

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It feels like we just took down our Christmas decorations, a reminder of great feasts, gift exchanges, and abundance. And now we get thrown into Lent, a time of abstinence, reflection, repentance, and sacrifice. Do you ever feel like the carefree abundance of Christmas sort of sets you up for the jolt of Lent? It's like baiting us with cookies, cakes and candies, getting us all on a sugar high, then "BAM" cuts us off. You break out in a cold sweat; the cravings are severe. We suffer from the deprivation of our candied joys! That is probably why it is called fasting. It happens fast. If we could wean off of the abundance a little at a time, we could call it slowing. "It's Lent, I'll be slowing now."

The knee-jerk reaction is to decide what food to give up. I've decided to give up liver, Brussel sprouts, and calamari. There! Decided. I will be successful. I don't like them. But, I will suffer by abstaining from meat on Fridays, replacing it with the local fish fry, lake perch, french fries, marble rye bread, and coleslaw. I'll pair that up with a glass of Spotted Cow. Because it is Lent, I'll pass on dessert. Whew! What a sacrifice, 'eh? I will make sure that I hang my head, frequently sigh heavily, and remind my family, friends, and colleagues how I am suffering during Lent, depriving myself of all pleasure and nourishment. I will ask them to be tolerant of any bad behavior that I exhibit towards them because I am malnourished and weak. How's that for a sob story?

Somehow this is missing the point. The purpose of Lent is to reflect on your relationship with God and each other. It is a time to be brutally honest with yourself, and to seek ways to address areas that harm your relationships. The idea is to enter Lent as one person, and to come out as a new and improved version of yourself. Christian version 2.0. Lenten reflections could include reconciling the baggage we carry, our own inflated egos, or our wounded perception of ourselves.

In our readings today, Isaiah is rich in sarcasm (at least that's how I took it).

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Fasting doesn't always bring out the best in us, yet it should, shouldn't it?

In our Gospel today, Jesus notes how those who look and dress for sympathy and admiration during their fast are doing it all for recognition and self-service. They want people to notice and praise them for their good and faithful sacrifices. I do believe that they would come out of Lent a different person, a little more prideful, a little more self-admiring, and a little less holy.

I say that we should all fast. I believe that we must cut down, if not eliminate one food source in our diets. As a matter of fact, we must strive to completely starve ourselves to death. Don't panic. By "ourselves," I mean our egos. We must stop feeding our inflated egos, and let them die. It is our egos that push God away and elevate our self-importance. When our egos get hurt, we are eager to petition God to restore our "damaged dignity."

I do not mean to say that giving up chocolate for Lent is a bad thing. It certainly serves as weight training to strengthen our ability to fight off temptation. That same exercise may apply to Fridays. If you love fish, it is certainly no sacrifice when you eat it. At the time, fish was considered the meal of the poor. So, in modern times, if you choose to make dietary changes for one day, simply choose a simple meal.

Getting back to my ego-boosting dietary changes, I believe that we must give up a certain class of junk food that everyone LOVES. Some days we nibble on this junk food, other days we gorge ourselves. Regardless, we find them delicious. They improve our appearance (as least we think so).

So, allow me to list some of these tasty delicacies: Hate, pride, greed, judgment, racism, stereotypes, envy, and lust. Imagine how we savor these tidbits. If I hate someone or a group, it elevates my status. Pride says that I don't need God.

Greed shows that there is no concern for those who are left without. Judgment allows me to classify people so I can exclude them. Racism elevates my privilege, giving me an unfair advantage. Stereotypes allows me to assign attributes to others to make them less desirable. Envy tempts me to step on others for self-promotion. And lust allows me to be superficial and phony, so I can take advantage of others who are vulnerable.

If I give these up: Hate, pride, greed, judgment, racism, stereotypes, envy, and lust, then I deprive my ego of cravings for self-deception, vanity, arrogance, and pride. I suggest that we create the Jesus Diet, a new version of the Mediterranean Diet (pun intended).

The idea is that we focus on giving up those unhealthy egotistical foods. You would notice that the weight from hate, envy, and pride begins to fall right off. You can try to keep it quiet; no one needs to know (although God will know). It will become obvious when our heads are held high. They may notice that because we are on the Jesus diet, that **they** are nourished with a sense of love, worth, and dignity.

On this diet, those who were excluded become included. Those who are unacceptable are welcomed. Those in need are fed.

It could be an interesting exercise to make a note or two where you fasted from egotistical junk food, and fed someone else. You might be surprised in 40 days how God's goodness in you becomes manifest in your demeanor and behavior. People might actually say that you couldn't possibly be fasting, you're filled with too much joy. You aren't miserable. You aren't suffering enough. Yet, you are not the person from before. Keep 'em wondering.

Imagine a 2022 Lenten version of the "Greatest Loser." Imagine working with your personal trainer, Jesus, to lose your egotistical weight. How many lbs of hate would drop off? Could you sweat out a few lbs of envy? Perhaps some extra training could trim some weight from your pride. You would not be the greatest loser, but rather an amazing winner.

May you have the courage to be brutally honest with yourself, and uncover those egotistical junk foods that your ego craves. May you also have the courage to try the Jesus diet, and feed others health food, such as love, acceptance, compassion, generosity, and mercy. You may find that this version of the Mediterranean Diet not only sustains you in this life, but also strengthens you for the life of the Resurrection. Now go, and become the greatest loser, and an amazing winner! Amen.