

The First Days of Lent

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* Feb 26: Ash Wednesday

Call to Worship

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."

[JOEL 2:1-2, 12-13]

Confession

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.

[PSALM 51:1-2,6,10-12]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

[MARK 8:27-30]

DEVOTIONAL

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The aim of Ash Wednesday is threefold: to meditate on our mortality, sinfulness, and need for a savior; to renew our commitment to daily repentance in all of life; and to remember with confidence and gratitude that Jesus has conquered sin and death. Our worship today should be filled with gospel truth because it is a witness to the power and beauty of our union with Christ and to the daily dying and rising with Christ that comes with this unity.

During a traditional Ash Wednesday service, ashes are applied to the worshiper's forehead (the "imposition") in the shape of a cross. In Scripture ashes or dust symbolize

mortality (Gen. 18:27), mourning (Est. 4:3), judgment (Lam. 3:16), and repentance (Jon. 3:6). An ashen cross serves as a reminder that you come from dust and to dust you shall return one day. It is also a call to “Consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11).

As you begin this journey of Lent, you must start with rending your heart—tearing it from self-absorption and binding yourself (mind and devotion) to Jesus. Regardless of your current state or your proneness to wander, you must “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13). After all, Lent is not about your faithfulness, but rather about the faithfulness of Jesus on your behalf. He is the faithful One!

REFLECTION

1. *Spend some time being still before God, asking the Spirit to search you: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24).*
2. *What hesitations or hindrances do you have in beginning this journey of Lent?*
3. *What habits/tendencies of self-absorption do you need to tear yourself from?*

Closing Prayer

Journey with us, O holy God, as we begin our way to the cross. Sharpen our focus, that our attention may center more on you than ourselves. Lead us through the shadows of darkness and prepare our hearts, that we might be a people of prayer, ready to perceive and respond to your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

[PSALM 145:14-21]

Confession

Holy and merciful Father, we confess to you ... that we have sinned by our own fault in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us ... We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

[BCP]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

[MARK 8:31-38]

DEVOTIONAL

The Lenten season is a time of preparation and repentance in which we make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus' passion and celebrating Jesus' resurrection. It can be a deeply meaningful journey so long as we get past mere externalities.

You may be familiar with the outward aspects of Lent: ashes on foreheads, conversation about giving up sugar or caffeine or TV. But Lent, like spiritual life in general, is not merely external. There are internal realities that give depth and meaning to our actions, things like humility, sacrifice, repentance, and faith. In other words, there is more to Lent than deciding between coffee and TV.

You could, of course, just decide that you are not going to drink coffee for forty days and be done with it, but to do so would be to deprive yourself of far more than coffee. You would miss something that God wants to do *in* you this season.

Jesus fasted from food and water for forty days in the wilderness. It was not a religious ritual or merely a display of his restraint. Rather, it was a time of trial and temptation which he endured by entrusting himself to God and being nourished on the Word of God. The point of the wilderness, for Jesus, was to experience the real presence of God with him, and power of God at work in him.

Though they may look the same from the outside, participating in Lent and “playing” at Lent are entirely different realities. So give up coffee if you want to, but don’t pretend that the absence of a beverage will sufficiently help you draw near to God.

The Lenten practice of denying usual comforts is a means of deepening our sense of union with Jesus, and reorienting our life around the things of God. We give up that which distracts and entangles because we want to experience some real joy and freedom in Christ.

When considering what to give up for Lent, begin with whatever habits or things lie at the heart of your consumer lifestyle. Forsake them for the sake of being consumed by the God-life. Lent is not about what we do for Christ. It is about plumbing the depths of what he has done for us.

REFLECTION

1. *In what areas of your life have you settled for the appearance of godliness?*
2. *In what ways do you sense a need for the Spirit of God to make Jesus real to you?*

Closing Prayer

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Teach us, Lord, to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[BASED ON PSALM 90]

Call to Worship

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

[ISAIAH 40:3-8]

Confession

Most merciful God whose Son, Jesus Christ, was tempted in every way, yet was without sin, we confess before you our own sinfulness; we have hungered after that which does not satisfy; we have compromised with evil; we have doubted your power to protect us. Forgive our lack of faith; have mercy on our weakness. Restore in us such trust and love that we may walk in your ways and delight in doing your will. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

[MARK 9:1-8]

DEVOTIONAL

At the onset of Jesus' ministry, John announced his coming in fulfillment of Isaiah 40: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." This is the cry of Lent: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make room for him in your thoughts and activities and affections.

An appropriate response to this announcement is to take stock of our lives, to reconsider how we are living our lives in light of God's presence and power made available to us in Jesus. And that is what Lent is for, to reflect on our lives as they are and as they could be.

Giving up a habit or a food or a pleasure is not distinctly Christian. People give up things all the time in the name of self-help, or worse, vanity and vengeance. The point of Lent is to reorient life God-ward. This reorientation has to do with desert and wilderness.

A "wilderness experience" in our language usually means one has been gone for a while and now returns with new insight or perspective, "a new lease on life." Whether it is a trip to the third world, or a hike in the mountains, people are stripped of their usual comforts, removed from the safety of familiarity, and are forced to see the world from a different vantage point.

Our aim during Lent is something like a wilderness experience. We want to shake up our lives significantly enough that when we reach for our usual comforts and grasp a fistful of air, we are forced to cling to Christ – his body, his blood. We want to see just how upside down our world really is as our "important things" prove to be perishable goods, as the light shines on our "righteousness" and exposes the layers of "self" beneath the surface, and as our "busy" lives are shown to simply lack wisdom.

