



Journeying Through Lent 2009

Ash Wednesday
February 25, 2009
The Journey Begins

Use this resource alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflections aloud, pausing between them. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance for larger groups. Share with each other your Lenten commitments and promises, keeping within the silence of your own heart those things which belong only there.

Opening Ritual and Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others after a hectic day.

Leader: Let us remember we are in the holy presence of God.

All: We welcome you God and ask that you be with us today.

Leader: Gracious and compassionate God, open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds to you throughout this Lenten season.

All: Amen

An Invitation from God

Lent begins with an invitation from God: “Come back to me, with all your heart” (see Joel 2:12). Our Lenten journey is our RSVP to God.

The Word “Lent”

Interestingly, the word “lent” comes from Old English through Middle English to modern English. Looking at it’s origin “lent” is a shortening of the word “lengthen,” used to describe the increasing amount of daylight each day. It was used to describe the harbinger of spring and new life.

When we think of spring we often think of sap running in trees, buds opening, green grass, tulips & daffodils popping out of the ground but we also think of spring cleaning. Lent is a time for spiritual spring cleaning. We clean out the clutter that has accumulated in our lives to make more room for God and one another.

Historical Factoid: Lent

Church historians tell us that there is enough evidence to indicate that by the end of the fourth century, a forty day period of fasting was observed in parts of the church in commemoration of Christ’s forty days in the desert. But then Lent developed into a

penitential season for preparing for Easter. By the end of the fourth century Lent had two emphases: it was the time of formation and preparation for the catechumens (those seeking entrance into the church) who would be baptized at the Easter vigil on Holy Saturday; and it was a time of reconciliation for those members of the church whose sins had separated them from God and the church.

With time the shape and understanding of Lent changed. The public reconciliation of penitents died out, as did the catechumenate. Lent had shifted from a season of baptismal renewal to a liturgical season of fasting.

The Fathers (Bishops) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for the restoration of the original meaning of Lent. Here is what the bishops had to say about Lent in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*:

“The season of Lent is both a time of preparation for baptism and a time of penance for the faithful, in both cases to prepare for Easter. Hence the practice of penance should be fostered in ways that suit our time and the local region.” (#’s 109-110 of *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, in Vatican II in Plain English* Volume 2, page 116)

What the document makes clear is that as a church our Lenten priorities should be: the catechumens’ preparation for baptism, and the renewal of the faithful in their baptismal commitment. Our repentance during Lent is to be individual and private as well as communal and public.

Liturgical Mathematics: Counting Forty Days

Mathematically speaking there are 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. So how did we get 40? Well not by means of math but by theology. Every Sunday, is Easter, even during the Lenten season, for every Sunday is a memorial of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we subtract the six Sundays of Lent from the total we end up with 40.

Lenten Practices

Catholics are encouraged in Lent to cultivate three religious practices: fasting and abstinence, prayer, almsgiving. The purpose of our Lenten practices is to discipline ourselves to be attuned to the activity of God in our lives.

What does it mean to fast?

Fasting is making do with less food. The result of not eating so much and getting hungry is that we have a heightened sense of awareness. When we eat too much we have a sluggish feeling, when we fast we are more alert and open to the activities of God in our life. Fasting cleanses our bodies and prepares us to pray more deeply.

“*The merit of a fast day is in the charity dispensed then.*” *The Talmud*

When do we fast?

Catholics are required to fast only two days a year: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This means that on these days we eat only one full meal with no food in-between meals. It is understood that if one eats three meals a day the two other meals should not total one full meal. Of course, everyone is free to fast at any other time as an aid for prayer and reflection.

What does it mean to Abstain?

To abstain is to refrain from eating meat as an act of penance and sacrifice. Since innumerable people in the world cannot afford to eat meat, our abstaining from eating it can put us in solidarity with the poor of the world.

When do we Abstain?

Catholics in the United States abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. This does not include abstaining from eggs and dairy products. All Catholics who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence.

Ask Yourself

What Lenten practices will I remain faithful to doing this Lent?

Prayer

Prayer is described as the raising of the mind and heart to God or conversing with God. Lent is a time to make a conscious effort to pray more and with greater regularity. There are many ways to pray in Lent.

Sunday Eucharist. The celebration of the Eucharist is considered the source and summit of Catholic prayer. Actively preparing for the Sunday Eucharist by reading the assigned Scripture readings ahead of time can be part of one's Lenten discipline. Some Catholics even choose to celebrate Mass more often than just Sunday during Lent.

Daily Prayer. Lent is a time to pray as an individual, as a family and as a faith community. Set aside time daily for your own personal prayer time and space. Pray as a family at meals. Bless one another as you leave your home in the morning and before you go to bed at night. One of the simplest and most natural gestures is to trace a cross on a

loved one's forehead. It speaks volumes to a young child when a parent gives him or her this sign of love and prayer.

"The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give us the grace to labor for." St. Thomas More

Praying with the Bible. Choose a quiet place and allow yourself some quality time to pray a psalm from the Bible each day of Lent. The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible and the church. Lent is a time when you can make it your prayer book.

Make a Retreat. A retreat can be described as a voluntary stopping of workaday actions and a special commitment to prayer, silence, and reflection. A retreat is a temporary withdrawal from normal activities in order to get in touch with God and experience spiritual renewal. Retreats can be as short as a day or longer if chosen. In Lent you could contact a retreat house in your area where you could make your own retreat.

