

Invitation to the Season of Lent

Beginning on Ash Wednesday, once again we will be invited by the prophet Joel to “return to the Lord your God with all your heart, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Joel 2:12-13). Along with the whole Christian church, we will be invited into the three traditional practices of Lent: prayer, fasting, and giving. For 40 days, we will be encouraged to recommit ourselves to our walk with Jesus; and in so doing, we will be encouraged to recommit ourselves to walk with each other.

But isn't this an invitation something that we should *always* be taking up as disciples of Christ? Are we not to daily re-turn to God with all our heart? Are we not to daily commit ourselves to journeying with Christ, and following his lead for our lives and for our world? And finally, are we not to daily commit ourselves to walking with our brothers and sisters in Christ as people of the same community?

It's true; we ARE to engage in this kind of lifestyle and that IS who we are called to be as baptized children of God. So, yes. This “should” be something that is a part of our everyday walk of discipleship – not just something during Lent.

But, I don't know about you, sometimes I need a bit of a “reset” to get back on track. Recently, when taking out my hairdryer one night at home, I found it wasn't working. Turning it off and then on again, I thought it would work. Nope. Trying another appliance in the same outlet, that appliance seemed to work. I was confused. Sighing to myself, I figured that I just needed to bite the bullet and get a new hairdryer. But then it dawned on me: press the reset button. (Admittedly, I'm embarrassed to think that it took me *that* long to figure that out!) And lo and behold, once I pressed the reset button, everything worked as it was supposed to again.

In the same way, I wonder if the season of Lent can act as the same “reset” button for us. I have a feeling that many of us “know” that we are to journey with Jesus, and to be attentive to the work of the Spirit within us. And we “know” that we are to journey with others, giving ourselves in community. *But we've messed up.* And in the midst of all that life can throw at us, sometimes we need a “reset” to get back on track. Not because we're wholly broken, and not because there is no hope left. But we simply need to create (or re-create!) some practices that draw us closer to Christ and to those around us.

So simply, this Lent, that's the invitation. Re-turn. Re-set. And come back. Not for punishment, but to find true and abundant life. For all of us, we're coming from a different point on our journey. But this season, ALL of us are heading in the same direction: toward the cross and resurrection of Christ – the only place where we will experience true and abundant life.

So, this Lent, return. Take a look at what we are doing as a congregation, and challenge yourself to recommit yourself to journeying with Christ and with those around you. And as you do so, be on watch. For it may just be on this journey that you might discover Christ's promise of love – for you, and for the world.

Wednesday Midweek Schedule

6:00-6:30 p.m. Meal and Fellowship

Meals served by teams.

Check the bulletin board in the narthex or with your team lead to determine when you are on deck to serve.

6:30-7:00 p.m. Evening Prayer Worship Service

Brief reflective service to draw us from the busy-ness of our days to prepare ourselves to come before Jesus in prayer.

We'll hear the Scripture passage for the night together during worship before breaking into small groups for further engagement.

7:00-8:00 p.m. Small Groups

Small groups will be consistent from week to week. The intent of small group time is to dive deeper into the Scripture passage for the evening and consider how God's Word is transforming you on your own journey of faith.

FINK aged youth and up are encouraged to be a part of small groups. Younger kids will be dismissed to have their own activity/conversation with an education leader each week (meeting in the nursery).

The above schedule is for Wednesdays beginning March 4 and continuing through April 1. Check your announcements in March for details regarding our Holy Week services.

Invitation to Prayerful Reading

At one point or another, many of us likely received a Bible: perhaps from a family member, at a significant life experience, from a congregation, or perhaps something stirred within us to pick one off the book store shelf because “something” perked our curiosity. But what does this dusty ol’ book have to do with our day-to-day lives now?

Often, when we start reading *anything*, our first inclination is to try to digest every detail of what we’re reading. We’re taught in school to read to “understand” and “comprehend” what’s written. On the whole, we read seeking to master whatever concept is being presented, or to understand what’s going on in the story, so that we can get our minds wrapped around what’s being presented and bring it under *our* control.

So, when it comes to the Bible, it’s not too surprising that we might find ourselves doing the same thing. When we start reading a passage, it may be tempting to read in order to “understand” what’s written, to “get” what it was like when Jesus walked the earth, and to “comprehend” the information that is put before us.

To be sure, there’s something to be said about this sort of reading. It gives us a foundation in which to grow from. **But what if we didn’t stop there. Instead, what if we came to approach Scripture not just to discover more “information,” and not necessarily to find an “answer” to our questions of faith, but simply to stand before God...ready and open for how the Scripture might transform us on our journey of faith?** If we were to do so, we might find that the way that Scripture impacts our day-to-day life would be opened up beyond our imagination.

This Lent, it is into this method of prayerful reading that you’re invited into. Rather than trying to understand every nuance of every reading, give yourself permission to simply focus on your relationship with Jesus. Allow God to come to you and reveal to you what it is that you need to hear.

