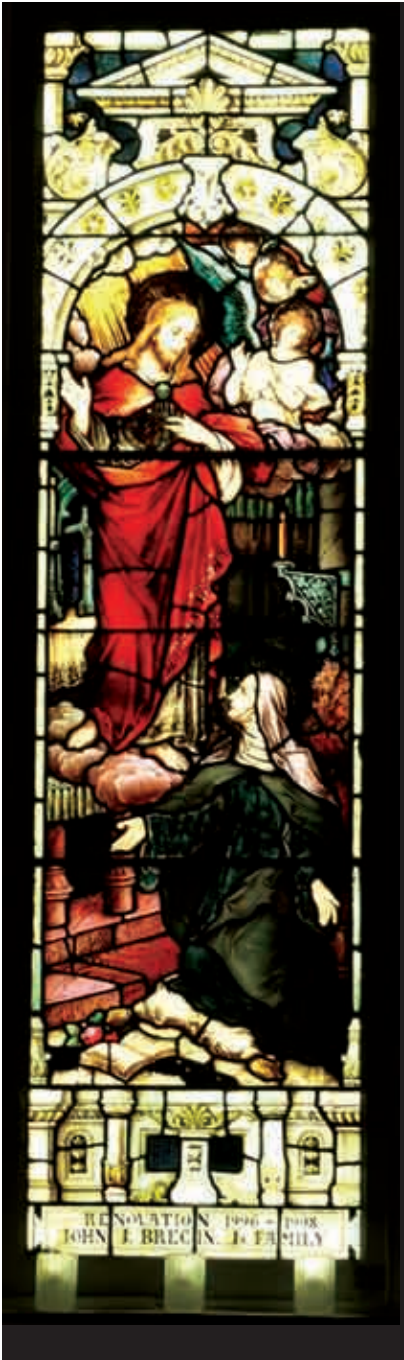


photo by Chris Johnson

The time during Lent is really preparing for Easter by reflection on the experience of receiving.

However we choose to prepare for Holy Week and Easter, the important thing is that we do prepare. The more intentionally we prepare will change the power and the meaning of Easter for all of us.

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