



Glory to God in the highest!

Dear Friends,

I expect that the season of Advent is a season of the church year that few of us associate with fasting. Lent, perhaps. *But Advent?*

There is a long history in the church of fasting during Advent, a tradition beginning in the late 4th century. It came to be known in some parts of the church as "St. Martin's Lent," named after Martin of Tours (d. 397), a revered bishop of the early church who prescribed the fast for the members of his diocese as a spiritual discipline in preparation for the celebration of the Incarnation at Christmas. As the fast became more common in Europe, its duration increased, beginning not on the First Sunday of Advent but November 11, the holy day set aside to commemorate Martin of Tours after he was made a saint.

The tradition of observing "St. Martin's Lent" continued in Europe for many centuries. A delightful Christmas carol of the late 15th century is indicative of this spiritual discipline. Called *Farewel Advent; Christmas is Cum*, we can hear in its words the relief that the fast is over, a hint of resentment that fasting was required, and a sense of boisterous joy in the festive celebration of the coming Christmas season:

*Farewell, Advent; Christmas is come;
Farewell from us both all and some.*

*With patience thou hast us fed
and made us go hungry to bed;
for lack of meat were we nigh dead;
farewell from us both all and some.*

*While thou hast been within our house
we ate no puddings or no sauce,
but stinking fish not worth a louse;
farewell from us both all and some.*

*There was no fresh fish far or near;
salt fish and salmon was too dear,
and thus we have had heavy cheer;
farewell from us both all and some.*

*Our bread was brown, our ale was thin,
our bread was musty in the bin,
our ale sour or we did begin;
farewell from us both all and some.*

(cont'd)

*The time of Christ's feast natal
we will be merry, great and small,
and thou shalt go out of this hall;
farewell from us both all and some.*

Stinking fish! Thin ale! Musty bread! Hmmmmm Not an Advent that I recognize!

I share this bit of history with you for two reasons. First, while fasting during Advent is no longer a tradition or spiritual discipline for most (it is still practiced in some Orthodox churches and is known as the Nativity Fast), its use in past centuries is a reminder to us that Christmas is a time of great spiritual significance. We proclaim that

the Word became flesh and lived among us,
that the Word still lives among us,
that yes, God is with us.

What an extraordinary thing. In times gone by, fasting prepared people in a concrete and tangible way to experience the feast of God's grace and love at Christmas. What wonder and joy the feasting would have brought! While we may not fast nowadays, may we nevertheless approach Christmas as a time of spiritual wonderment, a time of experiencing the extraordinary.

Second: there are so many who, even now, are forced by circumstance to live a fast even at Christmas time. Indeed, all year. Stinking fish, thin ale, musty bread this is their fare through no fault of their own. Jesus - the Word made flesh - had a particular love for the poor, the marginalized and the ignored. Perhaps as we feast this Christmas season we will do well to help those who live "St. Martin's Fast" on a daily basis, with no feasting on the horizon, no apparent end to the fast. Jesus is Emmanuel - God with us - for *all* people. Perhaps each of us could find a way, even a small way, to help someone end their unwanted fast and experience the Word made flesh in his or her life, proclaiming to them in concrete ways:

*Farewell, Advent; Christmas is come;
Farewell from us both all and some.*

As we come to celebrate the Christmas season, know that you are most welcome to join with us in our worship. Unlike past years, we are holding our Christmas Lessons & Carols service on the First Sunday after Christmas rather than the Sunday before Christmas. Christmas is a season of 12 days; and hearing the story of Christ's birth and responding in song is very appropriate for the Sunday following Christmas Day as we revel in God's extraordinary presence with us. If you happen to be traveling through this Christmas season and are unable to be with us, may you experience the presence of the Christ-child wherever you may be.

May *all* be fed, spiritually and tangibly, by the richness of our Christmas season.

In deep peace,

The Rev. Bruce Chalmers

Christmas at St. Mary's

Sunday, Dec. 23, 10 a.m.	Advent IV
Monday, Dec. 24, 7 p.m.	Christmas Eve Service
Sunday, Dec. 30, 10 a.m.	Festival of Christmas Lessons & Carols
Sunday, Jan. 6, 10 a.m.	Epiphany