

THE DISCIPLINES OF LENT

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF LENT

The early Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and early on it became the custom to prepare for the Easter mystery by keeping a short period of fasting and vigil beforehand.

At the same time, it became the custom for converts to the faith to undergo a period of more intense preparation and training before receiving Holy Baptism at Easter. This period of preparation was later extended to a forty-day season of fasting and prayer, modeled after Christ's forty-day fast in the wilderness.

By the time of St. Augustine in the fifth century, the church in general, and not just those preparing for baptism, began to keep the forty-day season of fasting and prayer to prepare themselves to celebrate Easter.

In the early Middle Ages, Lent also became a time when persons who had committed serious sins and had separated themselves from the community of faith were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness and restored to full participation in the life of the Church.

They began their period of penitence by being marked with ashes on the first day of Lent. The use of ashes to signify repentance is deeply rooted in scripture. (Jeremiah 6:26; Daniel 9:3, Jonah 3:6, and Matthew 11:21)

In the later Middle Ages, the church began to require all members to observe the Lenten disciplines expected of penitents. Thus, Lent has come down to us as a penitential season, in which we confront our sin and God's amazing grace. We prepare to re-experience the central mystery of our faith, Christ's death and resurrection, and we commit ourselves to growing in grace through the ongoing process of sanctification, until we die completely to sin, that we may be raised fully as new creatures in Christ.

The church invites us to observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word, and by giving alms and deeds of love to those who cannot repay us.

MY LENTEN COVENANT

Ash Wednesday, March 1-Holy Saturday, April 15

Lent is the forty-day period of preparation for the central event of the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of course, Christ's death and resurrection remain true whether or not I am prepared. However, without preparation, I may not experience the depth and power of Christ's death and resurrection as fully as I could. So, with my brothers and sisters, I commit myself to the traditional disciplines of Lent for conversion from sin and death to love and life in Jesus Christ. These disciplines are the means by which the Holy Spirit's sanctifying grace works within me.

THE DISCIPLINES OF LENT

Three traditional disciplines are associated with Lent: *prayer*, *fasting*, and *almsgiving* (giving to the poor).

If you have never tried the habit of setting aside a specific time for *prayer* and Bible reading each day, Lent is a great time to begin.

Fasting from food creates in us a greater openness to God's Spirit and deepens our compassion for those forced to go without food. We get in touch with our deeper hunger and thirst for God. In addition to fasting, some people put aside what they would have spent on a meal in order to give to the poor, which brings us to the third discipline.

Almsgiving to the poor to meet their needs helps to shape us in the image of Christ, who came "not to be served, but to serve." One special opportunity for United Methodists is to give to the One Great Hour of Sharing communion rail offering that will be received during the Sundays of Lent to aid in disaster recovery. Some families like to keep a Lenten coin box, encouraging members of the family to make a daily offering in conjunction with their table grace or Lenten devotional. Then at the end of Lent, they bring their alms to the church.

These three Lenten disciplines are some of the means of grace by which God works to sanctify us, making us more Christ-like.

LENTEN DISCIPLES

Lent is a time to submit to several time-honored disciplines that will help you to grow in grace.

Check the ones you desire or feel prompted to commit yourself to observing during the next six weeks of Lent.

PUBLIC WORSHIP

___ I will worship God in church every Sunday in Lent (March 1-April 9).

___ I will attend the following services during Holy Week (April 9-16):

___ Palm/Passion Sunday

___ Maundy Thursday

___ Good Friday

___ Easter Sunday

___ I will attend Thursday morning worship in the Garrison Chapel of the Family Life Center.

PRIVATE PRAYER, DEVOTION, AND SCRIPTURE

___ I will commit myself to a daily time of prayer and reflection or solitude.

The time of day I will reserve is_____.

___ I will read and meditate, using one of the special Lenten devotional booklets available in the sanctuary foyer.

___ I will read through the Gospel of Matthew.

___ I will read a book on spiritual disciplines, such *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster or *A World Worth Saving: Lenten Spiritual Practices for Action* by George Hovaness Donigian.

___ I will read *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone and participate in the Tuesday night book study led by Rev. Cathy Stone.

___ I will read *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and participate in one of following Lenten Small Groups or in a Sunday School class:

___ *Church Lenten Small Group* led by Rev. Taylor Fuerst

Wednesdays, March 8-April 12, 12:00-1:30 p.m.

___ *East Austin Lenten Small Group* led by Tim and Cindy Walter

Sundays, March 5-April 9, 3:00-4:30 p.m.

___ *North Austin Lenten Small Group* led by Chip and Jan Morris

Wednesdays, March 8-April 12, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

___ *Northwest Austin Young Adults Lenten Small Group* led by Rev. Michael Mumme

Wednesdays, March 8-April 12, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

___ *South Lenten Small Group* led by Tim Deschner

Wednesdays, March 8-April 12, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

___ *Southwest Lenten Small Group* led by Bert and Lara Greene

Mondays, March 6-April 10, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

___ I will walk the Labyrinth in the Murchison Chapel during Holy Week.

___ I will keep a journal of prayer concerns, questions, and reflections on my reading.

___ I will take an inventory of my priorities and plan how I will reorder them.

___ I will dance my prayers to a favorite tape or CD.

___ I will focus on thanksgiving and intercession for others, rather than asking for myself in my prayers.

___ I will go to bed earlier, to feel rested and to make time for prayer.

FASTING

Fasting from food creates in us a greater openness to God's Spirit and deepens our compassion for those who suffer from hunger. It unites us with the sufferings of Christ. We may also fast from such things as smoking, alcohol, immoderate television watching or internet use, etc. By living lives of moderation, we have more energy to devote to God's purposes. By fasting from food, we get in touch with our deeper hunger and thirst for God.

