

## 4th Sunday of Lent

Lent fixates on food. Every Friday we abstain from meat. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, we also fast—eating less quantity. Throughout the year we fast one hour before receiving communion. Many Catholics accept some other Lent penance on their own: abstaining from alcohol, eliminating chocolate, or going vegetarian, for example. I once heard of a guy who gave up condiments for Lent: no salt, pepper, mustard or ketchup. He claimed this became much harder than giving up food. Some people do a non-food abstinence, such as closing down social media. When Easter arrives, so does the hard part: What abstinence do I continue? What do set aside until Ash Wednesday next year?

Halfway through Lent, our readings today fixate on food. The prodigal son decides to repent partly because he's hungry, and he envisions the pantry at home. Joshua recalls how Israel celebrated its first Passover in the Promised Land. After wandering through the desert forty years eating nothing but manna, the people arrived at their destination, where they were told to expect wonderful food. The Book of Joshua describes the menu this way: "they ate the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain." I'm sure it tasted good, but not if you're used to Kansas City barbecue. Still, if you've gone without something for a long time, when you return to it, even a little bit tastes great.

Fixating on food, Lent ultimately proves that anytime you say yes to one thing, you say no to something else. If outside Lent you say yes to food and drink in excess, you say no to good health. If during Lent you say no to certain food and drink, you say yes to better habits. The little bit you consume tastes great. You appreciate tiny sips more than slaking draughts.

In the midst of this biblical food court, we sang verses from Psalm 34 with the popular refrain, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." The Book of Psalms was composed in Hebrew, a language with 22 letters in its alphabet. A few psalms like this one have exactly 22 verses and playfully start each one with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's nearly impossible to translate that structure into English. Psalm 34 is not an unfolding narrative; it's a ruminant reflection. Our cantor sang the opening verses: "I will bless the Lord at all times.... The humble shall hear and be glad.... This lowly one called; the Lord heard, and rescued him from all his distress." These are random thoughts about getting out of trouble, praising God for it, and inviting others to share the joy.

For us Christians, verse 9 takes the cake. "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." We interpret this as a foreshadowing of holy communion in which we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, literally tasting how good God is.

We still have three weeks of Lent to make good on our resolutions. This can still be a time of tasting less if in our judgment we usually taste more than we should. When we manage more carefully our quantity of food and drink, the hours on social media, the words we say out loud, the relentless background noise from television and radio, and the replaying of resentments that overtake other thoughts—when we fast from that quantity more carefully, we'll appreciate the gifts of this world even in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. We'll fixate less on food, taste a little bit, and see the goodness of the Lord.