

READER'S
EDITION

GOD FOR US

*Rediscovering the
Meaning of Lent and Easter*

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Greg
Pennoyer
Preface

LIKE ITS COMPANION VOLUME ON ADVENT and Christmas, *God For Us* is the result of a journey that began in an Anglo-Catholic church on Christmas morning, 1998. That was my first encounter with the depths of meaning in the liturgy and the beginning of my acquaintance with the rhythm of the church calendar. At the same time, it was also a discovery of visual art's capacity to enrich and complement what we learn from the written and spoken word.

Much has happened since that Christmas morning. My exploration of the meaning of the Incarnation helped me to see the importance of an enfleshed faith. It also made me realize that in subtle but real ways our religious culture often manifests a distorted Christianity based on the notion of a God who hates the body and the world he created. Instead, what I found on my pilgrimage was a God who through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ revealed his love for all creation and showed us how to live “for the life of the world.”

This discovery, over a period of time, led me into the ancient Christian tradition of the Orthodox Church. There I discovered (as others have done in similar journeys into other Christian traditions) the short leap from the revelation of “God with us” in the Advent and Christmas season to “God for us” in the Lent and Easter season.

Until this discovery, I had not paid much attention to Lent—and, since it is a preparation for Easter, I did not fully comprehend the meaning of Easter either. Advent and Christmas were easier to embrace because of their relative joyfulness and brightness.

The Lenten season was harder to grasp. Lent's reputation as a time for the "denial of the flesh," for self-flagellation and a vaguely spiritualized gloominess, made it much more difficult to engage. But my entrance into Orthodoxy, a set of challenging personal circumstances, and the desire to produce this book impelled me to learn more about what the great Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann called the "bright sadness" of the Lenten and Easter season.

If Advent/Christmas is a revelation of God's presence with us, then Lent/Easter is a revelation of God's desire to use all of life for our wholeness and our healing—the revelation that he will pull life from death.

Our ability to understand resurrection, our experience of both a personal Easter as well as the Easter of Christ, is shaped by our stance toward life and what it brings our way. Herein lies the purpose of Lent. Whether it is imposed by circumstances or chosen through spiritual discipline, Lent is about nurturing a posture that holds all things lightly, that ensures that our passions are subject to us and not the other way around.

In Lent we learn that the meaning of life is not dependent upon the fulfillment of our dreams and aspirations. Nor is it lost within our brokenness and self-absorption. That meaning is still there—and it can be found.

Lent cleanses the palate so that we can taste life more fully. It clears the lens so that we can see what we routinely miss within our circumstances.

Lent and Easter reveal the God who is for us in all of life—for our liberation, for our healing, for our wholeness. Lent and Easter remind us that even in death there can be found resurrection.

—GREG PENNOYER

Ronald
Rolheiser, OMI
Introduction

CELEBRATION IS A PARADOXICAL THING. IT LIVES within the tension between anticipation and fulfillment, longing and consummation, the ordinary and the special, work and play.

Seasons of play are sweeter when they follow seasons of work, seasons of consummation are heightened by seasons of longing, and seasons of intimacy grow out of seasons of solitude.

Presence depends upon absence, intimacy upon solitude, play upon work.

In liturgical terms, we fast before we feast.

In our time, we struggle with such paradoxes. Many of our feasts fall flat because there has not been a previous fast. In times past, there was generally a long fast leading up to a feast, and then a joyous celebration afterward.

Today, we have reversed that: there is a long celebration leading up to the feast and a fast afterward.

Take Christmas, for example. The season of Advent, in effect, kicks off the Christmas celebrations. The parties start, the decorations and lights go up, and the Christmas music begins to play. When Christmas finally arrives, we are already saturated and satiated with the delights of the season—we're ready to move on. By Christmas Day, we are ready to go back to ordinary life. The Christmas season used to last until February. Now, realistically, it is over on December 25.

Celebration survives on contradiction. To feast, we must first fast. To come to real consummation, we must first live in

longing. To taste specialness, we must first have a sense of what is ordinary.

When fasting, unfulfilled longing, and the ordinary rhythm of life are short-circuited, fatigue of the spirit, boredom, and disappointment invariably replace celebration and we are left with an empty feeling which asks: “Is that all?” But that is because we have short-circuited a process.

