



Introduction to Lent 2009

Questions about Lent

Q: What is the Lenten season, and why is it set apart?

A: It is a period of six weeks preceding the anniversary of the Savior's death and resurrection, and is set apart as a special season of fasting, penitence, and prayer. We do these things to identify with Jesus' suffering.

Q: Why is the first day of Lent called Ash Wednesday?

A: It is called so from the custom that prevailed in the early church of sprinkling ashes on the heads of penitent believers on the first day of Lent to represent humiliation and sorrow for sin.

Q: How should the Lenten season be observed by Christians?

A: As a special season for drawing near to God by extraordinary acts of penitence, charity and religious devotion, and by fasting and abstinence from all things that tend to draw the heart away from God.

Q: What is the object of keeping Lent?

A: To deepen the spiritual life, to purify the heart from sin, and to unite us more closely to the Savior.

Lenten Themes and Distinctions

Lent is all about identifying with Jesus in his suffering and ultimately in his death and resurrection. Our sermons from Luke will move "liturgically" through the narrative, following Jesus as he moves toward Jerusalem and his impending death. The various fasts we may observe are designed to help us identify with Jesus' suffering but can also have other positive effects.

As we've been learning in our Luke Sermon Series, the Gospel is not exclusively about us. In light of this, we desire our participation in the season of Lent to mark not only our own hearts and our own relationships with the Lord but also to make a difference in the lives of those around us and those we may never even meet. Through a partnership with Lifewater International, we invite you to participate in Significant Sacrifice by attaching a monetary value to the item(s) from which you choose to fast. Together, we will donate 100% of the funds raised to provide clean water, sanitation, and hygiene education to those around the world who lack these basic needs we so often take for granted.

Lent is also about "paring down" or simplifying our lives. We do this to embrace renewed quietness and re-center our lives on God. We desire this "turning away" to be accompanied by a "turning toward" God in the form of various disciplines; simplicity, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, almsgiving, and self-sacrifice. Traditionally, Lent was the season of preparation for those who would be baptized at the Easter Vigil Service. Mirroring this tradition, Pearl will include baptisms for those interested in our Holy Saturday Easter Vigil Service on April 11th. For more details, contact Mike Roth (miker@pearlchurch.com). You may notice that the tone of our Sunday services is quieter and less celebratory than at other times of year. Progressively, more time is given to silence during our services in an effort to keep continuity with the season and make space for deeper reflection.

Readings for Reflection

“A Look Inside” by Edna Hong

“Did you ever look inside yourself and see what you are not?” the crippled daughter in one of Flannery O’Connor’s short stories shouts at her spiritually crippled mother. Few of us have looked long enough into ourselves to see that what seems to us and to others as normally attractive is actually as graceless as a scarecrow and even repulsive. It is an easy matter for the physical eye to spot physical deformity and blemishes in others and in oneself. It is not so easy for the eye of the spirit to spot a spiritual dwarf, hunchback, or cripple, although it is easier to see these spiritual deformities in others than oneself.

...But to spot it in one’s self is not only difficult but painful, and no one wants to take the descending path to that naked, unvarnished truth, with all its unacceptable humiliations. It is much more comfortable to stay on the level of the plain and ordinary, to go on being just plain and ordinary. Yet it is to this path that Lent invites us.

The reason Lent is so long is that this path to the truth of oneself is long and snagged with thorns, and at the very end one stands alone before the broken body crowned with thorns upon the cross. All alone – with not one illusion or self-delusion to prop one up. Yet not alone, for the Spirit of Holiness, who is also the Spirit of Helpfulness, is beside you and me. Indeed, this Spirit has helped to maneuver you and me down that dark, steep path to this crucial spot.

...But the spirit of truth does not seek comfort. The purpose of Lent is not to escape the conscience, but to create a healthy hatred for evil, a heartfelt contrition for sin, and a passionately felt need for grace. This continuous movement of faith from a sense of sin to grace and forgiveness ends only when the spirit is ultimately released.

...The purpose of Lent is to arouse. To arouse the sense of sin. To arouse a sense of guilt for sin. To arouse the humble contrition for the guilt of sin that makes forgiveness possible. To arouse the sense of gratitude for the forgiveness of sins. To arouse or to motivate the works of love and the work for justice that one does out of gratitude for the forgiveness of one’s sins.

...In other words, a guilty suffering spirit is more open to grace than an apathetic or smug soul. Therefore, an age without a sense of sin, in which people are not even sorry for not being sorry for their sins, is in a rather serious predicament. Likewise an age with a Christianity so eager to forgive that it denies the need for forgiveness. For such an age, therefore, Lent can scarcely be too long!

“I have found only one religion that dares to go down with me into the depth of myself,” wrote G. K. Chesterton. And it is true. No other religion dares to take me *down* to the new beginning. Hence Lent is not a tediously long brooding over sin. Lent is a journey that could be called an upward descent, but I prefer to call it a downward ascent. It ends before the cross, where we stand in the white light of a new beginning....

