

Ash Wednesday Prayer Guide

February 17, 2010

Welcome & A Brief History of Lent

Welcome to Bethany Christian Church; we hope that today's self-directed prayer time will allow you to draw into a closer communion with our Lord Jesus Christ, the savior of the world. Ash Wednesday commences the 46 days of Lent leading up to Easter Sunday. Originally, for the first century church, Lent lasted only 40 hours to commemorate the hours Christ spent in the tomb. By the third century, the 40 hours stretched to six days, which we now call Holy Week. Over the following centuries, Lent lengthened to 36 days symbolizing a tithe of the whole year devoted to preparation for Christ's passion. Over time, four more days were added to symbolize Noah's 40 days of rain, Moses' 40 days atop Sinai, Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and other Biblical events lasting 40 days. Later the six Sundays of Lent were not counted as part of the season as each Sunday is considered, "a celebration of the resurrection of the Lord" and therefore not in keeping with the heavier, penitent spirit of Lent. This resulted in an additional six more weekdays added to the season, bringing the total calendar days leading up to Easter to 46. The entire Lenten season was established by 1099 and has remained the same since.

The Purpose and Spirit of Lent

Regardless of the calendar time spent in preparation for Easter, the purpose of Lent is clear: Human beings must reflect on the breadth and depth of their individual and collective sin so as to appreciate the surpassing greatness of God's grace and righteousness which transcends and conquers that sin. Therapeutically, the aim of Lent is to appropriate God's cure for our sickness. Or as the old spiritual goes, "*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*" The spirit of Lent is marked by deep introspection, a penitent heart, repentance, and a renewed spirit.

The Three "R's" of Lent – Repentance, Reconciliation, Renewal

Repentance is more than just remorse for one's actions or omissions. Repentance literally means to "do an about face" or "make a U-turn" where one's entire demeanor, attitude, will, and behavior turns away from sin and turns toward God. Repentance requires 1) recognition of those areas in our life where we have yet to turn fully toward God, 2) admission for failing to be 100% responsible for our relation with God, and 3) confession that we require God's grace, strength, wisdom, and insight to make the necessary changes to live according to His will.

Reconciliation originally comes from the banking term to "balance accounts." It implies that we start from a place in which our account with another is out of balance. We are "in debt" to others and others are "in debt" to us. As repentance draws our attention to our deficit with God, reconciliation galvanizes our attention on our broken relationships with other people. Jesus' instruction in the Lord's Prayer is pertinent, "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" Reconciliation requires the penitent believer to initiate the balancing of accounts, either by going and making amends with those whom we are indebted or by extending the grace and forgiveness to another who is indebted to us.

Renewal is the resulting fruit of repentance and reconciliation. One's spirit is refreshed; one's commitment rejuvenated; one's soul revived. Where one was spiritually parched, living water now flows. Authentic repentance and reconciliation results in a catharsis of the soul; when festering sin is purged and one is anointed with the antibiotic of Christ's saving love, then one can enter into deeper, sweeter mystical communion with Christ, fall deeper in love with friends and family, and bitter enemies become sisters and brothers. Old things fall away and new life is born.

[Over]

Prayer Guide

First a disclaimer: remember the counsel of Ignatius of Loyola, “*Pray as you can, not as you cannot.*” If at anytime the following suggestions don’t work for you, then drop them and simply pray as you can. Not all Prayer Guides work for everyone, and frankly nor should they. Don’t worry about “getting it right;” “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...” and the Holy Spirit will do the rest, for the Spirit is our true prayer guide.

Repentance, Reconciliation, Renewal

Allow the Three “R’s” to set the movement of your prayer time.

Repentance

- Read Psalm 51 (individual repentance) or Psalm 85 (communal repentance)
- After reading, allow your mind and body to become still and quite.
- Ask God to reveal to you the areas in your life that separate you from God
- Ask God to allow you to recognize the areas in your life which you need to repent
 - Are any of the “7 Deadly Sins” taking root in your life? (envy, gluttony, greed, laziness, lust, pride, vanity)
 - What is the general purpose of your daily living? Do you live for God or for yourself? Are your ambitions kingdom-based or self-serving?
- Note what God reveals to you.
- Admit to God your responsibility for the quality of your relationship with Him. Admit to God the excuses you tell yourself and others as to why you don’t have the quality of relationship with God that you deeply need and desire.
- Note how you feel upon this admission(s).
- Confess to God your weakness and failure to save yourself; confess your total reliance and dependence upon God for salvation; confess your powerlessness in the face of your sin(s).
- Note how you feel once you’ve made your confession(s).

Reconciliation

- Who are the people in your life?
- Of those, with whom are you out of balance? Ask God to reveal them and take note.
- To whom are you indebted? And for what? Ask God to help you to be totally honest with yourself; ask God to reveal ways that you can reconcile with that person. Ask God for the wisdom, strength, humility, and/or whatever else is necessary to initiate reconciliation between you and the other person.
- Who is indebted to you? What mercy do you need to extend to them? Are you being prideful with your wounded-ness? Do you like to harbor resentment? Has your anger become comfortable? Have you remained silent about your hurt and need to call someone into accountability for their actions? What do you need to do get this matter behind the two of you so that love and grace can grow between you and this other person?

Renewal

- What insights has God revealed to you in this process?
- Give thanks to God for Jesus Christ who died on the cross for your sins.
- Allow yourself to feel God’s grace/mercy/forgiveness/strength/comfort/joy or other fruits of the Spirit so that you may be renewed.
- Remember that you too are someone for whom Christ died and rose again.
- Make time to give thanks for all that God has revealed to you in this process. Amen.