

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Hope of the Lenten Season
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This week we in the Church will begin a special time of observing traditions that have been with us for centuries. On Wednesday, we will observe Ash Wednesday. This will begin a period of contemplating and preparing for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ on the holiday we call Easter. From Ash Wednesday to Easter is a period of 40 days plus the 6 Sundays and is called Lent or the Season of Lent. There are several significant days that we will focus on and observe, including Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But it all began this past Wednesday.

The word ‘Lent’ is a shortened form of the word ‘lencnten’ which means “spring season.” For those of us in the Christian faith, this spring season or Lenten Season, is a time of reflection about the final days of the life of Jesus Christ. Primarily, we are called to do three things during this period of contemplation: prayer, fasting, and giving. Prayers generally are focused on seeking God’s forgiveness and receiving God’s mercy and grace. Fasting, or giving something up that is a regular part of your life, is a daily reminder of things we can surrender in our lives. I have to personally be careful with my choice of fasting. In the past, I have tried unsuccessfully to give up my Starbucks visits, my Facebook visits, and cheese. I once tried giving up chocolate but was caught by the church member who asked, “I thought you didn’t like chocolate and never ate it, so how can you give that up?” Oops. Caught red-handed. But each of us can find one thing in our lives that we could give up for the Lenten Season. Have you ever offered to fast or give up one thing during Lenten Season? Was it successful?

The last way of observing Lent is to participate in the act of giving or doing something good for someone else. This is a way of responding to and sharing God's grace. This could be making an offering for the church or any other needed request. In doing any or all three of these acts we should remember that it does not cause us to earn God's grace, generosity, or love. Those are forever with us and never fail. But it is an excellent time to focus on what God has sacrificed for us as we look toward the days when Jesus was crucified and resurrected for us to have forgiveness and acceptance as a believer in Christ.

For some cultures, the Lenten Season actually begins on the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. This day has various names – Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday. It has a variety of activities connected to it. Some observe Shrove Tuesday as Pancake Tuesday; others consider it a day to overindulge in excessive eating as they prepare for fasting the next day. Obviously, that is called Fat Tuesday. And if you have ever been to New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gras, you would witness a huge parade, hours of celebrating and the eating of much more food than any one person should indulge in. I'm not sure how New Orleans became the center of that gouging and porking out, but if you ever want a remarkable experience, you should go. Right Duane?

For many Christians, Shrove Tuesday is a day of preparation. The word 'shrove' is derived from the word 'shrive' which means to obtain absolution of one's sins by confessing and repenting. It is difficult to understand how that meaning has evolved into a day of over-eating. For the faithful, it is a day in which we take time to burn the palm branches from the previous Lenten observance of Palm Sunday. Those ashes are blessed and are a significant part of the next day, Ash Wednesday.

In Psalm 51 verses 7 through 10, we find a cry for repentance. *“Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”* This is what Ash Wednesday is all about. The ashes from the palm branches symbolize two main important things – death and repentance. In services that many churches hold on Ash Wednesday, participants will come forward to receive an anointing of ashes in which we say that we are sorry for our sins and that we want to use this Lenten time to work on correcting our faults, to cleanse our hearts and grow in our relationship to Christ.

Though we did not observe Ash Wednesday as a congregation, as individuals we can take time during this Lenten Season to reflect on our own lives as we seek forgiveness and grace and at the same time, anticipate the joy we will experience as we await the message of Easter and Christ’s victory over death. As we place our attention on how we can observe this special season personally in ways that bring meaning and comfort to each of us, we find deeper meaning. Let me suggest two things that we can and should direct our thoughts and prayers toward.

