

Rejoice in the Lord always—and especially in Lent

When we give something up, we realize that its goodness doesn't depend on our ownership of it.

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To most of us, Lent seems as far from joy as the cross is from resurrection. But in an important sense, Lent is about joy.

The flow of the liturgical drama culminating on Easter Sunday leads many of us to defer all talk of joy for that most joyous of church feasts, Easter. To connect joy to the time between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday might seem out of place, at best, and at worst, it might appear to disregard the very events that give Lent its shape, the profound sacrifices that bookend Jesus' ministry: his 40 days in the desert, plagued by hunger and thirst and the devil, and his shameful and painful death on the cross.

It's true that Lent is not a season of laughter and indulgence. Some regard the 40 days as a time of self-punishment, drawing significance from the pain of being separated from what we enjoy. Or Lent is regarded as an occasion for self-improvement, a chance to free ourselves from things (extra pounds) or habits (checking Facebook) that we know are harmful.

Self-denial and self-improvement are indeed aspects of Lenten observance. But an important and neglected way to practice Lent—and one of the many ways to practice Lent well—is to see it as a time to refocus our relationship to the goods of creation, the goods of ordinary life.

For joy, two things are needed: that over which we rejoice must both appear to us as good and actually be good. Joy is a fruit of truthful seeing of genuine goods.

An essential part of this truthful seeing is the acknowledgment that an object's goodness does not depend on our possession or enjoyment of it. Joy's truthful seeing requires acknowledging not only that we cannot always possess certain goods but that sometimes their appearing good for us—and our experiencing them as good—depends upon our not possessing them at all, at least for a period.

The Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and Jesus' 40 lonely days in the desert involve privation, but the privation is not presented in the Bible as an end to be sought in itself. The Israelites eventually find their way to the land of milk and honey, and Jesus emerges from the desert announcing the good news of the kingdom of God, curing diseases, feeding the hungry, and even being fed at banquets. The goods that the Israelites and Jesus go without are indeed good, and in keeping with their goodness, the Israelites and Jesus do not give them up forever but return to enjoy them again.

So why abstain in the first place? Why create a Lenten gulf between us and the proper objects of our desire? Because it is in denying ourselves that which we want, perhaps even that which we think we need, that we learn to see that the world's goodness is not a consequence of our enjoyment of the goods of the world; rather, our deep enjoyment of them is the consequence of their goodness.

The world was good before there were humans to enjoy it; it was a good gift which God gave humans in the very act of creating them. Of course, if creation weren't enjoyable, it could not be a good and welcome gift; instead, it would be an inflicted burden. But when we treat the ordinary things of life as good because they are

enjoyable and give us pleasure, we tend to make them mere means to an end. Water comes to be regarded as just something to satisfy our thirst or irrigate our fields. Cattle exist only to provide us with steaks. The world is there for us to extract benefit for ourselves. Nature ceases to have an integrity of its own.

The same approach can be applied to the people who work to make or cultivate the objects of our enjoyment. Everything and everyone is seen as existing for our enjoyment. Failing to recognize God's gifts, we inflict damage on the world around us and upon ourselves.

When Paul writes that "the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," he isn't denying the goodness of food, drink, or any other aspects of creaturely life. He is reminding us that whatever goodness we might attribute to them lies in their being both created by God and caught up in God's plan for their perfect consummation in God's kingdom, a space of the Master's joy. The renunciations of Lent are in service of that joy.

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