

**FEBRUARY 26, 2017**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**Romans 13:11-14:4**

**“WHY LENT?”**

There was a man who caught the bus to work every morning. The bus stop was near his house and the bus was always a little late..... So he got into the habit of getting up later than he should, just a few minutes before the bus was due. He would get ready fast and hurry down to catch the bus. But one day, he slept even a little later than usual. In a total panic he ran around the house, getting ready at very high speed. Then he ran down the sidewalk and he saw a bus just pulling into the bus stop. Bad luck!—the day he slept in even later than usual was apparently a rare day when the bus seemed to be right on time. He ran as fast as he could and as he saw the bus start to move away he waved and yelled to the driver. The driver stopped the bus so he could get on. He went in, paid his fare, and collapsed into a seat to catch his breath. Then he looked around and realized he didn't recognize the driver---or any of the passengers! Getting nervous, he said aloud, “By the way, where is this bus going?” (Father Anthony Coniaris, The Message of the Sunday Gospel Readings, Volume I, Light & Life Publishing, p. 139).

We Orthodox are right now a bit like that man---preparing for a trip. Lent starts tonight, in just a few hours. We have to change the colors of the candles and altar cloths. The complicated Lenten service schedule is ready to go. Perhaps you have purchased your hummus and peanut butter in preparation for the Fast. But do we know what we are headed into? Do we know where this bus is going?

When riding on a bus, it's good to know the destination. When starting Great Lent, it's good to know what it's about and why we have it. So, today, in the immortal words of Ricky Ricardo, I think I “have some ‘splainin’ to do.” So I will!

Lent began in the early centuries of Christianity, primarily as a time and way to get ready for the greatest day in the year---Pascha, Easter, the day of the Lord's Resurrection. And that is most definitely still the essential meaning of the Lenten season.

The English word “lent” is derived from the same word as “lengthen”, referring to the fact that the days are getting longer this time of year. Simple as that.

Much about Lent began for the purpose of helping catechumens prepare to enter the Church by baptism, as baptisms most commonly took place at Pascha. In the ancient centuries, one usually had to be a catechumen for 3 years before entering the Faith. Now it's commonly only one year. As the end of the third year approached, the catechumens' experience became more intense because the time of baptism was approaching. More classes, more church services, more prayer, more fasting, a strong emphasis on repentance..... And over a period of time this special season became standardized at a length of 40 days.

As this season and its structure developed, already baptized Christians realized that it would be good for them as well to go through the disciplines of these 40 days. And so they

began to do so—now Lent was for all believers. (You will get a reminder of how Lent used to be more focused on catechumens if you attend one of our Wednesday evening Pre-Sanctified Liturgies and hear the ancient prayers for the catechumens that are still done in that beautiful service.)

So Lent is a 40 day season for the purpose of preparing to celebrate Christ's resurrection at Pascha and to help us get more intense about our relationship with the risen Christ. The idea is to get ready to celebrate the Lord's rising from the dead by repenting, growing, and becoming holier.

Some say it's not a good thing. It's unneeded. We should always, every day, be living in full intensity for the Lord. As you probably know, I was a Protestant pastor before I came into the Orthodox Church and so I went to a Protestant seminary. I was one of the guys on the seminary paint crew. There were usually 8 or 10 of us and we worked together painting seminary buildings to help pay our tuition. Get that many future pastors together painting some walls and there is lots of talking going on! Even lots of debate (of a friendly nature! No one ever threw any paint buckets at anyone!). Once, at this time of year, the talk and the debating ended up about Lent. We were all Protestants so the kind of Lent we were used to was very mild compared to Orthodox Lent, but many Protestants do have some Lenten observances. So we knew the basics of what Lent was about.

About half of the paint team thought Lent was a good thing. About half did not. That second half thought there was no reason to use a certain time of year to grow in Christ---just growing all the time was the way to do it. The main spokesman for this opinion was a nice fellow named Ken. He was very bright (still is, too!---he's now a professor at that same seminary) and would make a strong argument in his thick Brooklyn accent. And then the other side would argue back that humans are weak, that we need structures and focusing on growth in certain seasons in order to grow well----it's more realistic, they argued. Being I ended up Orthodox not many years later, you can guess that I was on the "pro-Lent" side. Well, I don't know if anyone's mind was changed or not but it made the boring painting job go by more quickly.....

Of course, we do believe we should strive for a closer walk with God all year long, every single day. But we believe Lent is valuable because we are weak and sinful and need the structure of a certain season with certain disciplines to help us in our faith. In Lent, everything should get more intense: pray more, fast more, give more to the poor, read the Bible more, go to church more, etc. Hopefully, all this will help us grow more. So the idea is that all year we have a slow and steady climbing higher spiritually...and then in Lent we climb more quickly and make some real progress.