First, if one tradition of Lent is to give up something as a sacrifice to keep us mindful of the sacrifice Jesus made, there are things we can fast or give up that are not necessarily tangible items. We need not give up our favorite food or beverage or treats believing that to be a significant sacrifice. What if we chose to give up something that is much more personal than that? This is the list of some possible personal things I considered giving up for Lent and borrowed from Pope Francis. Let me share them:

- ❖ Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- ❖ Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

- ❖ Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- ❖ Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- ❖ Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- ❖ Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- ❖ Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- ❖ Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- ❖ Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- ❖ Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- ❖ Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Each of us can find something we can give up as we try to focus on what Christ chose to give up for us – his life. The difficult thing for most of us is that it is hard not only to give up something, but to keep our hearts and minds simply focused on the sacrifice Christ made so that we can have forgiveness and eternal life.

Sometimes during the Lenten Season we get more distracted by the Easter celebration than anything else. I can recall the hours spent doing such things as dying eggs, finding an appropriate Easter basket for my son, and later grandson, making sure the basket was filled with the kind of sweets and candy they loved. In my childhood and youth, Easter was a time when we all got a new outfit to display to the world. Then, in order to show it off, we proudly went to church so everyone could see how beautiful we were. Back in those dark ages, even women often got new hats to wear for the Easter service. And of course, we can't forget that we all had to go to the sunrise service at the park and a very early hour. Our minds were filled with those distractions. How do we change that?

The second thing that should be important to us as followers of Jesus is to pray about and direct our minds to the meaning of Easter that we often miss. When Christ came to understand why God, his Father, had brought him into the world, the entire meaning for sacrifice and

forgiveness. Then we must remember the Jewish tradition of offering a lamb, in order to fulfill the obligation of attaining forgiveness and allowing God to wipe the slate clean. What slate are we cleaning? The sins that each of us have committed.

So, the Son of God was sent to prepare the people who believed for a new commandment to seek forgiveness through Christ. It's hard for us to think that a deeper meaning for this Lenten and Easter Season brings us to a place where we come to grips with why Jesus's life was taken anyway. Was it because the ruling government opposed him, or that the firm Jewish leaders wanted him out of the way? It's much deeper than that. The life of Christ was taken at the crucifixion as God's providing a pure sacrifice that would forever provide a way for all people to confess their sins, offer our request for forgiveness, and receive that forgiveness for the God who loves us so much.

Focusing on our sins and forgiveness seems like a very heavy and difficult way to give our attention to this season of time when we are so looking forward to Easter and all its celebrative ways. Yet, if we fail to miss the real meaning of God's offering His only son, we won't ever really know why we are observing his death and resurrection. Though there are dark days ahead as we move closer to the end of the earthly life of Christ, the end of the story is one of enormous joy. Soon we will be observing Holy Week, and there will be much for us to think about.

The final week in the earthly life of Jesus includes the Passover dinner that Jesus planned with his disciples, and which we still celebrate when we partake in communion, and at Easter time call it Maundy Thursday. But darkness followed in his betrayal, his trial and his execution. Many churches close their doors and cover the cross with black cloth on that they can grieve his death. Why that day is called Good Friday has always troubled me. And then there is the day of the greatest joy when

Christ arose from the dead and returned to give us all that God had promised. We call that Easter. I personally call it Glory Day, but that's just me.

There we have it, two things to consider. Will you give up anything during the next few weeks in observance of fasting for Lent? Will you give any prayer and time to seeking forgiveness of your sins? Those are questions each of us should consider. It's a part of our journey to the day we celebrate Easter. May our journey be one that makes a difference in our lives.

May we join in prayer.

Lord, we seek your mercy as we move into this time of reflection and confession. We are aware that we have fallen short of your glory, but we seek your mercy and grace. As we have come to a time of Lent, we ask that you be near us. Through your Holy Spirit help us to feel your forgiveness. Help us to have strength to overcome temptation and challenges that we cannot do alone. We thank you, Lord, that as we have entered Lent, we know that Easter is coming. Death will not have the victory because of Jesus's resurrection. Help us to keep the joy of this season in our hearts for the days of our Lenten Season. Help us to be the bearers of the fruit of your Spirit. We pray that we might experience your redemption and move into the days ahead with anticipation of your granting us a renewed life. We pray this our prayer as a community of faithful believers and in the name of Christ.

Amen