

Text: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13  Invocavit – 1st Sunday in Lent

Good for the Soul

In the name of him who for us faced the devil and overcame him, dear friends in Christ: Part of maintaining the optimum health of your physical body is scheduling a regular checkup with your doctor. And no, it isn't a lot of fun. You're jabbed by needles so they can run blood tests. They take your height, weight, temperature, and blood pressure. The doctor listens to your heart and lungs with a stethoscope you're certain they keep in the freezer between patients. And then the physician asks a lot of personal questions, prods, pokes, and checks things that, well, most of us would rather not have checked. But you do it. You subject yourself to it. Why? Because it's good for you.

With that in mind, let me suggest that what a physical exam is for the body the penitential season of Lent is for the soul. Think of it as your annual spiritual health checkup. And if it lasts a little longer than the time you spend with your doctor, 40 days as opposed to 30 minutes, maybe that's because it's a lot more important. Maintaining your physical health may extend your life a few years; but maintaining your spiritual health will extend your life forever. Neglect your physical health and you'll probably die sooner; but neglect your spiritual health and you'll end up in hell. Nothing could be more important.

And no, it isn't a lot of fun. The mood of the Lenten season is darker. The Scripture readings are more harsh and menacing. The hymns the Church sings are gloomier. All deliberately so; because we can't talk about your spiritual health without focusing a lot of attention on the dread disease of sin that infects us all and that threatens to kill you forever. So you do it. You subject yourself to it. Why? Because it's good for you. It's good for the soul.

And drawing from today's Scripture readings, that's what I'd like to talk about this morning: things associated with Lent that are good for the soul. The first is something we don't often discuss in the Lutheran Church. I refer to the adoption and practice of ascetic disciplines. Or, as we're more likely to say it, giving up something for Lent. The reason it's a topic that's avoided is because it's often misunderstood and it easily lends itself to abuse. But to me that only means we should do a better job of teaching it. So, let me attempt to set the record straight. First let it be clear that there is no scriptural mandate that *requires* anyone to give up anything for Lent. You don't have to do it. Some churches teach that you do, even going so far as to tell you what exactly is required on certain days and insisting that you are sinning if you transgress whatever rules they've decreed. That's just silly. And it violates a basic element of the whole idea which is that if you decide to practice an ascetic discipline, it has to be strictly voluntary. No one can require it of you. You are free in the Gospel to do it or not.

Second, it needs to be stated emphatically that there is nothing meritorious about it. You are no more righteous in the sight of God, not even a tiny bit, if you decide to engage in some form of ascetic discipline. This is what the Pharisees thought. They came up with all kinds of special fasts and self imposed disciplines that they believed made them holier to God and better than other people. And this is the danger. There's a Pharisee in all of us. It's the sinful nature that thinks I can please God by doing something. No you can't. Your righteousness before God is in Christ and in him alone. All you can bring to the table is your sin. And so when choosing to practice an ascetic discipline, one must be on constant guard against the sin of self-righteousness and confess it when it rears its ugly head – because it will. Guaranteed. And this

is why we Lutherans are so uncomfortable with this topic. We are deathly afraid of falling into the sin of self-righteousness; and rightly so, because it's such an easy to do.

But by steering so far clear of the issue, we end up robbing ourselves of the benefits to be gained. The Pharisees weren't the only ones who fasted. John the Baptist and his disciples did, and they were the good guys. In today's Gospel we heard how Jesus fasted for forty long days. And we know that the Apostle Paul, a man who so clearly articulated the Gospel and refused to submit to the rules and traditions of men, even he at times voluntarily practiced certain forms of ascetic discipline in his life as a Christian. Furthermore, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave instructions for how his followers were to fast. Not like the hypocrites, he said, who go around looking haggard and unkempt so everyone will know what they're doing and so be impressed by their piety; no, he said to keep it something private, just between you and the Lord. Don't make a big production of it. But again, by giving such instructions about fasting, the underlying assumption is that his followers *would* at times do it.

Why? Because done properly it's good for the soul. There's a connection between your soul and your body. You aren't one or the other; you're both together. And what happens to one affects the other. This is especially true for us because we live in such an affluent society. We Americans are used to indulging our every appetite and whim the instant we have them. We're constantly being told we deserve it. Hungry? Eat. And here, have another helping – or two. Better yet, “super-size it”. Got an itch? Scratch. Bored? Here're a thousand options for entertainment. We're pampered and satiated and full up busy all the time in the mind and body, which in turn makes the soul lethargic, lazy, fat, dumb, and happy – without a care in the world.

But the whole idea of a penitential season like Lent is trouble your soul with its sin, to concern it with weighty spiritual matters, to humble it on account of its weakness and wretchedness. And this is where a little self imposed denial of the worldly cravings of the body can help. The unsatisfied desire calls attention to the deeper hunger of the soul for what it needs. More than that, cutting something out of your life simplifies it. It allows you to focus more time on what's important – and in Lent that's your sinful condition and all that Jesus did to save you by his life, his passion, and his death on the cross. And that truly is good for the soul.