I am old enough to have known another time. Like our own, that time too had its faults, but it also had some strengths. One of its strengths was its belief—a lived belief—that feasting depends upon prior fasting.

I have clear memories of the Lenten seasons of my childhood. How strict that season was then! Fast and renunciation: no weddings, no dances, no parties, drinks and desserts only on Sundays, and generally less of everything that constitutes specialness and celebration. Churches were draped in purple. The colors were dark and the mood was penitential, but the feast that followed, Easter, was indeed special.

Lent. We know it is a season within which we are meant to fast, to intensify our longing, and to raise our spiritual temperatures, all through the crucible of non-fulfillment.

But how do we understand Lent?

Sometimes the etymology of a word can be helpful. Lent is derived from an Old English word meaning springtime. In Latin, *lente* means slowly. Therefore, Lent points to the coming of spring, and it invites us to slow down our lives so as to be able to take stock of ourselves. While that captures some of the traditional meaning of Lent, the popular mindset generally has a different focus, looking at Lent mostly as a season within which we are asked to refrain from certain

normal, healthy pleasures so as to better ready ourselves for the feast of Easter.

To further our understanding, perhaps the foremost image for this is the biblical idea of the desert. Jesus, we are told, in order to prepare for his public ministry, went voluntarily into the desert for forty days and forty nights, during which time he took no food, and, as the Gospel of Mark tells us, was put to the test by Satan, was with the wild animals, and was looked after by the angels.

Clearly this text is not to be taken literally to mean that for forty days Jesus took no food, but that he deprived himself of all the normal supports that protected him from feeling, full-force, his vulnerability, dependence, and need to surrender in deeper trust to God the Father. And in doing this, we are told, he found himself hungry and consequently vulnerable to temptations from the devil; but also, by that same token, he was more open to the Father.

Lent has for the most part been understood as a time of us to imitate this, to metaphorically spend forty days in the desert like Jesus, unprotected by normal nourishment so as to have to face “Satan” and the “wild animals” and see whether the “angels” will indeed come and look after us when we reach that point where we can no longer look after ourselves.

For us, Satan and wild animals refer particularly to the chaos inside of us that normally we either deny or simply refuse to face: our paranoia, our anger, our jealousies, our distance from others, our fantasies, our grandiosity, our addictions, our unresolved hurts, our sexual complexity, our incapacity to really pray, our faith doubts, and our dark secrets.

The normal “food” that we eat (distractions, busyness, entertainment, ordinary life) works to shield us from the deeper chaos that lurks beneath the surface of our lives.

Lent invites us to stop eating, so to speak, whatever protects us from having to face the desert that is inside of us. It invites us to feel our smallness, to feel our vulnerability, to feel our fears, and to open ourselves to the chaos of the desert so that we can finally give the angels a chance to feed us.

That is a rich biblical image for Lent, but human experience, anthropology, and our ancient myths offer their own testimony.

For example, in every culture, there are ancient stories and myths that teach that all of us, at times, have to sit in the ashes. We all know, for example, the story of Cinderella. The name itself literally means, the little girl (puella) who sits in the ashes (cinders). The moral of the story is clear: before you get to be beautiful, before you get to marry the prince or princess, before you get to go to the great feast, you must first spend some lonely time in the ashes, humbled, smudged, tending to duty, unglamorous, waiting.

Lent is that season, a time to sit in the ashes. It is not incidental that many of us begin Lent by marking our foreheads with ashes.

There is also the rich image, found in some ancient mythologies, of letting our tears reconnect us with the flow of the water of life and of letting our tears reconnect us to the origins of life. Tears, as we know, are saltwater. That is not without deep significance. The oceans too are saltwater and, as we know too, all life takes its origins there.

And so we have the mystical and poetic idea that tears reconnect us to the origins of life, that tears regenerate us, that

tears cleanse us in a life-giving way, and that tears deepen the soul by letting it literally taste the origins of life.

Given the truth of that (and we have all experienced that truth), tears too are a desert to be entered into as a Lenten practice, a vehicle to reach new depths of soul.

Lent. It is a season to slowly prepare our souls. It is a time to open ourselves to the presence of God in our lives and let the angels feed us. It is a time to sit among the ashes, confident that love will abound in due time. It is a time to be washed by our tears into the water of new life, to come to real transformation and newness ready to celebrate the feast that is given us at Easter.

