

FROM THE PASTOR: Preparing for Lent

“Lent starts this month. Get ready for six weeks of dreary music and feeling sad!” It was not that many years ago that some of us would hear that type of remark ... or perhaps make it ourselves. Maybe you still do. It is not surprising, really, when we consider that cultural images and most common questions regarding the season: “What are you giving up for Lent?” Yet there is something counterintuitive about this attitude at a time when, in the Northern Hemisphere, days are getting longer, buds are appearing on trees in some areas, while farther south, bushes and flowers are already riotous with color. Isn’t all this seriousness a bit of a put-on?



It may help to remember, that the very word “Lent” comes from an Old English word for spring, and the purpose of repentance is the renewal of our lives through the renewing of our baptismal identities -- individually, but also as a community. “Feeling sad” is neither here nor there, but repentance, turning around and starting anew, gives the longer days and the greening grass a deeper meaning.

So where do we start?

Much of the focus of American religion for the past four decades has been about shedding the obligations of the past. Many chafed under the “rules,” churches went out of their way to assure people they were not required to do anything. It was not uncommon to hear people boast about what their church did not ask of them: for example, dressing up, fasting, confession, or tithing. Such a negative approach to one’s faith formation does not provide much of a foundation to build upon.

It may be that the most important project for the church in these first decades of the twenty-first century will be to reintroduce spiritual disciplines and long-practiced traditions as a gift that past generations can bestow on those who are open to them. For example, medieval Irish monks created the rite of penance out of a pastoral concern for those too afraid of their own sinful inclinations to risk baptism.

Can we come to believe that the disciplines of Lent are offered out of pastoral concern for our benefit, not out of any desire on the part of “the church” to dominate one’s life? It is interesting to see the ways that some people today are searching out all sorts of spiritual disciplines rooted in a variety of faith traditions from around the globe. The Christian church has a wealth of resources to share in this area, if we can find the words and dare to share.

(Sundays and Seasons © Augsburg Fortress, used with permission)

So again, where do we start? Especially in this year where we are not able to practice as we’d like. Perhaps, start simply, light a candle, say a prayer. You may wish to include the discipline of praying for others. Pull out your directory, divide the households listed by 40 and pray for those individuals on a daily basis. (Remember Lent is the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, not including Sundays. On Sunday, we always celebrate the resurrection, although differently.) Consider reading the lectionary; the texts for the next week will be provided each week, read them. Allow the word of God to speak to you for the whole week, ask questions of the authors (What were you thinking, Jesus?), and then during worship, hear again the good news of the Gospel. Give of yourselves, your time and resources, be creative. Simplify your life, your commitments, your food choices. Journal. Spend time nourishing your faith, intentionally, regularly, faithfully.

May this Lenten season be a time of renewal. *Pastor Karen*