

## Pasadena Covenant Church

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# Lenten Reflections

February 17 – April 3, 2010

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, which runs through Easter Sunday.

- When you think of Lent, what comes to mind?
- Did you observe Lent in your family growing up?
- Have you observed Lent as an adult? How?
- What kinds of experiences have you had during Lent, good or bad?

### A Brief Background on the Season of Lent

The observance of Lent is by no means universal. Nor is it obligatory. Observing it, however, is in accordance with Scripture and with human needs. It encourages us to remember the important events in Christ's life that might otherwise be neglected. It is also inspiring to know that Christians all over the world are pondering the same things during this time.

It is modeled after forty-day periods of fasting of which we see many in the Bible. Moses went to the mountain to fast and pray before the commandments were given to him (Exod 34:28). Elijah withdrew to a cave on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Jesus fasted after his baptism for forty days, after which he experienced the temptation. These were periods of fasting and prayer, self-discipline and self-denial.

Lent is primarily a time of preparation. Centuries ago it was a time of training for new believers who were to be baptized at Easter. Even though believers are baptized throughout the year now, we can still approach Lent as people who need to learn, as disciples who may be better trained, more free, and more obedient to serve God. Abstaining from pleasures of life during Lent is not because these things are bad, but by abstaining we free ourselves to concentrate on the primary concern. Participating in Lent reminds us of who we are—followers of Christ.

### For Ash Wednesday

From *The Book of Common Prayer*:

The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. The whole congregation was thereby put in mind of the message of pardon

and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need that all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

We are invited, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

### **Scripture Passage**

Read and meditate on Psalm 51.

### **Considering a Lenten Fast**

During Lent, it is appropriate to take up the subject of fasting.

- How do you feel about fasting?
- Have you been involved in a fast before? Was it during Lent? With others or alone?
- If you have considered fasting but haven't done it, why not?

### **A Brief Background on Fasting**

The great saints of the Bible fasted (Moses, David, Elijah, and Daniel in the Old Testament, and Jesus and his disciples in the New). Men and women fasted. There were longer and shorter fasts. Throughout church history great saints have also fasted.

Fasting is not necessarily limited to abstaining from food. In some sense, fasting means abstaining from anything that hinders our communion with God. It is the practice of doing without; practicing self-denial. Generally, fasting means going without food. A *normal* fast would be going without food, but not water. The *absolute* fast would be doing without both food and water and could not go on for more than a few days without seriously endangering one's health. In Scripture such a fast is less common (e.g., Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Paul in Acts 9:9). It is an exceptional measure for exceptional situations. The *partial* fast emphasizes restricting one's diet rather than complete abstention (Dan 10:3). One can eliminate particularly rich foods or alcohol as well as omitting a certain meal each day. This type of fast is just as valuable as a normal fast and is often used as a stepping stone for those who have never fasted before. Besides these, the Bible also shows that fasting can be public or private, regular as well as occasional, individual or communal.

### **Scripture Passages on Fasting**

Matthew 6:16–18

Matthew 9:14–15

Matthew 4:1–4

## **What Did Jesus Teach Regarding Fasting?**

Read Matthew 6:16–18.

In this passage Jesus says, “whenever you fast,” which implies that he assumed his followers would fast, although he did not command it.

- What else do we learn about fasting from this passage?
- What might be the dangers of fasting?

Read Matthew 9:14–15.

Jesus the Bridegroom was still with his wedding guests, hence it was a time of feasting, not fasting. After Jesus’ ascension we learn of the apostles fasting (Acts 13:2–3). This apostolic practice of fasting was and is a means for the flowing of God’s grace and power. It is not merely an act of mourning for Christ’s absence but an act of preparation for his return.

- How do you view fasting?
- Is it mourning?
- A way to prepare?

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster notes that although Jesus did not command fasting in the strictest sense, he proceeded on the principle that the children of God would fast. For those longing for a more intimate walk with God, Jesus’ statements are compelling words.