In truth, this is risky stuff. What God may reveal to you in Scripture may not be what you’re expecting! And, at times, it may not be what you “want” to hear! There are several examples of people within Scripture who wrestled with this very thing. And, on the other end of the spectrum, at times, it might seem as though God is silent. We might come to Scripture ready to meet with God, open to hearing something new, and yet there is no noticeable change. It might be frustrating. And yet, that does not mean that our communion with God is not honored. Just as it is necessary to water a plant before growth is seen, at times, in our journeys of faith, it is necessary to add a little water before growth is noticeable.

So then, what is the purpose of prayerful reading? Simply, to focus on our relationship with Jesus, not to walk away with knowledge.

But how do I do that? Good question. Try this:

1. Still yourself before God. Yes, I know: there is craziness all around. If that’s the case, even in the craziness, be mindful of God’s presence with you.

2. Offer this time in prayer. Consider praying something like the following:

Lord Jesus, thank you for this time. Thank you, for coming to meet with me here. Thank you, for your presence that goes with me wherever I go. Open my ears to hear your Word. Open my eyes to see your love. And open my heart to receive your promises. In Jesus name, Amen.

3. Read the Scripture(s). Pay attention to what word/phrase might be standing out to you. Read through the Scripture(s) again if it is helpful. Reflect on how that word/phrase is touching your life. Finally, reflect on how God may be calling you to respond. Turn your thoughts into a prayer to God.

On Wednesday nights, we'll be guiding you through a process like this. Within worship, *together* we'll hear the Scripture passage, and you'll be encouraged *in the moment* to mark what word/phrase stood out to you. Then, as you go into small group, you'll have a chance to talk further about how that word/phrase may align with your journey. After taking some time to dive a bit deeper into the passage with a few specific questions (crafted based on the week's passage), then you'll be encouraged to come back to that word/phrase and turn your thoughts into a prayer to God.

Each week, you'll receive a weekly Scripture handout. This handout will be what will be read on Wednesdays, and will always be the upcoming Sunday's Gospel reading. **So, in essence, you'll have *three opportunities to engage with a Scripture passage:***

1. Once, for the first time, during worship on Wednesday evenings
2. Second, during small group conversation and formation
3. And finally, on Sunday morning after having some time to mull over what God may be saying *to you* in the passage.

As we move through Lent, we encourage all, even if you're not able to make it on a Wed night to keep up with our pattern by reading and reflecting on the upcoming Sunday's Gospel reading starting the Wed before you would hear them in worship. Therefore, for this first week, we encourage you to reflect on the Gospel assigned to Lent 1 (March 1). Though we won't have small groups on Ash Wed night, take some time to begin this practice. Then, next week (March 8), we'll distribute the Gospel assigned to Lent 2 and have conversation with each other in small groups.

All these opportunities are laid before you as just that: opportunities. If you're able to read on your own – great. If you're able to join us on Wed evenings but don't get to reading on your own – got it. The intent is for Lent to be a wholistic journey. The more you challenge yourself to engage with Scripture, the more you'll get out of it. Open yourself this season to what God has to say to you, to this church, and to the world. And no matter what you do, know that your time given to your journey with Jesus and each other this Lenten season is honored by God.

Lent 1

Wednesday, February 26

Looking toward Sunday, March 1

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

¹Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'

⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Questions:

1. What word/phrase stands out to you in this passage?
 - a. How does that word/phrase connect with your Lenten journey?
 - b. How does that word/phrase connect with your life?
2. Pastor Audrey West says of this passage: "Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy. For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next."
 - a. Looking back, when have you experienced a time of preparation? How did that shape you? How did it shape you for what was to come next?
 - b. How might this season of Lent be a time of preparation for you?
 - c. For what are you waiting for from God?

3. By the time the devil came around to meet Jesus in the desert, he had already been there for 40 days and 40 nights. At that point, one can imagine he was physically, emotionally, and spiritually worn down.
 - a. When have you experienced being “worn down”?
 - b. In that space, was it easier or more difficult for you to rely on God’s promises?
 - c. What encouraged you to persist through the trial/struggle/suffering?

4. What in this passage reflects your journey with Jesus? What in this passage reflects specifically your *Lenten* journey this year?

Prayer of the Week

O God, as your Spirit compels us to go into the wilderness, we wait for you.

Beginning our journey, together with each other, we ask You to give us courage:
to examine the desert places in our hearts;
to confront the adversaries in our lives –
 all that lures us away from being who you have created us to be;
and to face the wild beasts and fears that come from within.

And beginning our journey, together with You, we ask you:
to relieve the troubles of our hearts and the devastation of our distress;
and to turn your love toward us, O God,
 that we may know your grace,
 even in our loneliness and afflictions.

All this we pray, O God,
 trusting that you indeed watch over us,
 and will deliver us.
 in the name of Jesus Christ,
 our Savior and Lord.

Amen.