



Pastor's Note

"About the Season of Lent"



As you may have seen, this month we are entering into a new liturgical season – the Season of Lent. If you grew up in a non-liturgical tradition, you may wonder what this season is all about. Why are there purple banners up front in the sanctuary? Why do the hymns sound more mournful? Why do all the local restaurants seem to be offering fish sandwiches all of the sudden? Well, here are a few answers for you.

In the early Church, it quickly became a custom to baptize new believers on Resurrection Sunday. In baptism, we are marked with the sign of Jesus' death and resurrection, so this simply made sense. These new believers, however, would first go through a time of instruction beforehand. Along the way, this time of instruction soon became a time of fasting and repentance, as well – though, the length of this period was not standardized throughout the whole Church. Eventually, in the West, especially as Christianity became the majority faith, and as most people were baptized shortly after birth, this period before Resurrection Sunday grew into a time of fasting and repentance for the whole Church. This season of Lent (from the Old English "Lente," which means "springtime") became standardized to forty days long, which matched with our Lord Jesus' forty days of fasting in the desert after His baptism. Since the Western Church never fasted on Sundays, however, (for every Sunday is a feast day in which we celebrate the Resurrection), the six Sundays in Lent were not counted in those forty days.

After the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many Protestant churches dropped the Lenten observance, since it is not strictly mentioned in the Bible. By the 20th century, however, an ecumenical liturgical movement saw Protestant churches reclaiming some of these ancient practices which, while not strictly found in Scripture, are still based on Scriptural principles. The idea behind the season of Lent – that before one can truly celebrate the Good News of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, one must first repent of sin and recognize one's need for His work on our behalf – is certainly Biblical.

So, how do we observe Lent today? Well, here at the church, you'll find that we have some extra worship services during Lent. These start with Ash Wednesday, beginning this season of preparation and repentance with an ancient sign of grief and mourning – ashes are literally imposed upon us in the sign of a cross on our foreheads. We also have special services during Holy Week, the final week of Lent, with Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday.

(More about that next month!) In worship, you'll find that the hymns are generally written in a minor key, which sounds more mournful; the lyrics we sing will also tend to focus on the crucifixion and suffering of Jesus. (Think "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed?", "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," which are all generally sung during this season.) In our sanctuary, you'll also find that the liturgical color has changed to purple, both a symbol of royalty to remind us that Jesus is king, and a symbol of suffering, as we remember Jesus' suffering on our behalf.

But really, much of our Lenten observance is a personal choice. Lent really is what you make of it. Traditionally, many believers have fasted during this season, as fasting is a discipline which sharpens our prayer, our focus, and our awareness of our need for Christ. Roman Catholics historically have given up meat and other rich foods during Lent; this is the origin of Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday," as on the day before Ash Wednesday, all those rich, forbidden foods were eaten in one last big celebration before the fasting began. Eventually, this fasting period was scaled back to not eating meat on Fridays – hence, the ubiquitous fish sandwiches in the restaurants, as fish was not considered to be meat. Sometimes today, people will still choose to give up a favorite food during Lent, such as chocolate or ice cream, or they will commit to missing one meal each day and spending that time in prayer instead. Others will choose to practice an electronic fast – they'll give up social media or watching TV during this season. The point of this is to remember how much our Lord Jesus gave up for us, and to appreciate His sacrifice on our behalf by "denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him." (Matthew 16:24)

Still others add something special during this season. For these six weeks, they commit to daily prayer or Bible reading, or to coming to Sunday School or Bible Study. Some people commit to visiting the sick or shut-ins during these forty days, or to giving up their anger by praying for their enemies each day. Some write letters of encouragement to those who are lonely or grieving, or volunteer their time at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. The point of all this, again, is to prepare ourselves to truly appreciate all that our Lord Jesus has done for us, and to pattern our life after His.

I hope this Lent that you will prayerfully commit to the kinds of practices which will make you better appreciate the Good News of the resurrection. Ask God to give you direction on how you can renew your devotion to Him. Ask Him to make you more aware of sinful practices in your life so you can experience deeper repentance and forgiveness. Ask Him to give you a greater willingness and courage to commit to good deeds which bless His people. Whatever you do – don't waste this opportunity! For to Him – and to Him alone – belongs all glory!

In Christ's Love, *Joshua*