Lent is important. Don't fritter it away. Don't do just the minimum, just a little. Do a lot. Be serious. Go all out. What might "a lot" mean for you? Obviously, everyone's life is unique---unique obligations, time commitments, weaknesses, etc. A good rule of thumb is this: do more than you did last year. But whatever details you work out for your personal disciplines, don't go too easy on yourself. As I said above, don't fritter it away.

There is a denomination (not many in our area....more down south and in Indiana) called simply the Christian Church. It started in America in the early 1800s. Anyway, in Missouri there is a little town named "Half-way". The address there is Half-Way,

Missouri. In that little town there is just one church and it's in the denomination I just mentioned--the Christian Church. So if you drive by that church you will see its name on the sign in front—"Welcome to Half-Way Christian Church". Some might really like a church like that—a half way Christian Church. Perfect for half way Christians. (Roads to Quoz: An American Mosey, William Least-Heat Moon, Back Bay Books, p. 42) Perfect for us if we prefer a half way Lent. A Lent to just slide through until Pascha finally arrives. Don't waste the 40 days. Don't do a "half way" Lent. Take it seriously.

If we are tempted to just slide through Lent, then the message of today's epistle reading is very relevant. There was no Lent yet when St. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans. Lent took hundreds of years to fully develop, but St. Paul's letter, even if written before that, is still relevant for us on the day before Lent begins.

Hear one verse of it--Romans 13:11----"you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." Have we been spiritually dozing? Time to wake up!

St. John of Gaza, back in the 500's A.D., wrote the following words, "Awaken the Jesus that sleeps inside you." (Letters From The Desert, Saints Barsanuphius and John, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2003, p. 26) Of course, St. John didn't mean Jesus was literally asleep. But we, being sleepy, don't turn Him loose in our lives. A more literal way to say it would be----"Wake yourself up, and turn the Lord loose in your life." As St. Paul said in verse 11----"It is full time now for you to wake from sleep."

St. Paul goes on to say in the next verse, in verse 12---"the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." Cast off darkness. Put on more fully the light of Christ. Decide which side you are really on---darkness or light.

Sometimes years ago politicians in the South had very little policy disagreement with each other, even if one was Democrat and the other Republican. They even got along very well when campaigning against each other. This led to much friendlier relations in campaigns then we're used to today. There are stories of opponents traveling together by train, sharing meals together, even sleeping in the same hotel room. There is a story about one candidate getting a sore throat at a debate, so the opponent presented the sick man's arguments after he presented his own! But some folks thought this friendliness sometimes went too far.

Back in 1916 in Kentucky, the Democratic candidate for governor was Augustus Stanley and his Republican candidate was Edwin Morrow. They traveled together, socialized together, etc. But people got upset when they saw them publicly drinking whiskey together. Now people didn't mind they were drinking whiskey—after all, this was Kentucky! But what bothered people was that they were seen chugging whiskey together right out of the same bottle! That was a little *too* friendly! (The Border American States, Neal Peirce, W.W. Norton, p. 229)

Sometimes even we Christians just get too friendly with sin. Especially our *own* sins! In old Kentucky, politicians could get too friendly with their opponents. And we can get too friendly with our sins, way too accepting of them.

Lent is a good time to get real unfriendly with our sins, to stop chugging whiskey out of the same bottle with our sins. I need to recognize what St. Paul said in verse 12, where he

said that my sins are “works of darkness”. I need to decide---do I wish to live in the light or in the dark?

Lent is a good time to obey Paul and cast off the works of darkness---our sins. With God’s help and God’s strength, we can get rid of them. All the Lenten disciplines----fasting, almsgiving, prayer, more worship services, going to Confession, more Bible reading-----we should use them all to war against our own sins.

If you want to know more about the specific Lenten disciplines I just mentioned, you’ll find some info in the bulletin and in the March newsletter. And, of course, feel free to just ask me about them.....

Just the chronological fact of Lent showing up on the calendar tomorrow won’t help us a bit if we don’t do anything about it. We have to work it. We should work it hard, so that we can leave sin behind and grow in Christ. And it all starts tomorrow. (Actually, tonight, with Forgiveness Vespers.)

Are you spiritually drowsy? Nodding off in the Lord? Dozing off in your walk with God? Lent is the time to wake up. As St. Paul said in verse 11-----“you know what hour it is, how it is full time to wake from sleep.” It is full time to wake up---Lent is beginning.

Let us wake up. Let us wake the Jesus sleeping inside us.

