

## ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE

### CALL TO WORSHIP

We pay a price for every single thing we do. In every decision we make, we decide to use our time and life in one way ... instead of in another. And all the “friends and relatives” (if you know what I mean) of all the things we did not choose get hurt and angry.

When I was young, in my naïveté, I thought we only paid prices for being bad or choosing evil. Jesus put that myth to rest forever, if we notice. In any case, every single thing we *do* choose is considered to be evil by that which we do not choose. How freeing to know that. Knowing we cannot escape the price no matter what we do, we are free to choose what we truly believe and love.

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you .... (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)*

HYMN [\*Forty Days and Forty Nights\*](#)

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There are more traditions in Christendom than a legion of angels could keep up with. They all come from some meaningful place, and they all have the potential to help followers on their Way. We can only pick and choose. Over the years, Lent (Spring) has been particularly helpful to most of Christendom as a way to keep spiritually renewed and growing. Lent is observed over the forty days prior to Easter, excluding Sundays. Obviously we cannot fast on Sunday because it is a celebration of the Resurrection. Christians must interrupt even their most serious and solemn moods to rejoice in Christ’s victory each Sunday. We cannot keep from singing.

Lent commemorates the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. By the way, if you ask me, I will tell you that Jesus went to Sinai during this time, to the Holy Mountain, as Moses and Elijah had done before him. A young Jewish man, hit with a theophany – a spiritual experience as profound as Jesus got at His baptism – would

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head for the holiest place He knew on earth. “Normal life” would make no sense to Him anymore. So Jesus headed for the mountain where Moses encountered God – where Torah was given – to find out what He was supposed to do next.

We, His followers, realize that following this One is going to be an amazing trip. If even Jesus was puzzled and confused enough to need forty days to regain some clarity after His baptism, we are not likely to figure out our own spiritual journeys in ten minutes before we drop off to sleep at night. We had better learn to be intentional, and rigorous, like He was – and to sort through our temptations like He did His. So we head into Lent – into a special time of prayerfulness, rededication, quiet, concentration – opening ourselves to God, and to God’s will for us.

The first step on any spiritual journey is always humility: awareness of our need for God, willingness to put our lives into God’s hands, awareness of our foolishness and smallness and incompleteness ... and sometimes sorrow for our wrongness. Ash Wednesday always begins Lent. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes ... without You, O God, we are nothing. Make us over, or remodel us, or whatever You say, but we come to remember and to pray: “You are the potter, we are the clay.”

SCRIPTURE READING *Mark 1:7-13*

*And he [John] preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

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REFLECTION

GIVE IT UP

If you know anything about Ash Wednesday or Lent, you came here knowing that you could not leave without confessing your sins, and resolving to give something up for Lent. Both are exceedingly true, but they are true in a very different light from the one many modern Christians are seeing by.

First of all, why did Jesus fast? He needed to go from the Jordan River, where He was baptized, to the wilderness – most probably Mount Sinai, the Holy Mountain – and there was one blade of green plant life about every four or five square miles. There was not a single McDonald’s along the way. Jesus could carry some food with Him but not much, and it must last a long time. There was a spring, an oasis, at the foot of the mountain. With luck, He might find relief and refreshment there (not guaranteed). And of course, He must come back. His fasting was not about mortifying the body – it was the only way to get to Sinai!

In Jesus’ day, food was not waiting in the refrigerator, or even in the supermarket. It was running around bleating “baaa.” Half your life was spent preparing food, or supporting somebody else who could. Fasting was just a way to stop spending the amount of time it took to deal with food so you could spend that time with God. Everything was a trade-off.

What you must see, if you are ever to use Lent aright, is that Jesus was not giving up food, He was getting time with God. Giving up food was just the side effect, a necessary means to an end. He was not after giving up food; He was after God. If you get this crossed up, like most people in our time do, you will never come out alive.