Beth Bevis
**The Feasts and
Fasts of Lent**

THE CHURCH ARRIVES AT EASTER, THE OLDEST and most sacred feast of the Christian year, by way of a fast. Like Advent, the season of Lent has given Christians throughout history a period of time to prepare for the coming holiday through practices of reflection, repentance, prayer, and self-restraint. One of the goals of this season is to reveal habits or mindsets that may be preventing us from experiencing true freedom and wholeness. The restrictions imposed by the Lenten fast seek not to deny the goodness of the many blessings we enjoy in this life, but rather to remind us that they are, in fact, gifts. Above all, a fast is intended to nurture a sense of gratitude to the giver and to encourage us to share these gifts with those in need.

The function of the church calendar is to enact a sense of wholeness and proportion in time, setting aside certain days and seasons for fasting and preparation, others for feasting and celebration. It can be easy to fall into the trap of emphasizing one aspect of the Christian life over all others—to dwell too long on our failures or to embrace only the good news of deliverance from sin, to deny the body or to become complacent about it. Without an intentional guide, such as the one provided by the church calendar, we can lose sight of the full extent of our humanity. The liturgical calendar, with its cycle of festivals and fasts alternating with seasons of “Ordinary Time,” helps us to remember not only

the breadth of Christian teaching but also what it means to be human, both fallen and redeemed by God.

By the fourth century, when the church officially instituted the forty-day season of Lent, customs of fasting and penance had already begun taking shape among baptismal candidates as a way of preparing for entry into the church at Easter, the usual day for baptism in the early church. With the creation of Lent, the church brought together many of these preexisting customs and directed them to a common need—not only among those entering the life of the church for the first time, but also among practicing Christians for whom the mystery of Easter might threaten to become a mere commonplace.

Lent became a way for Christians to mindfully prepare for the coming feast, to open themselves to their own spiritual hunger in order to make room for the life and fulfillment offered at Easter.

Because Lent is a fast, one might be surprised to find there are many rich traditions associated with the season—traditions belonging not only to the feast days and Sundays that punctuate Lent, but to the fast itself. To be sure, sensory experience is pared down during Lent, but this doesn't mean that it is a time of spiritual dryness. There can be as much meaning in a strategically instituted silence as there is in a resounding "alleluia," as much to glean from a spare Lenten meal as from an Easter feast.

The aim of the histories that follow is to demonstrate the richness of the customs of Lent and to reclaim this season as a time of spiritual renewal that enhances our understanding of Easter, making us readier than ever to embrace the abundant life that Christ made possible for us through his death and resurrection.

A Note about the Dating of Easter

For almost as long as the church has observed Easter the question of how to calculate its precise date has been a point of debate. This has been partly the result of juggling two calendars—lunar and solar—along with the Jewish festival cycle upon which Easter’s date was based, since the first Easter took place during the season of Passover. The Council of Nicea in 325 attempted to solidify a universal date, and the replacement of the Julian with the new Gregorian calendar in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries went some way toward getting the Christian world on the same calendar. But even now, the churches of the East and West calculate Easter’s date slightly differently: the Western church sets Easter on the Sunday after the first full moon of the spring equinox (March 21), while the Eastern church still uses the Julian calendar in its calculations. The result is that Christians in the East and West usually celebrate Easter on different Sundays. Many of the customs associated with the feast in the East and West, however, stem from the same early church traditions, and we feature many of them in the coming pages.

SHROVE TUESDAY AND
THE FIRST WEEK OF
LENT

Beth Bevis

History of the Feast

Shrove Tuesday

(also known as Pancake Day, Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday)

WHEN IT WAS FIRST OBSERVED IN ENGLAND in medieval times, Shrove Tuesday was seen primarily as a day for the confession of sins in anticipation of Lent, which began on the following day. “Shrove” comes from the Old English verb “shrive,” to impart penance and absolution. Over time, as the entire season of Lent came to be devoted to the practices of confession and repentance, the imperative to confess before Lent was downplayed, and Shrove Tuesday, along with the preceding week, came to be more focused on feasting and merrymaking, practices restricted during Lent.