Definition of *fasting*: not to eat any food and to drink only water for a period of time. Definition of *abstinence*: to refrain from eating specific types of food or beverage: for example, meat, or ice cream, or alcoholic drinks.

Fasting and abstinence may be used in combination. For example, you might abstain from ice cream throughout Lent, but fast (skip) lunch on Fridays in Lent.

(Note: Sundays are not counted as part of the Lenten season. Sundays are feast days in honor of the Lord's resurrection and are never fast days.)

____ Here is the food/beverage I will not eat/drink during Lent:
_____ (except on Sundays)

____ On ____ M ____ T ____ W ____ TH ____ F ____ SAT in Lent
____ I will skip one meal.
____ I will not eat at all until sundown.
____ I will abstain from all meat (eat vegetarian) through Lent.
____ Other: _____

ALMSGIVING AND MERCY

In scripture, almsgiving and mercy are linked to prayer and fasting as spiritual disciplines for God's people. Lent is a time to inventory our generosity.

____ I will ask God to show me a person or persons to whom I can show mercy and generosity.

____ I plan to give \$_____ to _____

(List persons or organizations)

____ I will use the "My Gift Can Help" collection boxes (available in the sanctuary and chapel foyers) for our Easter Offering. (These may also be used in combination with fasting if you put the cost of the meal you fasted in the collection box, or you may choose simply to make a daily or weekly donation.)

____ This Lent I will commit myself to participate in:

____ "Feed My People" Breakfast for the Homeless on Tuesdays and Thursdays

____ Mobile Loaves & Fishes

____ FreeStore (Reopening March 8)

____ Other: _____

____ I will visit a "shut-in" neighbor or church member or person in the hospital

____ I will give blood and recall the Cross.

____ I will take communion to our Homebound Members. Contact Libby Sykora at libby@fumcaustin.org.

EXERCISE

___ I will engage in a routine of physical exercise.

Here is how: _____

RECONCILIATION AND OUTREACH

Lent is traditionally a time to be reconciled with those from whom we are estranged and to practice Jesus' new commandment to "love one another, as I have loved you."

___ Attend *One Human Race* and examine the American concept of race, share feelings and experiences, and engage in discussions about race. *One Human Race* will be held March 11, 18, and 25 from 12:30-3:30 p.m. in Garrison Chapel of the Family Life Center.

___ Make a list of people with whom I need to be reconciled. Pray for them and let Jesus guide me in my thinking and feeling toward them.

___ Give up a grudge or a rehearsal of a past event.

___ Forgive someone who has hurt me.

___ Rebuke the spirit of criticism in me and focus on positive thoughts and words.

___ Pray to God to help me resist racial/ethnic/political/class/lifestyle prejudice and to give me courage in opposing it.

___ Write a letter of affirmation to a person who has touched my life.

___ Go to coffee or dinner with someone I want to know better.

___ Share my faith story with someone I don't know.

___ Sign up to help with one of our service opportunities on our website.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Key to the Lenten journey into deeper discipleship is holding oneself accountable to fellow disciples.

___ I will share my intentions for Lent and experiences in Lent with at least one other person.

___ I will share my intentions for Lent within a small group.

___ I will meet with a small discipleship accountability group for ongoing spiritual growth during Lent.

*Please register your commitments in this booklet
and keep it by your bedside throughout Lent.*

A LENTEN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

During Lent, ask the following questions with the intention of adopting new habits and disciplines, not just for 40 days but for every day, so that new pathways of deep change will reshape us spiritually.

- How am I growing or not growing in grace?
- What progress am I making in sharing gladly what I have with others, particularly with the stranger and the poor?
- What attitudes do I convey to those who irritate me?
How can my awareness of my own need of God's grace enable me to be more gracious to them?
- How has my sense of interconnectedness with the family of Christ in corporate worship grown of late, and how can I move ahead in appreciating the contributions and needs of other members in the congregation?
- Am I as charitable to and thoughtful of my family members as of others?
Or do I "take it out" on my family when life at work or school gets hectic?
- Can I re-distribute my long-range personal budget in order to have more money to give away?
- When I hear someone being unjustly maligned, do I speak up to correct the record, or am I a silent accomplice?
- How can I more effectively and consistently support legislation and governmental action that will help the disadvantaged rather than hurt them?
- Am I neglecting prayer, the sacraments, and other means of grace?
When I do pray and in my devotional reading, am I increasing my attention span and discovering new ways of listening rather than of talking, of giving thanks rather than of complaining?
- As I uncover and deal with one level of prejudice in my life, what other levels do I find lurking underneath, and how can I confront them?
- In addition to intercessory prayer, what habits can I develop that allow me to be more responsive to the sick, the distressed, and the bereaved, particularly when their needs emerge suddenly and require immediate attention?
Can I plan spaces into my life to allow for such unanticipated opportunities to minister to others?
- Am I, by consistent attendance at worship, a witness to others of the worthiness of the God I follow?
Or am I, by my sporadic attendance, suggesting that God is worth serving at some times, but not at others?
- For my sanctification, what unholy habits do I want to give up or have God put to death in me?
What holy habits and disciplines do I want to take on?

These questions of self-examination are taken from the chapter on Lent in Professor Laurence Hull Stookey's book, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*.

Ash Wednesday Prayer



*The dust of dreams deferred,
the ashes of burned bridges,*

*the dust of worn-out, dead-end paths,
the ashes of destroyed relationships,*

*the dust of years of accumulated unfinished business,
the ashes of neglected passions.*

*We are marked by both joy and sorrow,
dreams and disappointment,
fear of death yet undying hope.*

We are wholly yours, Holy One

Dr. Marcia McFee