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In honor of National Poetry month, I begin with a poem entitled “Ramadan” by Muslim American poet Kazim Ali, who teaches literature and writing at the University of San Diego.

Ramadan

BY KAZIM ALI

You wanted to be so hungry, you would break into branches,
and have to choose between the starving month's
nineteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-third evenings.

The liturgy begins to echo itself and why does it matter?

If the ground-water is too scarce one can stretch nets
into the air and harvest the fog.

Hunger opens you to illiteracy,
thirst makes clear the starving pattern,
the thick night is so quiet, the spinning spider pauses,
the angel stops whispering for a moment—

The secret night could already be over,
you will have to listen very carefully—

You are never going to know which night's mouth is sacredly reciting
and which night's recitation is secretly mere wind—

-The Fortieth Day (BOA Editions Ltd., 2008)

The spring holy days of the Abrahamic faiths are upon us once again: Lent and Holy Week, Passover, and Ramadan. It's a rare year when the Christian, Jewish and Muslim festivals occur in such close proximity. These festivals all have one thing in common: the practice of giving up life essentials for a temporary period of time. For the seven days of Passover, Jews give up leavened bread and all things that have “chametz” or yeast. The matzo represents



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the “bread of affliction,” a reminder that in fleeing Egypt there was no time to wait for the bread to rise. From sunrise to sunset during the Holy Month of Ramadan, Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intimacy. Christians observing Lent typically approach this 40 day period as a time of giving up things that people tend to overdo—sweets, alcohol, fried foods, red meat.

During this spiritually rich time of year, Unitarian Universalists seek to find our place in the religious landscape. We perhaps feel most comfortable identifying with some of the European Pagan traditions which have mingled with Christian practices. The word Lent originates from the Old English word *lencdene*, or length, referring to the lengthening of days in springtime. Ancient agriculturally based cultures approached this time of the year with reverence and asceticism. They had a very practical fear that the spring would not return, and that food would be scarce until the spring harvest time again. Pagan traditions celebrated “Oester” or “Ostara” with ritual and feasts that celebrate the German fertility Goddess of the same name, which many say is the origin of the Christian festival of “Easter.”

Within the cycle of the European Christian calendar, spring was a special time where God's favor and life-giving energy returned to the world in abundance after the winter's dormancy. Twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, whose compositions we heard earlier, likened God to a life-force she called “Veritas” or “greening.” “ I am the breeze that nurtures all things green” Hildegard wrote. “I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.”

Where the patchwork quilt of European Paganism and Christian practice begins to get interesting is when you begin to read the biblical accounts of the season of Lent. These are not seasonal stories of winter turning to spring, but a very different view into a foreign landscape: the desert wilderness. These are some of the wilder stories of the Bible, with some



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of the more supernatural elements that tend to put religious liberals on alarm. Jesus is tested and tried spiritually before the trials of his public ministry. Mark's version tells the story this way:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:9-12 NRSV)

Matthew's version says:

"And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry." Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, "If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:2-4 NRSV)

Our spring-loving European Pagans would have had no concept of the desert, except the privileged few who went on pilgrimage. But they would have related to Jesus' suffering—they would have known firsthand what it meant to starve and deny the body its basic needs.

Fasting, in particular, removes one's constant orientation towards the social and practical dimensions of food. Think about how much time we spend in the preparation and consumption of food. The practice of fasting creates in the body an emptiness, a spiritual desert, waiting to be filled. Perhaps the consequence of poverty became a spiritual



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practice to connect with a deep, clarifying suffering in which the body becomes a kind of spiritual wilderness in itself.

Rick Hamlin is a Pasadena native and prolific author on the history of Pasadena as well as reflections on his journey as a Christian. In a 2018 opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, he asks the question “what will you give up for Lent?”

You can see why the idea of giving up stuff is linked to this period — “fasting” as Jesus did in the desert. Indeed, many people (Christians) give up certain foods, going without chocolate or red wine or desserts. A little bit of self-imposed suffering to mark the season and a reason to kick up your heels with chocolate eggs and jelly beans when Easter finally rolls around. Even if you’re not a Christian, the idea of going without for 40 days is not so bad.

-Hamlin, R. (2018, February 14). What will you give up for Lent? *New York Times*.

But there’s something else in this Gospel story that I’d rather honor.

What does it mean to wander in the wilderness for 40 days and nights and face your demons? How would I do that today?

How do you give up all distractions and listen to that inner voice that tells you what you need to be doing but you can’t quite face yet? The idea fills me with a weird combination of joy and dread.

We Unitarian Universalists aren’t big on practices of self-denial. But for this solemn Holy Week before Easter, I want to invite you to think about giving up something significant for you. It could be something that in excess is making you suffer in your life. It could be a pattern that is destructive and holding you back. It could be something that helps you to appreciate what privileges and comforts you have. It could be something that as an act of justice puts



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you in touch with the deep suffering of others. Only you know what might make a difference in your life if you gave it up, even for a few days. Ask yourself “who am I with and without this thing, and what does abstaining from it tell me about what I value most?” Tell someone in your life about what you’ll give up, whether it’s your spouse, a family member or a friend at church. And on Easter, allow yourself to add it back to your life. And see what perspective you might gain.

Finally, when the season of Ramadan comes around in just a few weeks, I wonder if there is energy in the congregation to consider taking up a fast in solidarity with our Muslim neighbors. Muslim poet Kazim Ali writes: “It’s always easier to fast with another person. We feed each other our hunger.”

As you enter into this Holy week, try to remember that this invitation is not about punishment or renunciation, but transformation. The wilderness is not a place where we are banished to forever, but a place we, like our ancestors and friends in faith, travel through to reach a deeper sense of freedom.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet proclaims:

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls,

because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people,

the people I formed that they may proclaim praise.

-Isaiah 43: 19-21

Amen, and blessed be.

**Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church**



Prepare the Way
Rev. Lissa Gundlach
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