In this way, Shrovetide was similar to its European counterpart, Carnival, which also originated in the Middle Ages as a pre-Lenten period of feasting and frivolity, culminating on the Tuesday before Lent. Carnival traditions have varied over time and place, but almost always involve the eating of cakes, pancakes, or other pastries as a way of using up eggs, butter, milk, and sugar—foods that were at one time prohibited during Lent. Shrove Tuesday’s French name, Mardi Gras or “Fat Tuesday,” reflects this history, as does its traditional name in England, Pancake Day. Christians in the Eastern Church likewise enjoy meatfare and cheesefare week, two weeks devoted to soon-to-be-forbidden foods. The word “carnival” likely originated from the Latin “carne levare,” signifying the “removal of meat” from the Lenten diet.

As a “farewell to flesh” in an even broader sense, Carnival has historically involved indulgence in pleasure and a loosening of

social restrictions. In addition to consuming rich food and drink, it was common throughout Renaissance Europe for people to throw mud, flour, eggs, lemons, or other projectiles at each other. At its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Carnival focused on satirical performance, including the wearing of masks; in some places, the lower classes would dress up as members of the ruling class in a temporary, humorous role-reversal (reminding everyone of their equality in the eyes of God).

By the nineteenth century, the more disorderly Carnival customs had evolved into new traditions, such as flower battles, masked balls, and parades. Variations on these celebrations can be found today in Europe and in the Americas, where Carnival was introduced by European colonists and where it combined with indigenous cultures to form new traditions, including the famous Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans.

Because Carnival celebrations easily devolved into overindulgence and unrestrained revelry, the Protestant church after the Reformation discontinued the celebration of Carnival, though it kept the observance of Lent. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, continued to allow Carnival but made a concerted effort to curb its excesses. While the dangers of excess are obvious, the Catholic Church recognized the benefit of setting aside time for festivity and feasting before a season like Lent. Just as feasting can be taken to an extreme, with people using Carnival as a license for intemperance or sin, so too can fasting and contrition become excessive if they are not undertaken in light of what Shrovetide and Carnival represent. These days are the Church's way of giving merriment its due place alongside the more ascetic seasons of the church calendar. Culminating on Shrove Tuesday, the festive days leading up to Lent are a vital reminder that there is room in the church calendar—and in the Christian life—for both feasting and fasting.

Richard
Rohr, OFM

Shrove Tuesday

S C R I P T U R E

Isaiah 2:1–5;

Psalms 121;

Romans 13:11–14;

Matthew 24:37–44

THE DAY BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF LENT created a number of local customs in different areas, none of them official but differing from culture to culture. Most of them had to do with hearty eating and drinking before the formal fast of Lent began on Ash Wednesday. Many of us are familiar with the names Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) in French speaking countries, Carnival (“letting go of the meat”) in Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries, and Pancake Day in many Northern European countries.

Most of these continue to this day and have even grown larger, which seems to reveal some deep need for breaking the rules, going to excess, or coloring outside the lines. Perhaps the tendency toward excess is itself an acknowledgment that the lines are there for a reason.

I once attended an awesome Fastnacht celebration in Calvinist Basel, Switzerland, where the Catholic revelry from before the Reformation was balanced out by measured and beautiful marching, quiet drumming, flute playing, and gorgeous costumes moving in all directions for three nonstop days. Here, too, was excess, but now an excess of order and discipline and creativity—and for a healing purpose.

Like a good Swiss watch, it all began simultaneously and ended simultaneously in every part of town. The too muchness, as it were, was contained inside very strict boundaries and limits. Similarly, my New Orleans classmates told me that the festivities of Mardi Gras were required to end at exactly twelve midnight—and then the old French Catholics would fittingly get their ashes of repentance the next morning. Both fit into the cycle of life.

However, the church did not attach spiritual significance to this day, and so there were never any formal scriptures or liturgy for what was informally called Shrove Tuesday. Our word Lent came from the Middle English word *lente* for the season of spring, which corresponded to the forty days preceding the rebirth of Easter, at least in the northern hemisphere (see history of this feast day).

Rather than condemn or idealize either swing of the pendulum—too much fasting or too much feasting—perhaps this is a day to help us recognize that both have something good to offer us.

