
How Do We Observe Lent When the Whole Year Has Been Lent?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

We started asking the question in a kind of jest. The question comes just as it comes to anyone trying to make jokes during the pandemic of the past year. By now, we have shared all sorts of pandemic humor across emails and web sites and various posts. It's been fun to laugh, even while sharing our pitiful plights. We've needed to share our plights.

We've kept up with birthdays and graduations, all adapted to our isolated times. We have kept anniversaries and school beginnings. We have watched our notable sports celebrations, like the World Series and the Super Bowl. We have even kept the Church's great celebrations. Yes, Easter was strange last year, but it was also a bit fun trying to welcome resurrection in a new way. We celebrated Christmas, too, even in the cold.

But the season of Lent is different, isn't it? Lent is actually meant to be a somber and lean place, a season of abstinence intentionally chosen. Lent is actually supposed to be an encounter with wilderness and solitude and retreat. All of which we have been doing for a year! During Lent, we voluntarily give up things, we fast from good and joyful foods and habits, so that we can focus on something else. But, it is obvious to me that most of us do not feel like giving up anything in this Lent of 2021. We've given up too much already!

What, then, does Lent mean in the year 2021? Well, it can mean at least two things. For one, we can deliberately pause to interpret this entire past year as a long spiritual exercise for ourselves. Maybe this whole past year has shown us what Lenten is supposed to be like. Of course, there are lots of things of this past year that are surely worth regretting. But maybe we can re-view this past year in a spiritual way, intentionally trying to learn from it. In other words, maybe we can use this season as a way to spiritually summarize the entire past year.

For instance, our refrain from travel might have taught us that the kingdom of heaven is not necessarily in some exotic vacation spot far away from us. Maybe heaven is right where we are, if we have the patience and insight to realize it. We don't need travel, or a new house, or a new toy, in order to be spiritually satisfied. We need only the mindfulness to see God right where we are. ("The kingdom of God is within you," said Jesus, at Luke 17:21.) And maybe our refrain from the latest gourmet events has taught us the same. God and good nutrition can be found right where we are, no matter where we are.

But what about our isolation from other people, from touching and hugging the people we love? That's been incredibly hard to accept and to interpret. It's been awful, for sure. If that restraint has been a Lenten discipline, however, it might be a fast that teaches us even more deeply that we need each other. We need to touch. We need to eat and sit together. We need community. And maybe the isolation has also taught us to listen to ourselves; what has really, truly, been going on inside us? (When Jesus was in his Lenten wilderness, he was able to discern many voices within himself!)

Perhaps, then, our Lenten practice for 2021 is to take the time to review the past year as a symbol for Lent. To accept our fasts as ways that we have become closer to something else, closer to acknowledgements of holy people and holy places. What have we learned about ourselves in the past year? If we can answer that question, in any way, we have participated in a Lenten exercise.

What do we learn about ourselves when we are in retreat, away from our usual comforts? What do we learn about our own fears? What do we learn about our own loves? When we acknowledge both those fears and those loves, we grow a little bit. If we can give voice to those fears, and those loves, we might be a little closer to the God whose love defeats fear.

A second Lenten practice we might engage in this 2021 year is to envision the future. To envision Easter. To envision heaven! In the Church, the season of Lent was not always meant to be a penitential and self-suffering season. It was meant to be a season of preparation, with time spent hoping and preparing for Easter and new life! Some Lenten disciplines, in the past, have involved not giving up things, but taking on things, taking on projects of adventure and hope and creativity.

Lent, then, can be a season for en-visioning, or re-visioning, what Easter can be. Most simply put, Easter means new life. What can new life be? What can our new lives be? How will we live, how can we live differently, in newness of spirit, when this long Lent is over, when this coronavirus is managed, and when this pandemic has subsided? There will be opportunity for us to live again! But, the opportunity also comes to live again in a new way, with new and deeper understandings of ourselves and of God. A healthy experience of Lent leads to a healthier experience of new life.

Someone once said that the best way to predict the future is to be the future, to live in such a way that you are being the very future you want. The same is true about Easter, and Resurrection, and New Life: the best way to experience Easter is to act as if Easter is already here. That's what Lent can be about; it can be about living into Easter, acting in ways that bring new life to ourselves and to the world, whatever our present hindrances may be.

Yes, we still have some challenges, some hindrances. But we can also be New Life itself; we can be Easter right where we are. The word, "Lent," comes from the word, "Length." The days are growing longer as Spring, and New Life, loom on the horizon. We can use this Lent of the year 2021 to lengthen our hopes, to lengthen our loves, to live into the Easter and New Life we truly want for ourselves and for the world.



The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip