

Bread and Wine in a Season of Fasting



What is Lent all about? Giving up chocolate or beer?
No meat on Friday? Ash marks on our forehead?

How about this: Lent is about spiritual renewal. It's about a journey we're invited to make. On the far horizon is the glory of Easter. On the near horizon—ashes, mortality, and temptations in a desert. It's the time in between these two horizons that is a different kind of space, a passage, a time of being on the way. It is a time of conversion, of change, of growth, and also of uncertainty and "not knowing." Lent is the annual trust walk of the Church, when we let ourselves be led by the Spirit into the desert of purification.

What does the Eucharist have to do with Lent? How do we feast on the "bread of heaven" during a season of fasting? It is good to ask such basic questions during a time of renewal. Because we participate in the Eucharist all year round, do we simply take it all for granted? Is our experience of Eucharist on autopilot? Perhaps Lent is the time to slow down and reconsider what really takes place in the Eucharist. Perhaps it is a time to rediscover how it can change our lives. The Mass gives us a vision of who we are and who we are called to become. It renews our confidence in God and deepens our love of neighbor. Authentic worship helps us become better witnesses to God's reign in our world.

COVENANT MAKING

This year, the golden thread that runs through the season of Lent is to be found in the first readings of the Sunday Lectionary. Their theme: covenant and the renewal of covenant. Each Sunday you will hear an Old Testament reading concerning a covenant God made. This series of

readings leads up to God's promise of a new covenant, announced on the Fifth Sunday of Lent: a promise fulfilled in Jesus.

What is a covenant? It is more than a pact or an agreement. A covenant is a loving and life-giving commitment. When God makes a covenant, as described in the Bible, it is not like a contract between two equal parties. Rather, the initiative—and generosity—are all on God's side. The covenants God makes last forever, they are forever fruitful, and they require a faithful response.

This week, on the First Sunday of Lent, the spotlight shines on the covenant with Noah. The biblical story of Noah, from which today's reading is drawn, begins by telling of a terrifying disaster brought on by human sinfulness. Yet a consoling promise follows the devastation of the flood, as the reading proclaims today. God makes a covenant with Noah and his family and, by extension, with all creation. This moment is creation's new beginning, blessed by God.

BREAD AND WINE

So perhaps the connection between the Eucharist and the season of Lent this year begins right here, with the elements of bread and wine—the fruit of creation, gift of the sun and the soil and of life, faithfully brought forth from the earth, year after year. Bread and wine are natural signs of God's love and fidelity in creation. Yet they also require human skill and labor to make them what they are. Divine and

human work, together, produces bread and wine. Planting, harvesting, and many stages of preparation are needed to turn wheat and grapes into bread and wine.

One of the great teachers of the early Church, Saint Augustine, reflected on the process of forming the Christian community by comparing it to the baking of bread. "Remember," he said, "bread doesn't come from a single grain, but from many. When you received exorcism you were 'ground.' When you were baptized, you were 'leavened.' When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were 'baked.' ... In the visible object of bread, many grains are gathered into one just as the faithful (so Scripture says) form 'a single heart and mind in God' [Acts 4:32]."

THE GREATEST GIFT

Before Jesus gave his life for us on the Cross, he shared a meal with his disciples. He blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to them, saying "This is my body." He also said the blessing over the cup filled with wine and shared it with them, saying "This is my blood."

Thus bread and wine—already wholesome and holy things—have become something infinitely more precious. In the Eucharist, as Jesus himself told us, they become his own Body and Blood. The Eucharist makes present the mystery of Christ's saving death and resurrection. It is the sign of the new covenant, made in the Blood of Christ.

The rainbow in the clouds was the sign of God's faithfulness in the covenant with Noah. But the greatest sign of God's love and fidelity for all time is Jesus, who becomes our food and drink in the Eucharist. His Paschal Mystery, his dying and rising, is our bread and wine in a season of fasting. By putting other things aside during Lent, the Church creates a time and space in which to reflect on what Jesus Christ has given us—the greatest gift—himself.

REFLECT

One of the visible signs of God's covenant with us in Christ is our unity. How can you help foster oneness of heart and mind in your parish? Is there someone you need to forgive or whose forgiveness you need to receive, in order to become this living sign?

ACT

Be intentional about fasting before receiving the Eucharist. The Church asks that we abstain from food and drink for one hour before receiving Communion. Take care to observe this practice in a spirit of reverence and joy. Make room for a feast by fasting.

PRAY

Heavenly Father, you gave creation a new beginning after the devastation of the flood. Let me begin again this Lent. Holy Spirit, you led our Savior into the desert. Guide me to where I can better hear your voice. Lord Jesus, you have made the Eucharist a living sign of the unity of your Church. Help us to be that sign for the world.

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