Pilgrimage. During Lent make a pilgrimage to a holy place that is nearby: a place of natural beauty, a cemetery where loved ones are buried, a monastery, a priory, a cathedral, the church in which you were baptized or married. When you arrive, center yourself and pray in your own way in the holy place.

Spiritual Reading. St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines saw reading as a prayerful activity. He required each of his monks to read a book during Lent. Anyone can practice spiritual reading in Lent. Select books that deal with Sacred Scripture, biographies of saintly people, books on prayer or sacraments or ones that deal with developing a deeper spiritual life. Reading has the ability to deepen one's prayer life.

Ask Yourself

What will I do to deepen my prayer life this Lent?

Almsgiving

"Almsgiving is the mother of love, of that love that is characteristic of Christianity." John Chrysostom, Fourth Century Bishop

Almsgiving is much more than giving money to the poor or to your favorite charity. It is all the things we can do to make the broken world whole again. The aim of giving alms is to right the wrong distribution caused by greed or power or whatever else. The three modes of giving alms are: time, talent, and treasure.

Time. In our fast pace world, time is the alms that is hardest to give whether it is a parent or a grandparent giving that alms to a child generously and regularly, or a person volunteering time at a food shelf or a womens shelter, or a person taking time to tutor adults in a literacy program, or citizens lobbying legislators for affordable housing for the poor. To give freely and generously of our time is a healthy practice of Lenten almsgiving.

Ask Yourself

I will generously give of my time this Lent to...

Talent. Everyone has been blessed by God with talents. We can practice the talent alms by cooking a meal for a terminally ill person or an elderly shut-in. We can use the talents of our hands by helping to fix up a person's home or doing some spring cleaning for them. We can drive people to medical appointments, shop for the elderly and infirm. Lent is a time to both inventory the talents we have and to make use of them.

Ask Yourself

This Lent I will use my talents to...

Treasure. How do you share your treasures, both the things you own and the money you earn? Could you live for less if it meant it would feed the hungry of your community? What donations could you make to charity this Lent? Are you keeping up with the pledges you have made to your alma mater? To your parish? Could you forgive someone a monetary debt they owe you?

Ask Yourself

This Lent I will share my treasures and be more generous toward...

Historical Factoid: Ash Wednesday

It is just amazing how many people come to church on Ash Wednesday. People come to be reminded that they are dust and unto dust they shall return; to be admonished to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

In the early church, when the season of Lent was a time period for reconciliation of public sinners, the penitents would come to church at the start of Lent, wearing a penitential garment, suggesting sackcloth, an Old Testament symbol for seeking repentance. They were sprinkled with ashes ritually dismissed from the assembly to do their penance for forty days, returning to church on Holy Thursday. With time the dismissing of penitents disappeared, but the ashes remained as a reminder and call to penance of all the faithful. The act of imposing ashes symbolizes human mortality and fragility and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God.

You are encouraged to read aloud the Scripture Readings for Ash Wednesday:

Joel 2:12-18

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Reflection

Lent calls us to return to the image of God that we were fashioned to reflect.

Ashes are the end product of a fire that has burnt out. There are times in our lives when the glowing fire of our faith has burnt out. Ash Wednesday is a time to reflect on what we need to rekindle in our relationship with God and one another. Whenever people are marked with ashes, the symbolism is that during the Lenten season they are to turn their hearts back to God, repent of their sinful ways and embrace the way of the Lord.

The first reading for Ash Wednesday is from the prophet Joel. In it we hear God's call for the people of Israel to repent, to return to the Lord. The prophet has God pleading his case before the people: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting weeping and mourning: Rend your hearts not your garments, and return to the Lord your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich and kindness." The entire assembly/congregation is called together to repent---the aged, infants, children, men and women.

How do we do this? We do it by being creative and imaginative in fasting and performing acts of mercy and compassion---imitating God. Our God is compassionate; we are called to be compassionate. Our God is a reconciler; we are called to be reconcilers. Our God forgives, we are called to forgive. Lent is the season of returning to the image of God that we were fashioned to reflect. It is a time when we work anew at being reconcilers, peacemakers, prophets, those who speak on behalf of God and Christ.

The Ash Wednesday Gospel reading comes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It provides the biblical foundation for the churches traditions and teachings about Lent—fasting, prayer, and almsgiving which were traditional practices of the Jewish people and of Jesus himself a Jew. Fasting and almsgiving touch on two fundamental drives of human life for nourishment and ownership. Sacrificing them requires an act of trust in God that is sustained only by prayer. Jesus admonishes his disciples and all of us not to show and tell everyone how we fast, pray and give alms. He calls this behavior hypocritical. The Greek word “hypocrite” means an actor on a stage. Lent is not a time to show off our Lenten discipline for an audience to applaud, but rather we do this secretly for only God to see. As we journey through Lent let us remember that our goal is to return to God.

Closing Prayer

Leader: God come and journey with us this Lent

All: Be our guide as we travel.

Leader: Help us to follow in your ways and to stay on your path.

All: May you always be our companion, especially throughout these 40 days of Lent.

Leader: God, may your breath be the wind behind us and your presence before us as we journey.

All: Amen