

Journey through Lent

Ash Wednesday • February 17, 2021

Opening 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 even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Leader: Let us remember that we are always 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.

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (Joel 2:12-18)

- ▶ The prophet challenges the people to return wholeheartedly to God.
- ▶ He encourages the whole congregation—children and adults—to proclaim and live a fast so as to show God their willingness to return to him.

Second Reading (2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2)

- ▶ Paul challenges the Corinthian Church and all of us to be ambassadors for Christ.
- ▶ He goes on to challenge everyone to be reconciled to God and not to accept the grace of God in vain.

Gospel Reading (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

- ▶ This passage is all about prayer, fasting, and giving alms.

Reflections

Rekindling Our Relationship with God and One Another

Ashes are the end product of a fire that has burnt out. All that remains are carbon compounds and other trace particles. When a house is burnt to the ground or a log is burnt up in a fireplace, a heap of ashes is left behind. These need to be cleaned up. Lent is a time for cleaning up the ashes of our lives. The symbolism of smearing ashes on a human head reminds us that there are times when the glowing fire of our faith has diminished or burned out. Ash Wednesday is a time to reflect on what we need to rekindle in our relationship with God and one another.

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, and 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 in kindness and relenting in punishment." The Hebrew word for repentance is "to turn." Ash Wednesday calls us to turn away from those things that separate us from God and one another, and to reconcile with one another and return to the Lord.

How do we do this today and throughout Lent? We do it by 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. Our God is holy. We are called to be holy. Lent is the season of returning to the God that we were fashioned to reflect.

It is a time when we work anew at being reconcilers, peacemakers, forgivers, holy people, and prophets, those who speak on behalf of God and Christ.

Gospel Challenges for Lent

The Ash Wednesday Gospel reading comes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus outlines what it means to be one of his disciples. The Gospel passage provides the biblical foundation for the church's traditions and teachings about Lent—fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which were traditional practices of the Jewish people and of Jesus himself, who was a Jew.

Fasting, not Dieting

Fasting is making do with less food. It is not the same as dieting. Dieting has as its purpose the loss of weight and improved health. Not so with fasting. Fasting, the result of not eating so much and getting hungry, provides a heightened sense of awareness. When we fast from food we are more alert and open to the activities of God in our life. Fasting from food cleanses our bodies and prepares us to pray more deeply. Fasting is not limited to food. It also includes fasting from anger, pessimism, worry, complaining, hostility, bitterness, idle gossip, arrogance, lying, and fault finding.

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is much more than giving money to the poor or to your favorite charity. It is all the things we can do by means of our time, talent, and treasure to make the broken world whole again. Fasting and almsgiving require an act of trust in God that is sustained only by prayer.

Prayer

Prayer can be described as raising the mind and heart to God or conversing with God. Lent is a time to make a conscious, daily effort to pray more and with greater regularity. 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. Rather it is only for God to see. As we journey through Lent, let us remember that our goal is to return to God. God invites us to, “come back to me with all your heart, soul, and mind.” Regular disciplined prayer will help us to return.

Lent and Self-Denial

Our Lenten practice is not about self-denial for its own sake or self-aggrandizement. Put another way, Lent is not a time to go on a diet, so as to look good on Easter. Jesus warns us in the Gospel reading: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.” We do not publicly share what foods or behaviors or habits we give up for Lent so that others can praise us for our choices. Rather, our Lenten practices are directed toward renewing our relationship with others, and God. We do this through acts of charity, prayer, and fasting. Our Lenten practices are not done for self-reward but for the sake of returning to God wholeheartedly. Lent is a time for a heart-to-heart talk with God. The Gospel teachings about Lent make clear that renewed relationships with God and one another can only be realized through the self-denial that turns us away from ourselves. Lent is that time of the year when we deny ourselves so that we may better give of ourselves.

Lent and Its Challenges

The Scripture readings for this first day of Lent challenge us to do a little “well.” It is far better to do a little well than to take on a whole lot and in the end not have deepened our relationship with God, renewed our relationships with others, and formed a good, new, spiritual habit. The question we may want to ask ourselves on Holy Saturday, as we prepare to celebrate Easter, is whether we have discovered God in new and more life giving ways. Our dying to unhealthy habits and behaviors during Lent is for the sole purpose of coming to new life in God who is “gracious and merciful... slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment.” Our dying during Lent is the work of forming daily spiritual habits that lead us to new relationships with God and others.

Since Lent is a time when we are challenged to strengthen our relationships with God and one another, we may wonder where we can turn for suggestions and guidance. Perhaps one place is the Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially paragraphs 1435–37. The Catechism suggests “gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of one’s faults to one’s brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one’s cross each day” (1435). In addition, Lent is a time to celebrate the Eucharist regularly, to daily read Sacred Scripture, and to pray.

For Reflection

1. How will you turn away from being self-centered and reach out toward others this Lent?
2. How, this Lent, can you rearrange your schedule each day to provide time for prayer?
3. What specific aspects of your time, talent, and treasure will you share with others this Lent?
4. The Ash Wednesday Gospel reading comes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus outlines what it means to be one of his disciples. This Lent, reread the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7).

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.

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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