Edna Hong, “A Look Inside,” from The Downward Ascent. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, copyright © 1979 by Augsburg Publishing House.

“Living Lent” by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

We didn't even know what moderation was. What it felt like. We didn't just work: we inhaled our jobs, sucked them in, *became* them. Stayed late, brought work home – it was never enough, though, no matter how much time we put in.

We didn't just smoke: we lit up a cigarette, only to realize that we already had one going in the ashtray. We ordered things we didn't need from the shiny catalogs that came to our houses: we ordered three times as much as we could use, and then we ordered three times as much as our children could use. We didn't just eat: we stuffed ourselves. We had gained only three pounds since the previous year, we told ourselves. Three pounds is not a lot. We had gained about that much in each of the twenty-five years since high school. We did not do the math. We redid living rooms in which the furniture was not worn out. We threw away clothing that was merely out of style.

...We felt that it was important to be good to ourselves, and that this meant that it was dangerous to tell ourselves no. About anything, ever. Repression of one's desires was an unhealthy thing. *I work hard*, we told ourselves. *I deserve a little treat*. We treated ourselves every day.

And if it was dangerous for us to want and not have, it was even more so for our children. They must never know what it is to want something and not have it immediately. It will make them bitter, we told ourselves. So we anticipated their needs and desires. We got them both the doll and the bike. If their grades were good, we got them their own telephones.

There were times, coming into the house from work or waking early when all was quiet, when we felt uneasy about the sense of entitlement that characterized all our days. When we wondered if fevered overwork and excess of appetite were not two sides of the same coin – or rather, two poles between which we madly slalomed. *Probably yes*, we decided at these times. Suddenly we saw it all clearly: *I am driven by my creatures – my schedule, my work, my possessions, my hungers. I do not drive them; they drive me. Probably yes. Certainly yes. This is how it is*. We arose and did twenty sit-ups. The next day the moment had passed; we did none.

After moments like that, we were awash in self-contempt. *You are weak. Self-indulgent. You are spineless about work and about everything else. You set no limits. You will become ineffective*. We bridled at that last bit, drew ourselves up to our full heights, insisted defensively on our competence, on the respect we were due because of all our hard work. We looked for others whose lives were similarly overstuffed; we found them. “This is just the way it is,” we said to one another on the train, in the restaurant. “This is modern life. Maybe some people have time to measure things by teaspoonfuls.” Our voices dripped contempt for those people who had such time. We felt oddly defensive, though no one had accused us of anything. *But not me. Not anyone who has a life. I have a life. I work hard. I play hard*.

When did the collision between our appetites and the needs of our souls happen? Was there a heart attack? Did we get laid off from work, one of the thousands certified as extraneous? Did a beloved child become a bored stranger, a marriage fall silent and cold? Or, by some exquisite working of God's grace, did we just find the courage to look the truth in the eye and, for once, not blink? How did we come to know that we were dying a slow and unacknowledged death? And that the only way back to life was to set all our packages down and begin again, carrying with us only what we really needed?

We travail. We are heavy laden. Refresh us, O homeless, jobless, possession-less Savior. You came naked, and naked you go. And so it is for us. So it is for all of us.

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, “Living Lent,” from Living Lent: Meditations for These Forty Days, copyright © 1998 by Barbara Crafton.

“The Relinquished Life” by Oswald Chambers

No one is ever united with Jesus Christ until he is willing to relinquish not sin only, but his whole way of looking at things. To be bore from above of the Spirit of God means that we must let go before we lay hold, and in the first stages it is the relinquishing of all pretense. What our Lord wants us to present to him is not goodness, nor honesty, nor endeavor, but real, solid sin; that is all he can take from us. And what does he give in exchange for our sin? Real, solid righteousness. But we must relinquish all pretense of being anything, all claim of being worthy of God’s consideration.

Then the Spirit of God will show us what further there is to relinquish. There will have to be the relinquishing of my claim to my right to myself in every phase. Am I willing to relinquish my hold on all I possess, my hold on my affections, and on everything, and to be identified with the death of Jesus Christ?

The imperative need spiritually is to sign the death warrant of the disposition of sin, to turn all emotional impressions and intellectual beliefs into a moral verdict against the disposition of sin, *viz*, my claim to my right to myself. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ”; he does not say, “I have determined to imitate Jesus Christ” or, “I will endeavor to follow Him” but, “I have been *identified* with Him in His death.” When I come to such a moral decision and act upon it, then all that Christ wrought *for* me on the Cross is wrought *in* me. The free committal of myself to God gives the Holy Spirit the chance to impart to me the holiness of Jesus Christ.

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Other Resources

Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter. Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003.

Webber, Robert E. *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004.