

Lent It Be, Lent It be



The strong smell of haddock from the church on the corner, headaches from caffeine withdrawal, nicotine fits, candy bars in the trash, and liquor down the sink can only mean one thing. It's Lent! Lent officially began last Wednesday. Millions of devoted Catholics and some Protestants observe 40 days of not eating meat on Friday and abstaining from the pleasure of your choice until Easter.

The word Lent as a ritual fast does not appear in the Bible but it has been in practice since the 4th century and the number 40 is significant in a number of ways. The solar year can be almost perfectly calculated if observed in 40 day cycles and there are several important 40 day time periods talked about in the Bible. The one most commonly associated with Lent is that Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness and opening himself up to the temptations of Satan to make himself resolute and ready for the mission that God had set before Him. Moses stayed on the mountain top for 40 days waiting for God to deliver the Ten Commandments. Noah waited 40 days after the flood to open a window on the ark. Goliath returned to Israel for 40 days before being killed by David. Jesus reappeared for a period of 40 days after his crucifixion. Still, the practice of Lent was never spoken about by Jesus or any of his disciples.

We have talked about various Christian practices that have derived from, or been influenced by other cultures, and Lent is yet another example. The word Lent comes from the Anglo Saxon word, Lencten, which means Spring and the practices of Lent seem to have been taken from the customs of ancient fertility and sun god worship everywhere from Babylon to Mexico. The cult of Tammuz sprung up in Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C. In Babylon, the shepherd Tammuz was the son of Duttur who was a mortal woman and wife of the King Nimrod (nope I'm not making that up, he was one of Noah's great-grandsons). Duttur was said to have been impregnated by the sun god and gave birth to Tammuz. Later Tammuz became consort of the goddess Ishtar (pronounced Easter), who was the goddess of fertility and love. Ishtar is the counterpart of the Sumerian goddess Inanna as well as Astarte in the Eastern Mediterranean, who later evolved into Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, or in her warrior form as Artemis. Tammuz was said to have been murdered by a jealous mob bearing sickles and dragged down into the underworld. Ishtar made a descent into the underworld to rescue him and brought him back. In another account, when Tammuz was 40 he was hunting when he was killed by a boar. Ishtar placed her hand on his forehead and wept for 40 days, depriving herself of food and rest. Her tears and grief brought him back from the dead. Ishtar also realized she became pregnant during this process but we'll save that for the Easter blog. This rescue or resurrection of Tammuz was recognized each year by 40 days of alternate mourning and celebrating. This practice is known as the 40 days of weeping and is mentioned by Ezekiel in the bible.

The story of the boar killing and resurrection is echoed in the tale of Adonis and Aphrodite while the underworld rescue is related to the myth of Hades and Persephone, and is similar to the story of the Egyptian story of Osiris who was rescued from the underworld by Isis. The 40 days of mourning or trials and tribulations are seen throughout the myths of the Middle Eastern and the Mediterranean cultures. On the other side of the world ancient Mexicans began a 40 day fast 3 days prior to the vernal equinox in reverence to their sun god.

Worshipping gods of fertility and the sun was not something foreign to early Christians. You can see it in the halos of the saints and the rays shining down on blessed figures. The emperor Constantine was himself a sun worshipper and even as he became converted to Christianity you can see his continued reverence for the sun in his original chi rho cross incorporating a spoked wheel as a nod to the original life giver. Keep in mind that his conversion occurred on his death bed so there was not much room for further evolution from there. The Celtic cross depicts a cross and circle with rays, and 4 spokes to symbolize the passing of the equinoxes.



In addition to the fast, Catholics abstain from eating meat on Fridays and often substitute fish. This practice is also never mentioned in the scriptures but it's not just an excuse for a Lenten fish fry fundraiser or \$1 Filet-o-Fish at McDonalds. The fish is the symbol of Christianity but is also a symbol of fertility in many cultures including the Babylonian, Phoenician, Chinese, and Assyrians, among others. Fish are extremely fertile creatures. Many species spawn upwards of 9 million eggs annually. The fertility goddess Freya for whom Friday is named has the fish as her symbol, as does Venus. The Israelites worshipped the sun goddess, Ashtoreth and the Egyptians regarded Isis as their goddess of fertility who is often depicted with a fish on her head.

It's interesting how a ritual observing fertility and the sun has evolved into a 40 day time period without beer or Hershey bars but I think Pope Francis' message about Lent is a great one for anyone of any faith. He suggested that giving up the temptation of indifference to your fellow man for 40 days could transform the world. In these busy times it's easy to get into that "I've got problems of my own" mentality but one small act of kindness can have an immeasurable ripple effect. For 40 days I'm going to cast my stone in the pond of compassion as often as I can, giving what I can, and doing what I can, even if that sometimes just means a silent prayer to improve a situation. I may not be able to see the ripples as they roll away from me but I'll be able to feel them as they come back to me from the stones of others. I hope you'll join me in this endeavor.