We could go into great detail about fasting and the various ways it was used in Scripture and throughout religious history. For the purpose of brevity, let’s focus on fasting as a spiritual discipline related to the self-denial and preparation that are part of Lent. The element of suffering that is part of a fast connects us to the suffering of Jesus as well as the suffering of others. It reminds us of our own pride as well. Pride and a full stomach often go hand in hand, therefore, fasting is a corrective to pride and is meant to humble the soul (what God requires is a broken and contrite heart).

## **The Real Source of Nourishment**

Read Matthew 4:1–4.

This familiar story of Jesus’ temptation starts with a temptation to eat. Temptation is meant to sow disbelief that God’s way is the most satisfying way to live.

- What do we learn about temptation from this short passage?
- How does Jesus experience temptation and how does he respond to it?
- Think about temptation in terms of something that leads us to doubt God’s good intentions for our lives (rather than as a force that draws us to do “bad” things).

- With this perspective, are there any areas in which you feel tempted? In other words, is there some area of your life in which you are doubtful God's way is the best way?
- Do you gain any encouragement from Jesus' response to his desert temptation? How so?

### **Taking on a Fast**

In the spirit of learning to be disciples of Christ, of trusting God's ways, let's consider some form of fasting for the season of Lent. It is often best to undertake a fast with others in order to reinforce our capacity to do it and free us from the view that we're doing something "special." We don't need to fast in the same way—some might want to abstain from something other than food, choosing instead some other pleasurable activity (e.g., watching television, surfing the web, going to movies, taking elevators, etc.).

Regarding fasting from food: the body grows accustomed to fasting by degrees, and God does not usually ask us to run before we can walk or even crawl. Starting with a partial fast is best; for instance, fast one day until dinner the next day. You could just drink juice and water or refrain from one meal or from particular foods or drinks as well. The Eastern Orthodox tradition concentrates its Lenten fast on particular foods such as oil and meat.

Take some time to reflect and discuss what sort of Lenten fast you would like to try. If someone does not feel compelled to fast at all, that is appropriate. We must remember that we fast because we feel that the Holy Spirit has prompted us—it is something that begins with God rather than our own ability or will. We are free to consider fasting from something together as a group or to approach a Lenten fast as individuals, rooted within a group.

Share with others how you will be fasting (or not, as the case may be) during Lent. Spend time praying for one another as we should be practicing this spiritual discipline together. (If someone has chosen not to fast, you can pray for some other aspect of his or her Lenten journey.) As people gather together during Lent, talk about how you are experiencing Lent so far and pray for one another.

### ***Prayer***

You have said, O Lord, that to become your disciples we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow you. You know our extreme dislike for both one and the other. Suffer not our faith on this point to condemn us for not practicing what we believe to be necessary for salvation, but grant that as we believe so may we ever live as becomes Christians. Amen.

## **Learning to Be Disciples of Christ**

It is appropriate to focus on discipleship during the season of Lent. We are learning to be like Christ, and by observing Lent as individuals and as groups we are being disciples/learners. Our hope is to grow in our life in Christ as we participate in Lent together.

### **Scripture Passages**

Matthew 21:28–32

John 15:1–11

Philippians 2:1–11

### **Reflections from Scripture**

Read Matthew 21:28–32.

- In a phrase, what would you say is the theme of this passage?
- What was surprising in it for you? What jumped out?
- Has there been a time in your life you were like one son or the other? Share a story from your own life as an example.
- What does this story tell us about God's priorities for our Christian life?

Read John 15:1–11.

This passage is probably familiar to many, but perhaps by approaching it with Lent in mind we might see something new.

- What does it mean to "abide"? How do we abide?
- What about pruning? What does Jesus mean by that in this passage?
- How can we abide and be pruned during the Lenten season? What might that look like? For you personally? For us as families, groups, as a church?

### **Moving beyond Ourselves**

It seems that we are disciples for a reason. Abiding and pruning are intended to bring about fruit in our lives that benefit others. However, God does not expect us to bear this fruit on our own. John 11:5 tells us that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Through the Holy Spirit in our lives we are able to abide and be pruned and bear fruit.