Down through the ages, people have watched the saints at Lent. They have not seen the interior life, known the inner motive, or discerned the joy of what was really going on. But they did notice the exterior and saw that the saints were giving up some external things: sleep, or food, or activities that were normal to their schedule. So they concluded that the secret was in giving something up. But they got the emphasis on the wrong syll-AB-le. The saints were after

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something important – something they dearly longed for – something they deeply needed. But there simply wasn't room in life for everything, so what we see externally is what they sloughed off on the way to what they truly most cared about. Saints do not make sacrifices (sacred to the altar, yes; but that's a different story) – saints get rid of trash that is slowing them down or getting in the way of their true goal. Careless bystanders, with a different set of values, watch and say, "Oh, what an amazing sacrifice she made." (David Livingstone: "Sacrifices? I never made any sacrifices." He was doing what he most loved in all the world.)

To enter into Lent, you must discover or discern something you want or need in your life to bring you closer or more in tune with God. Do not jump to it too quickly. This needs a little patient prayer. As we stop to ponder, there are probably half a dozen things that have been nibbling at the corners of our minds for quite some time. Do not pick them all! Pick one. Pick the one that seems most poignant at this time. How can you get this thing into your life?

I will use an obvious illustration (but that does not mean it is the right one for you). Suppose that after sufficient reflection, you conclude that more prayer time is really what you need most. How can you get more prayer time in your life? So you make your plan. How much more time is appropriate? Say, thirty minutes. You schedule thirty minutes more of your undivided attention – time to spend with God each morning. Guess what? You have been doing other things with that time until now. None of those things have been nearly as important as giving God your undivided attention. Nonetheless, thirty minutes of your life are gone. So you will have to make some changes, some adjustments. There is no way around it: to move toward this new joy, you must give up something that was formerly occupying thirty minutes of your time. It does not mean you think the former things are wrong or evil. That has nothing to do with it. If you merely "give up" those things for Lent, it will do you no good – it will even do you some harm. If, on the other hand, your true motive is to spend more time with God, then you will be greatly blessed, and what you "give up" will be a mere side effect, an incidental price along the way. You played musical chairs with your schedule, and those things got left out. But you will come into Easter with a joy and a fullness you wouldn't trade for anything.

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What an insulting, picayune attitude and mindset if Christians go around complaining about what they must give up ... for the mere privilege and benefit of love, and grace, and guidance, and healing, and attention from the omnipotent, omniscient, eternal God.

I won't tell the stories behind these illustrations, much as I would love to, but here is a short list of some of the things my friends of the WAY have given up for Lent. See if you can imagine what they were really after.

1.) One friend broke his routines – took a different route to work, got dressed in a different order, slept on a different side of the bed, ate left-handed – anything he could think of to disturb old ruts. It brought the change he sought. He said it was like waking up to a whole new world.

2.) A lady in her early forties gave up reading, all reading, even the Bible.

3.) A man stopped watching all sporting events during Lent. He in no way intended to give up his love for sports, nor did he ever think he was supposed to carry it past Lent. He was, nevertheless, enthralled with the experience and all it taught him.

4.) Another man gave up calling his mother on the phone every day, and instead visited her in person once a week. (Boy did the fur fly – for a while. But in the end, it redeemed the relationship, and brought much healing to the mother.)

No storming of castle walls. No giving the body to be burned. Just simple but genuine acts of devotion – a hunger to be closer to God – and some literal steps to invite that.

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SERVICE OF ASHES

Anyone who wishes may come to the kneeling rail to receive the ashes of repentance and humility. I cannot say everything tonight, but **repentance**, if you will believe me, means most profoundly: **to turn in a new direction and head for home**. Sometimes repentance comes with deep sorrow for great wrongs. And that is all some people know. But you need not be conscious of any great specific wrong to truly and deeply repent. Even people too shy or well-trained to commit great sins, can be very lonely and very eager to draw closer to God.

HYMN *Breathe On Me Breath of God*

PRAYER

I am sorry, Lord, that I am so far away from what You made me ... so far away from knowing and loving You ... so far away from obeying and pleasing You. And somehow the road toward You, the road toward our true Home, always starts afresh with awakening – with sorrow and repentance. These are the ashes – the symbols of what isn't working; of what is burnt out, used up, wasted, destroyed, crooked, bent, distorted. We come to You with ashes, and You give us New Life: unimaginable Forgiveness and Mercy and Grace. If we come to You with anything else, at least in the beginning, You just wait ... wait for us to awaken. May we not be asleep this night. Amen.