



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The First Sunday in Lent, March 4th, 2012

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

By contrast with what goes on in Europe, our Anglican Pre-Lenten observances are dull in the extreme. The weeks before the beginning of Lent are a time of wild celebrations in France, Italy and, above all, Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Pre Lent is a time of the Carnival – known as Fasching in Germany – a party season that begins on November 11th at 11:11 AM and culminates in the actual Carnival week on the Thursday before Ash Wednesday. German Carnival parades and costume balls are held on the weekend before Ash Wednesday and on Shrove Tuesday, but mostly on Rose Monday (*Rosenmontage*), the day before Shrove Tuesday. But whatever the day, it is a time governed by the philosophy of “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we fast.”

The largest and most famous carnival takes place in the city of Cologne. Carnival Thursday – affectionately known as "Old Women Day" or "The Women's Day" – commemorates a revolt by a bunch of washer-women that took place in 1824. Today women celebrate it by storming city halls, cutting off men's ties, and kissing any man who happens to strike their fancy.

Such extravagances are almost entirely absent in the English-speaking world. The Shrove Tuesday pancake suppers and pancake races are, for Anglicans, at least, the last vestige of this ancient pre-Lenten carnival. But in the Middle Ages, our English forebears traditionally preceded the forty day fast with a veritable orgy of eating, drinking and merry-making,

Killjoy Puritans suppressed the festivities during their grim 12-years in power in the mid 17th Century. But even though the monarchy was ultimately restored the pre-Lenten festivals were never fully revived.

The suppression of the Carnival, however, doesn't seem to have made the English-speaking world any more pious than our European counterparts. Our observances during Lent are, in fact, usually by no means as painstaking as those in Europe. But then the Carnival celebrations are intended to compellingly emphasize the stark contrast between the joy of the Epiphany and the sorrows of the Lenten season.

Our restraint might, perhaps, reflect the time before Lent was the season of deep penitence. Lent, you see, is one of the oldest

of all the Church seasons. It can be traced back to the second century. Originally, it was a time in which candidates for Baptism were instructed in the Faith. And back in those days, the Sacrament of Baptism was customarily administered upon Easter Eve. Today some churches have revived this ancient custom.

In very early times, there was no set period for the Lenten Fast. Often, the period of abstinence lasted merely a couple of days. The emphasis was not on our Lord's trials and sufferings, but on His triumphant Resurrection. Lent was, thus, a time of great rejoicing not penitence. In our language, at least, its name reflects the fact: "Lent" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "spring." Lent only gradually became associated with Christ's Forty Days in the Wilderness.

The earliest surviving reference to associating it with our Lord's Temptation in the Wilderness is to be found in the Festal Letters of St. Athanasius, the orthodox bishop who played a prominent role in the Council of Nicea of 325 AD. (This is the Ecumenical Council – the council of the undivided church – that formulated the Nicene Creed.)

Lenten observances have never been uniform throughout the Church. The Eastern Churches spread the season over eight or nine weeks, while we in the West have tended to follow the Roman practice of marking a six-week fast. But if the Lenten Fast was shorter in the West than it was in the East, it was almost certainly more rigorous. In days before refrigeration, modern food-processing and factory farming, the Lenten season fell at a time when there was an acute shortage of food.

Meat was hard to find because the cattle – slaughtered and salted or smoked at the end

of the summer – had been eaten. Sheep could not be slaughtered because of the approach of the lambing season.

Eggs were unobtainable, because hens were hatching their spring broods. (Ever wondered about the origin of Easter Eggs, Easter Lamb, Easter ham and Easter Chicks? Easter coincided with the reappearance of all four commodities.) Even fish was in short supply as the winter storms made fishing difficult. Thus the majority of the population had little more fall back on than grains, vegetables and, perhaps, a little milk.

Lenten abstinences practiced by Christians today are pale in comparison with those of past generations. They accepted, uncomplainingly, just the basic necessities. We, by contrast, often take Lent as merely a welcome opportunity to shed the extra poundage accumulated over the Christmas holiday.

In fact, abstinence is often no hardship at all in these days of plenty. So may be the time has come for us to redefine our notions of fasting. To be sure, we should not entirely give up abstaining from our favorite foods, but perhaps we should start taking up things for Lent as well – something that puts to good use the money we save by fasting.

There are plenty of other good causes that are worthy recipients of your support. But there are many other things to give up beyond food and many ways to support worthy causes beyond donating money.

Folks who are really serious about observing Lent might consider giving up activities they enjoy and devoting the time they save to activities that benefit others. Who knows they might actually find themselves having a good time as a result – the Lord moves in mysterious ways. *AMEN.*