

Lenten Spring

“Nothing is as beautiful, as deep, as inspired and inspiring, as that which the Church, our Mother, reveals and freely gives to us once we enter the blessed season of the ‘lenten spring.’”¹
 Alexander Schmemmann

If you are like me, you have difficulty thinking of Lent – that severe season of austere penance – as being beautiful, inspiring or springy. It can easily feel more like something to be endured in order to placate a dour deity whose inescapable, suffocating nature perennially frowns on our pleasure.

But Alexander Schmemmann thinks we have it wrong. Perhaps the key to his understanding is in those last two words: lenten and spring.

I only discovered this recently, but Lent means ‘spring’ and derives from the word ‘long,’ or ‘lengthen.’ It refers to the lengthening of days when the sun releases the earth from her icy bondage, drawing leafy green from the now warming, fecund soil. It represents a turning from barrenness to fruitfulness – a return to life in all its diverse fullness. It is the affirmation that death will not have the last word, because the soil from which life springs is itself redeemed death.

Think about the generative relationship between spring warming and the nature of soil, and one gets a glimmer of the beautiful inspiration Schmemmann is hinting at:

Soil is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise.²

So, Norman Wirzba, reflecting on these insights, exclaims, “soil is a marvel... the site of resurrection.”³

But it is hard for us fallen creatures to appreciate how far we have deviated from the fullness of life and love, and their ultimate object – God himself. We are accustomed to our winter; our retreat from life. We have so invested in its continuance – with our petty attachments and disordered loves – that we resist the winter thaw, tragically fearing the greening of spring to be a loss, or a death, rather than a release from it. Such is the nature of our sinful disorientation.

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey into Pascha* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 1974), 9.

² Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common Place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Counterpoint, 2002).

³ Norman Wirzaba, from his essay “Dark Night of the Soil: an Agrarian Approach to Life,” quoted in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

Our reorientation takes some time and requires work. Time and effort are essential, says Schmemmann, because it takes both to “uproot and heal the universal and common disease which men have come to consider as their normal state.”

The Church has therefore set aside forty days each year (roughly a tithe of the year) to devote to this work of reorientation. One major theme is desert, or wilderness wanderings. This, of course, harkens back to Israel’s forty years wandering in the desert, which is re-enacted and redeemed by Christ’s forty-day temptation in the wilderness.

Yes, Lent is a season of austerity and disorientation. It is a season in which we voluntarily destabilize ourselves with some kind of fast (mini-death) that brings into focus the many ways we cooperate with death and our own soul’s freezing. But it gives us the opportunity to know the truth of our lives that we may turn (repent) and live. It loosens the soil of our souls so we can, with joy, receive the seed of salvation that comes to us by the grace of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Again, Alexander Schmemmann:

“Hunger is the state where we realize our dependence on something else.”

But there is also an active side to fasting. It’s not only about giving up something for the sake of our own interior renewal, but equally about adding in something that is good: works of mercy that help us turn from our self-orientation to focus on the flourishing of others.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. (Isaiah 58.6-8)

Here, we are not only invited to participate in our own liberation, but in that of all creation. Our offer is the dignity of participation with Christ in the redemption of the world.

I discovered online this thoughtful litany affirming both the negation and the affirmation (fast and feast) that are key to Lenten renewal. Perhaps you may take something from it as your own discipline of renewal.

Fast from judging others; Feast on Christ dwelling in them.
Fast from apparent darkness; Feast on the reality of Light.
Fast from pessimism; Feast on optimism.
Fast from thoughts of illness; Feast on the healing power of God.
Fast from words that pollute; Feast on phrases that purify.
Fast from anger; Feast on patience.
Fast from worry; Feast on unceasing prayer.
Fast from complaining; Feast on appreciation.
Fast from hostility; Feast on non-resistance.
Fast from bitterness; Feast on forgiveness.
Fast from anxiety; Feast on hope.

Fast from yourself; Feast on a silent heart.⁴

The following chapters reflect on several aspects of Lent worth contemplating. I'm on the pilgrimage myself and consider these pages to be a trail to a few of the discoveries others and I have made.

It is a very rich season.

FRESH AND GREEN (Psalm 92)

music and lyrics by Steve Bell

Fresh and green we will remain
Bearing fruit to a ripe old age
Happy to tell about your name
A blessed endeavour
The righteous flourish like the palm
And grow like cedars of Lebanon
Planted in the courts of God
Forever and ever

The senseless person doesn't know
The wonders of your glory
And yet their hoppers overflow
But they don't understand
That folly springs up like the grass
And spreads throughout these vast lands
But harvesting will come to pass
When everything is shown
Everything will be exposed

Fresh and green we will remain
Bearing fruit to a ripe old age
Happy to tell about your name
A blessed endeavour
The righteous flourish like the palm
And grow like cedars of Lebanon
Planted in the courts of God
Forever and ever

It is so good to sing of you
At the first sight of the morning
And at night your faithfulness review
Before I close my eyes
And sometimes in the dimming light
I stumble on your glory

⁴ Litany on fasting and feasting from *Cross Roads*, Holy Cross, Mt. Lebanon, PA, vol. 8, issue 3, <http://www.allstswv.org/Orthodox%20Study%20Forum/From%20the%20desk%20of/2008%2004%20-%20Fastin%20and%20Feasting%20During%20Lent.htm> (Accessed June 26, 2018)

That overwhelming sudden fright
But not the daunting kind
It's so hard to describe

Fresh and green we will remain...
Fresh and green we will remain
Bearing fruit to a ripe old age
Happy to tell about your name
A blessed endeavour
The righteous flourish like the palm
And grow like cedars of Lebanon
Planted in the courts of God
Forever and ever

Listen to the above song at www.pilgrimyear.com/songs: Lent: Chapter One.