Let's begin to think about how we want to abide with Christ and allow ourselves to be pruned during this Lenten season. Take time to consider some ways in which this might happen for us as individuals and as a group.

Meditate upon one verse that was significant for you. Consider recalling and/or journaling on periods of fruitfulness in your life or periods of pruning. Is there a particular way in which you've wanted to grow as a disciple? Take these desires to God in prayer.

### *Prayer*

We beseech Thee, our most gracious God, preserve us from the cares of this life, lest we should be too much entangled therein; also from the many necessities of the body, lest we should be ensnared by pleasure; and from whatsoever is an obstacle to the soul, lest, being broken with troubles, we should be overthrown. Give us strength to resist, patience to endure, and constancy to persevere; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.           Lenten prayer by Thomas à Kempis (1379)

### **The Cost of Nondiscipleship<sup>1</sup>**

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on "easy Christianity" or "cheap grace." It pointed out what one must give up in order to be a disciple of Christ. But the cost of nondiscipleship is even greater than the price paid to walk with Jesus. Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith, and hope. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life that Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane.

From Dallas Willard:

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship.

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being a disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter exclaimed, "Look, we've left everything and followed you!" (Mark 10:28). The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with Jesus in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions—the heart or inner attitudes—of disciples are forever the same. The disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him.

- Willard says that the disciple of Christ desires to be like him. Who are some of the people you have desired "to be like," and how did you go about becoming more like each of those people?
- What would change about your life if you were to focus your energies on becoming like Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the content in this section is taken from *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith (Harper, 1993).

Meditate on the lordship of Christ. Examine your life to see how much of it actually falls under Jesus' authority.

Instead of focusing on the cost of giving these areas over to Christ, focus on the high price you have been paying by keeping them under your control.

Read Philippians 2:1–11.

May this season of Lent be an expression of our desire to be like Christ, to practice his attitudes and to imitate his sacrificial love.

- What do we learn about Christ in these verses?
- What attitudes and actions does Jesus exhibit?
- How could we also exhibit these in our lives?
- How might your Lenten fast provide an opportunity to practice such attitudes, specifically those of humility, sacrifice, and self-denial?

## Reflections, Readings, and Prayers for Holy Week

Reflect on the words of the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Isaac Watts:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,  
Save in the cross of Christ, my God.  
All the vain things that charmed me most,  
I sacrifice them to Thy blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

- Where are those places of pride in your life?
- What “charms” you about this world in such a way as to distract you from Christ?
- How can you give your life, your all to God?
- What might that look like given your particular context, strengths, weaknesses, and dreams?

### Maundy Thursday

On this day we remember the night before Jesus suffered, when he instituted the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The challenge of Maundy Thursday is to delve deeper into what Jesus has done for us, to see simultaneously what he has suffered and what we have gained. This question does not admit to easy or ready answers, but stands before us as a continuous challenge.

Read Psalm 22:1–11; Matthew 26:26–29; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.

#### *Prayer*

Father, it is a humbling thing to be died for. On this day let me remember that Jesus Christ, your Son, did exactly that for me. And he went to his death knowing full well how often I would forget his love. Let no pride keep me from kneeling at the foot of the Cross. In the name of Jesus my Savior I pray. Amen.

*from The Prayers of Peter Marshall*

## **Good Friday**

Read Psalm 22:12–21; John 18:1–19:37; Hebrews 10:1–17.

### *Prayer*

Almighty God, whose dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

## **Easter Sunday**

Read Romans 6:10–11.

From Martin Luther, “Sermon for Easter Sunday”:

Our feelings must not be considered, but we must constantly insist that death, sin and hell have been conquered, although I feel that I am still under the power of death, sin and hell. For although we feel that sin is still in us, it is only permitted that our faith may be developed and strengthened, that in spite of all our feelings we accept the word, and that we unite our hearts and consciences more and more to Christ. This faith leads us quietly, contrary to all feeling and comprehension of reason, through sin, through death and through hell. Then we shall see salvation before our eyes, and then we shall know perfectly what we have believed, namely, that death and all sorrow have been conquered.

### *Prayer*

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.