

Ash Wednesday: Invitation to a Holy Lent
Ruth Haley Barton

I invite you, 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. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer

Growing up as a Protestant Christian, I remember hearing folks from other traditions talk about “giving up something for Lent.” Usually they gave up something they really liked such as chocolate or ice cream or candy. I was impressed with their resolve. Even those who seemed to exhibit little interest in spiritual things during the rest of the year were somehow willing to enter into the self-denial that Lent required. I couldn't help but suspect that they knew *something* I didn't.

Now, of course, I understand that they were entering into a particular season of the church year and that these seasons are meant to shape us. I have learned that as we give ourselves to these (sometimes) strange rhythms they guide us into a way of seeing and being in our lives that we might not otherwise choose or even know how to choose.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the Church's observance of the Lenten season. It is the doorway into a space in time that calls us to stop whatever we are doing, no matter how important it might be, and enter more intentionally into the disciplines of prayer, self-examination and repentance. Left to ourselves, we probably would not choose to devote a whole season to such rigorous and demanding disciplines, but God knows we need it.

Entering In

The season begins as we receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads and acknowledge our human finiteness and mortality. No matter who we think we are, the traditions of Ash Wednesday remind us that “you are dust and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) This is not meant to be morbid, it is just meant to limit our grandiosity and help us to stay in touch with the real human condition that we all share.

Ash Wednesday also initiates a season of acknowledging our sinfulness. In a very intentional way, we invite God to search us and know us and (eventually) to lead us into resurrection life. The ashes marking our foreheads carry the same meaning contained in the Old Testament practice of covering oneself with ashes: they are an outward sign of an inward repentance and mourning as we become aware of our sin. This, too, is good for us because we live in so much denial. Facing our sin in the shadow of Christ’s cross and impending resurrection is the healthiest way to deal with our sin.

The disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to face the hold that our sin patterns have on us and to somehow let go. They create space for the godly grief that leads to repentance. They ask us to consider how we might be called to give more of ourselves to others. There is no doubt that Lent requires something of us. But there can be no feasting without fasting. Entering into the Lenten discipline of giving up something in order to create more space for prayer is the fast that prepares us to fully enjoy the Feast of the Resurrection.

Ready or Not!

This year, I must admit that I don't feel quite ready for Lent with all of its demands and its disciplines. It seems to have come quickly and we have barely cleaned up from Christmas! But I also don't want to miss anything. I don't want to miss the possibility of having my life stripped down to its barest essence through the disciplines of abstinence. I don't want to miss the possibility for repentance and change. I don't want to miss the experience of resurrection in the places that I know have been deadened.

There is something about the season of Lent that causes me to feel strangely hopeful about the possibility of repentance and forgiveness in my own life... hopeful about the possibility of greater freedom in places where I am in bondage... hopeful about the possibility of the Pascal mystery of death, burial, and resurrection taking place in my life.

So ready or not, my heart is also saying that I want to enter into Lent in a way that has meaning and will change me somewhere deep inside where it matters. I don't want to just "give up chocolate for Lent" because I like chocolate and God is the curmudgeon in the sky who wants to keep it from me. I want to enter into Lenten disciplines that correspond to the places in my life that cry out for deeper levels of transformation. The dynamics of Lent have to do with abstaining from the ways we normally distract ourselves from spiritual reality—the reality of our sin and the deeply patterned behaviors that keep us from our calling to follow Christ. It has to do with allowing some of the external trappings of our lives to be stripped away so that we can find our true identity and calling in God once again. It has to do with acknowledging the subtle temptations to

which we are prone rather than pretending that we are beyond temptation. It has to do with facing the spiritual reality of the battle that Satan is waging for our very souls.

We abstain from that which distracts us and numbs our awareness so that we can become more finely attuned to what is really going on in our lives spiritually. We fast from what is temporal and material so that the inner person can be filled with the power of the Spirit.

Sometimes we know immediately what our Lenten disciplines should be. If we are struggling with issues related to ego and pride, we might discipline ourselves to say no to activities that feed the ego. If we struggle with sins of speech or carelessness with our speech, we might consider additional time in silence daily or a longer retreat of silence sometime during this season. If we are aware of an inner exhaustion that we have not been willing to pay attention to, we might choose to say no to caffeine and other stimulants in order to walk all the way into our exhaustion. In the absence of substances that keep us stimulated, we might ask God to reveal the deeper sources of our tired-ness. If we tend towards the sin of gluttony and know that our eating patterns are out of control, we might consider some level of fasting. If our prayer life has been lacking, we might commit ourselves to more intentional rhythms of prayer. If we sense God inviting us to deeper levels of self-examination and introspection but we know we tend towards morbidity and depression, we might enter more intentionally into community and spiritual friendship during this time—asking for the help and prayers of others.

Many of us as pastors and ministry leaders are at this very moment preparing to guide others into this most significant season of the church year. One of the great temptations of life in leadership is that we can become so focused on leading others into a

deeper experience of the spiritual life—it is our job, after all!—that we neglect to protect space for our own spiritual journeying. We put off paying attention to the places where God is calling *us* to the rigors of self-examination and repentance. My prayer and my plea is that part of your preparation would be to consider your own Lenten disciplines and bravely ask God, *Where in my life do I need to acknowledge my humanness and renounce my sinfulness? What are the disciplines that will help me do so?*”

So let us begin together.

*Oh God,
let something essential happen to me,
something more than interesting
or entertaining or thoughtful.*

*Oh God,
let something essential happen to me,
something awesome,
something real.
Speak to my condition, Lord
and change me somewhere inside where it matters,
a change that will burn and tremble and heal
and explode me into tears
or laughter
or love that throbs or screams
or keeps a terrible, cleansing silence
and dares the dangerous deeds.*

*Let something happen
which is my real self, Oh God.¹*

—Ted Loder

Listening for Your Lenten Discipline

Lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Lent is a time for “giving things up” balanced by “giving to” those in need. As you allow God to guide you in shaping your own Lenten discipline, take time to reflect on these Scriptures and the practical guidance they provide for entering into the Lenten season. The central question that guides our practice of Lent is highlighted in the reading from Joel 2: *How will I repent and return to God?*

Matthew 6 highlights very concrete disciplines that have the potential to loosen the grip of sin and compulsion in our lives, thus creating more space for God. As we reflect on this passage in light of the Lenten season, we might ask:

How will I give? (Vv. 2, 3)

How will I pray? (Vv. 5-13)

Who do I need to forgive and who do I need to seek forgiveness from? (Vv. 14, 15)

How will I fast? What do I need to abstain from in order to create more freedom and space for God? (Vv. 16-18)

What is the level of my attachment to earthly treasures? Where is my treasure—really—as it is reflected in how I use my time, financial resources and energy? Is there any specific way in which God is inviting me to “let go” of my attachment to some earthly treasure—at least for this season? How can I reclaim my heart in order to invest in that which is eternal? (Vv. 19-21)

Do not feel that you have to answer all of these questions. Instead, go to the question you feel most drawn to—the one that is most compelling or surprising or the one that corresponds most closely to an area in which you are in need of transformation or are aware of a desire to return to God or be more open with him. Let the Lenten season help you to open this area more intentionally to God and to the disciplines that lead to freedom. In all of these questions, let us approach Lent as an opportunity, not

requirement. “After all, it is meant to lead us into the church’s Springtime, a time when out of the darkness of sin’s winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges. No wonder one liturgy refers to it as ‘this joyful season.’”²

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¹ Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace* (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press: 1984), p.86.

² *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 2003), p.xvi.