



“O Lord, throughout these forty days
You prayed and kept the fast;
Inspire repentance for our sin
And free us from our past.”

These familiar words speak to us each year as we enter the Church-year season of Lent. In doing so, we join a tradition of observance which goes back, according to many scholars, almost to the beginning of the Church itself. In the First Century, the Church in its theology and practice centered around the cross and the empty tomb, what we call Good Friday and Easter today. These events in the life of Jesus stood out as the great acts of Christ by which the ultimate power of death is defeated, and God’s great gift of life is made real for all. As a way of paying particular homage to this holy time of the year and as a way of preparing to enter into the celebration of the greatest mysteries of our faith and God’s greatest acts of grace, early Christians began to set aside a period of time during which they equipped themselves emotionally, spiritually and physically to make ready for the truth of the cross and empty tomb to be shared. Firstly, because Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness after his baptism, and because so many other important Biblical stories were marked in time by forty days/ years, the early Church adopted forty days as the appropriate length of time during which this preparation was to take place. Looking at the calendar, you might recognize that the time period between Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and Easter surpasses forty days in length. That is because, in the tradition of many Christian groups, most Lutherans included, Sunday always is considered a “feast day,” because it is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. The other days of the week throughout the Lenten season have been regarded by the Church for many, many centuries as days of fasting and repentance. Lent is considered to be a period of time devoted to spiritual exercise, similar to physical exercise, to become stronger, during which the believer works to strengthen his or her faith through various acts such as prayer, fasting,

Scripture/devotional reading, regular worship attendance, giving toward worthy causes, self-sacrifice, loving deeds of service, charity, and greater recognition of our brokenness before God.

Traditionally, we Lutherans have observed the beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday, as a worship experience which honestly speaks to our situation as human beings, both sinful and mortal. We receive ashes on our foreheads as a symbol of our need for repentance, for turning away from the ways of the world and back toward the ways of God, and of our mortality, represented by the words spoken to us as we receive the ashes, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In its solemnity, this service begins our Lenten journey which leads us to the cross and to the place where Jesus takes on the power of death. In the time between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday/Holy Saturday we are encouraged to take this journey as an important piece of our developing understanding of our faith as children of God and of God’s desire to be in relationship with us. Many choose to take this journey by “giving up” something important as a way of disciplining themselves or of excluding things which may get in the way of contemplation upon the saving acts of Jesus. Others give up eating meat on Fridays or add extra Scripture readings or special time for meditation and/or prayer or find other ways of connecting with the poignancy of this walk to the cross.

My invitation to you this year is that you find a way to take this journey to the cross honestly this year, seeking to find a practice which builds your faith and prepares you to enter into this holiest time of the year. I don’t believe there is a “one size fits all” practice that will work for everyone, but rather that each of us can find some way which helps us to tune into God’s graceful acts through Jesus so that we may come to understand and/or appreciate this grace in a new way. Then, focused on God’s grace, we may be prepared more for what comes next.