Even the rather dour Qoheleth, who eagerly condemned all “vanities” in his book of Ecclesiastes, says, as if to balance himself out, “Joy then is the object of my praise, since under the sun there is no happiness for humanity except in eating, drinking, and pleasure. This is our standby during our toil through all the days of life that God has given us under the sun.”

If I were to suggest a scripture for today it might also be Qoheleth’s most quoted line from earlier in this same biblical text: “There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven.... A time for laughter, a time for mourning, a time for dancing.”

Here is where he first tries to balance out his own pessimism and moralism by recognizing that all things indeed have their

time and place. (Of course the list is much longer than we have here; if you wish to see all the truthful contraries that he balances and compares, see Ecclesiastes 3:1–8).

A New Testament scripture might be this: “The time has come, the kingdom of God is now at hand. Change and believe the good news.”

Jesus’s very first words in the Gospels are a call to change. Isn’t it strange that so much of the religion formed in his revolutionary name has been a love of the past and a protection of the status quo?

Lent is intended to lead us into an always hidden future and an always greater opportunity, and it is in truth—a future created by God—but still unknown to us. We now enter Lent with a new and open horizon, ready to both expect and work for God’s ever new springtime.

God of all seasons, God of both feasting and fasting, you guide us through the letting goes and the new beginnings of our lives. We confess to you our weakness in doing this fully, and we ask that we can let go of all impediments to our journey toward “life and life more abundantly” so that we can begin anew in grace. May we never lose hope in the eternal spring that you have promised to all of creation in a “new heaven and a new earth.” Amen.

Beth Bevis History of the Fast

Ash Wednesday

SINCE THE SEVENTH CENTURY, THE WESTERN church has observed the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday—the fortieth day before Easter, not counting Sundays. In addition to providing ample time for self-examination and spiritual reorientation, the duration of forty days symbolically aligns Lent with biblical examples of preparation, fasting, and journeying toward liberation—recalling, for instance, Jesus’s forty days of fasting in the wilderness before beginning his ministry, as well as the Israelites’ forty years of desert-wandering before their deliverance into the Promised Land. Among most traditions, this first day of Lent is set aside as a special day of fasting; the Roman Catholic Church, for example, allows for the consumption of one meal or two small meals on Ash Wednesday, setting this day aside, with Good Friday, for more rigorous fasting.

Ash Wednesday services are solemn occasions, offering time for prayer, silent reflection, and in some cases confession. The primary feature of the Ash Wednesday service is the imposition of ashes, in which congregants receive a smudge of ashes in the shape of a cross on their foreheads—a sign of humility and repentance. While forming the cross, the minister typically recites God’s words to Adam and Eve as they were expelled from the garden: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This ritual reminds us of the inevitability of death, making the hope of Easter and the Resurrection all the more vital. The ashes are also a token of our own status as sinners—an acknowledgment

that we, too, have been figuratively exiled and are in need of forgiveness.

The imposition of ashes, now a familiar Ash Wednesday tradition in Catholic, Anglican, and many Protestant churches, has its roots in an early-church penitential practice. For people who had been excluded from the church for serious sin, the imposition of ashes at the start of Lent served as a public sign of their repentance. These sinners then undertook acts of penance throughout Lent and were formally restored to the church community at Easter. By the end of the eleventh century this practice had become less directed to particular kinds of sinners, and the imposition of ashes was prescribed for all Christians in the Western church at the beginning of Lent—a season that was becoming increasingly focused on repentance.

Because Eastern Orthodox Christians follow a slightly different calendar, they do not observe Ash Wednesday, but begin Lent instead on the evening of the seventh Sunday before Easter, known as Forgiveness Sunday. The next day, the first day of Lent, is known as Clean Monday, or Ash Monday by analogy to the Western tradition (although most Eastern churches do not practice the imposition of ashes). In general, the atmosphere of Clean Monday is more celebratory than that of Ash Wednesday. Families in Greece gather in the open air for picnics and enjoy permissible Lenten foods, children fly kites, and there is even dancing on this day. During Clean Week, which begins with Clean Monday, the streets are cleaned of the remnants of the celebrations of Carnival. This literal act of purification can be a reminder that Lent, with its prescribed practices of confession, repentance, and fasting, is meant to assist in the process of cleaning our hearts and preparing our spirits for the celebration of Easter.