

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

We're on the heels of the season of Lent. To many people, the most they get out of this season is a mouthful of Paczki (how do you pronounce that, again?) on Fat Tuesday. So what is the 40 days of Lent supposed to be about?

First of all, the 40 days begins on Ash Wednesday, and concludes on Holy Saturday. If you don't trust your pastor, and actually count the days, you'll notice there are more than 40 days in that time period. That's because Sunday's are not counted as part of Lent. Each Sunday (other than Easter Sunday) is a "little" Easter – a celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord. That's why the pastor says these words during the Divine Service, *"It is truly good, right, and salutary [spiritually beneficial] that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who **on this day** overcame death and the grave and by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life"* (Proper Preface, LSB Divine Service, Setting 1). Sunday's are the day that God has given us to receive and celebrate His gracious forgiveness of all of our sins, through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. Even so, we limit the celebration during Lenten Sundays by striking all hymns that contain "Alleluias" and other parts of the liturgy that are celebratory in nature. So what about those other '40 days'?

Ash Wednesday worship is a reminder of what the wages of sin are all about: **death**. We put on ashes, signifying that our sinful life leads to our death, but more importantly, that that same sin led to our Savior's death on the cross. You can immediately sense that the forty days of Lent are not going to be one of revelry and celebration. It's actually meant to be a time of **penitent thought and action**.

Penitent thought comes from hearing the Law of God, and understanding just how important those words are to our Lord. If the Law is not some kind of game that we are engaged in. It's life and death. To hear the Law, recognize our sinfulness, and our need for a Savior – is the very foundation of our salvation. Lent is foundational. Easter has real meaning - it has great depth, only when we recognize the great hurt that our sin has caused our Lord and others. Easter is precious when we grasp the need for Jesus to have to die for us – there is no way that we can be "good enough" to earn our way to heaven. Without this penitent thought, Easter Sunday is reduced to an oversized bunny that runs around hiding eggs.

Penitent action comes from a heart that is changed by God. We move forward, in faith, recognizing the sacrifice that our Lord has made for us, and the need for God's strength to turn from the sin that led to His death. Now some will choose to go without certain things in life that they normally find pleasing. People give up certain foods, or candy, or movies or whatever – a partial fasting – during those 40 days. The question that I have is "Why are you giving this up?" If your motivation is to somehow earn God's favor, to make him pleased with your sacrifice – you're doing it all in vain. You cannot please God by going through the motions of partial fasting. You can't deny yourself this thing during Lent and claim that you suffered just like Christ did. You didn't.

If your motivation is to help you be reminded of the ultimate sacrifice that our Lord had to make, every time you see it and resist pleasing yourself with it, then this partial fast will be of benefit to your spiritual life. May I suggest, instead of (or in addition to) partial fasting, you add something this season? **Add midweek worship**, a time of **Bible study and meditation on God's Word**, and **quiet time for prayer**. More important than any partial fasting could ever be, is the time that is spent reconnecting yourself to your Lord. Our Lord promises that He will faithfully respond to you: *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened"* (Matt. 7:7,8). May our Lord use these penitent days to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith.

Pastor Travis