The desire is a new lease on life, a view into the vast world of God, a deep breath and long look above the tree line of self-absorption. So in Lent we focus on getting away from the life of flesh and into the life of the Spirit, denying our ways and embracing God's.

The point of giving things up is not to be reminded of how much we miss them, but rather to be awakened to how much we miss God and long for his life-giving Spirit. This means, of course, that Lent is not only about giving up things. It is also about adding things, God-things.

- » Having given up junk food for a healthy diet, what will you do with the energy you gain?
- » Having given up reading magazines, what will you read now?
- » Having given up Facebook, to whom will you devote meaningful conversation?
- » Having given up lunch, how will you rely on God for the strength of "food from heaven"?
- » Having given up TV as a default activity, how will you use that time to cultivate quality family time?
- » Having given up isolation, how will you immerse yourself in community?
- » Having given up shopping, will you see those who need clothing in your city?
- » Having sacrificed whatever form of selfishness you indulge, how will you meet the needs of others?

The practice of giving something up for Lent is a way of entering into the wilderness with Jesus. Don't worry about whether or not your sacrifice is a good one. It's not a contest. Just make your aim to know Christ more fully, and trust him to lead you. Seek to replace that thing with devotion to Christ—his Word and his mission. God may lead you to give up and take up more as you go. That's good. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.

REFLECTION

1. *What measures will you take to reorient your life around the things of God during this season?*
2. *What will you give up? What will you add?*

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, we come to you today realizing that we are not how you want us to be. Help us let go of our past, that we may turn toward you and live again the life of faith. Help us call out our fear and hatred, our anger and self-pity. Lift the burden they place on our shoulders. Help us set aside our guilt and enter a season of healing. As we pray and fast today, help us become simple people, that we may see you plainly. Let us draw near to you now. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Let us look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

[HEBREWS 12:2-3]

Confession

God of exodus and wilderness, God of refuge and help, hear us now as we make our confession to you. In times of temptation we forget what you have done for us. You give us everything we need, yet we often remain unsatisfied; you trust us to care for creation, yet we often abuse that trust and spoil what we have been given. You show us the way we are to follow, yet we often continue on the path of self-indulgence and self-centeredness. Forgive us, we pray. We ask for your direction, your patience, your love, in the name of Jesus Christ, who, in spite of his temptations, was faithful to your saving Word. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

[MARK 9:9-13]

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a journey that ends with resurrection, but by way of the desert and the cross. Anyone who takes it seriously quickly discovers the challenge of entering into this wilderness. It is not a casual shift—we must devote ourselves to it as a matter of the heart. Nor is it a sudden shift—we have to unravel the entangled habits of our bodies, and make ready our preoccupied minds. In these first few days, we have been trying to downshift slowly and thoughtfully from our normal routine into the rhythms of Lent.

There are perhaps a few groups of people at this point: latecomers, early goers, and those who are neither here nor there.

Latecomers: If Lent were a party, you just walked in the door and aren't quite sure what has already been said and done. Part of you wants to blend in like you know what you are doing, and part of you wonders if you should just go home and try to make it on time next year. Good news for you: The Lent party is a gospel party! The gospel of Jesus does not discriminate against when or how you got here. It only beckons you to come as you are.

What should you do now that you are here? Set aside some time for understanding and prayer. Catch up on the reading, worship Jesus, and ask him to lead you in this journey. Decide on something that you will give up and something that you will take up in order to draw near to God. Do not worry about what you have missed or whether or not you are doing it right. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6: 33-34).

Early Goers: If Lent were a race, you are starting to lose energy. You began with enthusiasm, but you have already forgotten at times what you are supposed to be doing, or you may simply feel defeated by how well everyone else seems to be doing. Good news for you: You are worse than you think, but also far more loved by God than you ever imagined. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, which means you have been set free from "performing Lent". Indeed, the very thing that Lent beckons us to consider is the death of Jesus, in whom all of our unfaithfulness and shame was condemned once for all, so that we may breathe easy in the company of God's family.

What should you do if you have already strayed? Get back on course. Repent of making Lent about what you do or don't do (or what other people do) and run to the cross where "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, by sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3).

Neither Here Nor There: You are neither here (late) nor there (gone). You are running with the pack, fully present at the party. Good news for you: The gospel is deeper and fuller than you ever imagined! "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

This is what Lent is about: joining the company of God's people to consider Jesus' suffering and death; denying ourselves and being sustained by God so that we may run straighter and stronger; gaining hope and strength from the faithfulness of God in Christ Jesus. Wherever you are today – behind, astray, on course – fix your eyes on Jesus, our brave frontrunner and generous host.

REFLECTION

1. *What have you learned about God and yourself in these first days of Lent?*
2. *What areas of fear or pride are hindering you from fully committing to this journey?*
3. *How would you articulate your need for God and your longing to know his presence and power more authentically than you do?*

Closing Prayer

O Lord our God, long-suffering and full of compassion: Be present with us as we enter this season in which we recall our Savior's sufferings and celebrate his triumph. Give us your Holy Spirit, so that as we acknowledge our sins and implore your pardon, we may also have the strength to deny ourselves and be upheld in times of temptation through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

First Sunday of Lent

This is the good news that we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved: Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared first to the women, then to Peter and the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses. We believe Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead, in whom all things hold together, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell by the power of the Spirit. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and by the blood of the cross reconciles all things to God. Amen.

[BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 15; COLOSSIANS 1]



How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory

Behold the Man upon a cross
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished

I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom

[STUART TOWNEND]