

LENT: A TIME TO JOURNEY TO THE CROSS

Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2012

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5.20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Giving Up by Taking On

For many Christian traditions, Ash Wednesday marks the entry into the season of Lent, an Old English word for “spring.” So in the Church Year, Lent is that time to stir ourselves from the slumber of winter and prepare to burst forth with new life as the morning of Easter draws near. It is a time of transition, when many Christians renew their commitment to God by giving up something in order to spend more time in prayer, reflection, and renewal. The “sacrifice” can be as simple as watching less television (or buying less from shopping channels!), giving up chocolate or caffeine, detaching from longtime but undesirable behaviors, or not eating one meal a day (fasting). Whatever the choice, it is essential to remember that the “extra time” offers a time of spiritual renewal, inner change, and new growth in your life and in your relationship with God.

The words of the prophet Isaiah might be haunting to many of us who believe our Lenten sacrifices or days of fasting are surely enough in and of themselves. The context of Isaiah 58:1-12 is, most likely, that some of the people were complaining because they believed that God was not “seeing” or honoring their fasting. In response, God asks a direct and clear question: Why do you think I will honor your fast when you use the time only to oppress others and quarrel and complain? “On those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves,” God bluntly told them (Isaiah 58:3, *CEV*).

After that accusation, God offers several suggestions for making the fast day honorable and less self-serving. Consider some of these suggestions from Isaiah 58:6-7 (*CEV*):

- Remove the chains of prisoners who are bound unjustly
- Free those who are abused
- Share your food with everyone who is hungry
- Share your home with the poor and the homeless
- Give clothes to those in need
- Don’t turn away your relatives

This is quite a list of suggestions! But notice the slight difference in focus – these suggestions from God are not about giving up something or removing some action; they are more about taking on a behavior, adding some action, acting out in response. The emphasis is more about giving up part of yourself – by taking on more for another person or other people. What a drastic

change would occur in our places in the world if we were to take on more actions to help others rather than simply giving up television or candy or even an entire meal.

Quite honestly, you might find it very difficult to “take on” something from this list for all the weeks of Lent. If so, prayerfully consider *something* that you could do for someone or others. It might be as simple as sending ten handwritten notes or making ten telephone calls to old friends, helping a neighbor plant and tend a garden, sending small treats to children in a local hospital, donating time or money to a local shelter or food bank, spending one day a week reading to children at a library or to patients in a hospital.

What is most important to remember is that Lent is a time to bring about change, rebirth, new energy – not only for ourselves but also for those around us. Then, in the words of Isaiah: “...your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun” (58:10b, *CEV*). So let us boldly head into the Lenten season with the conviction that we are doing something in the world to jump start the change and hope that we so desperately crave.

This Reflection for Ash Wednesday was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of American Bible Society as Senior Manager of the Translation Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

Today we remember to pray for the opportunity to begin this season of Lent by reflecting on the true meaning of the season. Merciful God, help and guide us as we seek to “give up by taking on” and commit ourselves to serving those in need. Teach us humility and true repentance, and grant us forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Activity Corner: Psalm 51 Litany

Supplies needed: Bible; writing paper; pens or pencils (or type the psalm and the litany response on a computer and print out copies for each member of your household).

Ask each one to copy the psalm with the litany response or distribute typewritten copies. Divide the reading into seven sections as follows and invite different members of your household to read the assigned verses: 1-2; 3-5; 6-9; 10-12; 13-14; 15-17; 18-19. At the end of each section, invite all family members to respond together, “CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD.” Use the psalm as a prayer throughout the Lenten season during family devotional time.

“Spiritual Nourishment” Calendars

Supplies needed: Bible; photocopies of 8-1/2 x 11 calendar pages (with boxes for each date) for the months of February, March and April 2012; pens or pencils.

Read Isaiah 58 and reflect on what the prophet says about “true fasting.” The season of Lent offers us a disciplined time to reflect on choices we make each day in light of how those choices may or may not nourish our spiritual life. People often talk about things they plan to “give up” for Lent; i.e., sweets, watching television, etc. Invite members of your household to think about ways they plan to choose to expand their opportunities for spiritual nourishment.

Instead of thinking about things to “give up,” encourage them to think of things to “add on;” i.e., spending more time in daily Bible reading and prayer; attending additional opportunities for Bible study and worship; reading devotional books; reading Bible stories to younger children; volunteering their time for community service, etc. Throughout the days in Lent, ask each member of your household to write down their choices on copies of calendars (what they plan to do each day), beginning with February 22 through April 7. At the end of each week, discuss as a family your reflections on your activity choices and their impact on spiritual nourishment. Consider keeping a family journal of these thoughts and reflections and/or incorporate these thoughts into your prayers during family devotional time.