

Wrestling with Lent

Feb. 22, 2007, Phil Jones

On Ash Wednesday I did not go to church to receive the mark of the cross on my forehead. For one thing, it is not a particularly Brethren thing to do, though some of our congregations do join in this ritual. I tried it a couple of times when pastoring in North Carolina. While some of our former Catholic members appreciated it, few others turned out for the worship service.

Brethren Press has published an excellent Lenten devotional booklet written by Rhonda Pittman Gingrich. Thursday's reading on the issue of "saying I am sorry and really meaning it" is one that really resonates with me during this time of Lent - even though I am not sure I am ready to fully engage the season.

That is the second reason I did not receive ashes on Wednesday: I am wrestling with Lent.

Some describe Lent as an intentionally prayerful and reflective effort to renew the Spirit within us. Others say Lent is a season for soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. This is all great. Prayer and reflection rank high on my list as faithful duty. More than that, prayer keeps me going and gets me motivated.

But this 40-day thing modeled after Jesus and his time in the wilderness presents a huge challenge for me. Reflection and prayer just do not seem like enough.

Many traditions hold Lent in high regard and have strict guidelines for the faithful observant. Even some Christians who are not obligated to participate by their tradition do so willingly. The degree of participation varies greatly, from merely giving up eating chocolate to living on bread and water. Participants often pray or fast to seek God's will for their lives.

As I wrestled with Lent, I did what I do whenever I tackle an issue here in the office: I researched what the Church of the Brethren has said in the past about this issue. A quick look, though not exhaustive, did not uncover any real directive from Brethren policy. But I did find something very interesting from the 1851 Annual Meeting that speaks to fasting, a traditional practice of Lent. From the 1851 minutes: "Considered, inasmuch as the gospel teaches us to fast and pray, to always pray, and never faint; and the Great Teacher says, a certain species of evil spirits cannot be cast out but by fasting and prayer, we hope that every Christian shepherd will teach [their] flock to pray and fast oftener than once a year as we do not know the time when the one that goeth about as a roaring lion may tempt or deceive us."

I knew I could count on the historical record. This gets me going. Pray and fast and watch for the roaring lion.

I wrestle with Lent, with this whole 40 days set aside for reflection, because I am afraid we have done too much reflecting already and not enough lion-hunting. This may seem

somewhat hard, even angry, and perhaps it is. I hope, however, that it is a call to be who we say we are. We have had 300 years of reflection on who we are as a peace church, and our continued prayers and reflection on how we live this out are imperative. Spend your Lenten season doing that. But wrestle with Lent as well. Do not just pray and reflect, but act.

On the 17th day of Lent this year, you will have an excellent opportunity. Pray and fast and reflect and discern - and come and join us. It is time to name the lion and demand that the violence of this war in Iraq come to an end.

Thousands of Christians - evangelicals, Protestants, and Catholics - from across the country will worship together on March 16 to mark the fourth anniversary of the Iraq War with public prayer, a candlelight procession through the center of the nation's capital, vigils in cities and towns throughout the country, and a protest culminating with 1,500 Christians surrounding the White House with the light of peace. The Christian Peace Witness, organized by a broad cross-section of Christian denominational peace groups and organizations, is expected to be the largest peace gathering of Christians expressing opposition to the war since it began four years ago.

Prominent religious leaders and peace activists, including Jim Wallis, Celeste Zappala, Bernice Powell Jackson, and Raphael Warnock, will speak at a worship service, which begins at 7 p.m. at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. After the service, thousands of Christians will make a two-mile, candlelit procession to the White House, where a solemn, prayerful vigil will dramatize the Christian call for peace in Iraq. Following the vigil, hundreds of participants, including many clergy members, will encircle the White House with a band of candlelight to express their conviction that the teachings of Jesus call unequivocally for an end to the war. Many will choose to participate in an act of nonviolence, risking arrest as a witness to their passion for bringing an end to the violence of war.

“Jesus taught us that nothing could be more impractical, or more foolish, than responding to violence with more violence,” says Rick Ufford-Chase, convener of the national steering committee of Christian Peace Witness for Iraq. “Congress needs to act swiftly and boldly to challenge the escalation of the war in Iraq. We will pray, worship and protest on March 16 and send a message to our leaders and the world that peace and reconciliation stand at the very heart of the Christian message and our respective traditions.”

Join in this season of Lent as you feel directed. Wrestle with me, if you will, with the challenges of our faith. Pray and reflect and seek God's directive. Come and give witness in the nation's capital or in your local community. Say you are sorry for the culture of violence in our nation's foreign policy, and really mean it. Live out the teachings of Jesus, who came out of his 40 days with a roar of his own.

**For more information on this event contact the BW/WO or go to
http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=action.cpw&item=cpw_main**