In view of this, I encourage you to consider at least observing Lent by making it different than the rest of the year and adopting some form of discipline that you don't normally exercise. And let me just throw out a few suggestions to prime the pump. You might decide to fast from a favorite food like chocolate or sugar or your choice of soda pop. You might skip a meal or take smaller portions. You could cut back on your consumption of television or time spent on the internet, maybe using the time you gain to engage in prayer, devotional reading, or tackling a good book on theology (see me for suggestions). Maybe your whole family together might decide a way to engage in a Lenten discipline. Traditionally, a big Lenten practice is to deprive yourself of something in order to give what you save to charity or to those in need; you might consider something like that. And finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't suggest marking Lent in part, anyway, by attending our Wednesday evening services. That too is good for the soul. So, again, consider these things; and if you decide to do something, don't make a big production of it. It's for the good of your soul, not for showing off your devotion.

Okay, I spent more time on that than I wanted; but I think it needed to be said. Moving on, there's an old expression that says *confession* is good for the soul. And that comes through loud and clear in today's Scripture readings. What is confession? It becomes evident if we break the word into its component parts “con”, which means “with or together”; and “fess”, which

means “to speak”. So, to confess is “to say with” or “to say together”. And when it comes to Christian confession that’s good for the soul, we can look at it three ways:

First there is the confession of sin. I learned long ago as an engineering student that the first step in solving a problem is to describe it accurately. You can’t fix something if you don’t know what’s broken. As I pointed out this last Wednesday evening when we were reviewing the 10 Commandments in the Small Catechism, this is precisely why God gave us his Holy Law: not to fix us, but to show us what’s broken. The Lord already knows, of course. He summed up our condition this way: “Every inclination of the [human] heart is only evil all the time.” He describes us as rotten through and through, saying that even our best and proudest achievements are worse than garbage in his sight. The trouble is that we don’t believe it; not really. We want to cling fast to the notion that there is something good in us. We’re always comparing ourselves to others and thinking “at least I’m not as bad as them.” And that very thought springs from the self-righteous Pharisee in you. The thought itself is a sin – one that needs to be acknowledged, confessed, and repented of like all your other sins revealed by the Law of God. And when you do confess your sins you are saying with God what your problem is.

The sinful human condition is pictured metaphorically in today’s Old Testament reading in the bondage the Israelites were subjected to in Egypt. “There”, the Lord directed his people to confess, “the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor.” That’s what sin does. We are enslaved to our selfish desires, always working futilely to justify ourselves; but no matter how hard you work at it, at the end of the day you are still a slave to sin. This is why we confess together before the Lord that we are by nature sinful and unclean, that we have sinned against him in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and left undone, and that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition. These truths are hard to face, but confessing them is good for the soul.

And sometimes there are specific sins that especially trouble the soul. They are those things that you are all too well aware of and that you are deeply ashamed of. You think, “I can’t believe I allowed myself to sink so low” or “I still feel terrible about what I did to this person or how I failed to help when I could have”. When it comes to such sins, confession is the means to unburden your guilty conscience. And that too is good for the soul.

But that brings us to the second aspect of confession we need to consider, and that’s the saying together of what the Lord has done to redeem us from our sin. Again, this shows up in the Old Testament reading where the people are directed to say “And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders.” It’s all foreshadow, you see, of what Jesus did to redeem us; how he, God in flesh, rescued us from sin’s bondage with his mighty hands nailed through and his arms outstretched upon the cross. There the great deed of terror was inflicted upon him as he bore the guilt and penalty of our sin. And it was accompanied by signs and wonders, like the sky going dark and the earthquake that marked his death.

We recite God’s saving work together in the Creeds of the Church and every time we say “amen” when we hear the words of absolution or when receiving Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion. And it’s necessary that we say together what God has done to save us, as St. Paul writes in today’s Epistle: “... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Speaking the faith is an integral part of it. So doing we declare aloud to others what God has done, which in turn strengthens our own faith and theirs because faith comes by hearing the Word of God. It’s

the means by which the Holy Spirit creates and builds saving faith. And when it comes to good for the soul, there's nothing better than that.

Finally, a third aspect of confession we want to consider are the words we say together with the Lord when facing temptation. The best way to deal with sin is not to fall into it in the first place. And yes, I know that it cannot be avoided altogether. But specific sins can be avoided. And while all sin is evil and is cause for God's condemnation, not all sins have the same temporal consequences. It's one thing to have an adulterous thought; it's quite another to commit an act of adultery. The first sin affects only you. The second affects at least one other person and potentially the members of two whole families – not to mention all the friends and neighbors. The second sin can destroy lives. And so we need to fight such temptations. In today's Gospel, we see Jesus showing us how. Note that each time the devil tempts him, he responds with a quotation from Holy Scripture. When tempted, he speaks God's Word.

It's no coincidence that this is what Adam failed to do when the devil tempted Eve. Instead of speaking up with the truth, contradicting the lies of Satan with God's powerful faith giving Words, he allowed his wife's faith to falter so that she was led astray and deceived. And the same thing happens to us in temptation. The devil is there with the lie that somehow this sin will result in something good for you. It's not possible. Sin is always destructive. It never results in good. And we need to say it. We need to speak God's Word against temptation both because speaking the Word strengthens faith and resolve, and because the devil hates to hear it. The Word of God is the only weapon we have to use against him. It's our means of resistance. And St. James tells us that when we resist the devil, he will flee. And that is good for the soul.

Which, bringing us back to where we started, is what Lent is all about. Therefore may our gracious Lord guide us by his Word and Spirit through this penitential season, that we use it to see more clearly our lost and sinful condition so that we are led to confess our sins, to confess together God's saving work through Jesus his Son, and to confess the truth of his Word to defend ourselves against the lies of the devil; because all of that is good for the soul. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!