

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once again, the calendar of the church brings us together to enter into our annual Lenten discipline. No sooner than we have removed the last vestiges of pine needles from the carpets and wrapping paper has been returned to the store room, we are faced with the brutal reminder that the One whom we celebrated coming into the world just a few weeks ago came in order to die for the world. The joyous carols in strong major keys are replaced by quiet, reflective hymns in the subtleness of the minor. We do not shout our hymns of praise, but offer our prayers and supplications of penance in lowered voice and softened spirit.

But is this what Lent is truly about? Must we bury the “A” word for these 40 days? Are we required to put aside laughter and joy? Must we wash the smiles from our faces, replacing them with sour looks and ashen foreheads? After all, Jesus has already died, risen, and ascended. We live in the hope of the return of Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Why should we do all of this play acting that we are really in mourning?

Strictly speaking, there are no “musts” in our marking of the season of Lent. You can visit countless churches this very day and find the doors tightly locked. Enter on Sunday morning and you’ll hear joyful music and celebrations of Easter proportions. If it’s OK for them, then why isn’t it OK for us?

For one reason, we are part of a long-established tradition of Christianity. Lent has been and will be a time when Christians stop, at least for a few weeks, to reflect and contemplate on what is important about this thing called the life of Jesus and especially his death on the cross at Calvary. We gather in this place, but also in our homes and other places in our communities, to reflect on our lives and how we have been blessed by the grace of God, freely given and wholly undeserved. We slow down—if only a bit—and take a little more time for prayer, Scripture reading, and reflection on what we have read and about what we have prayed. We do this not because it makes us better Christians or because we want God to love us more or to show off to our nose-y neighbors and the obnoxious loudmouth at the office that we are more devout and pious than they are.

No, we mark the time of Lent with quietness, reflection, and special devotion because it's good for us to do it. We need a time to step back and slow down with intention and purpose. We children of God's own creation need the chance to come, if not to a full stop, to at least reduce the motors to a slow trolling speed, allowing us not only to offer our prayers and thoughts to God, but especially to listen for God's reply to us. God has granted us two ears and one mouth for a reason, my friends, and it's a pretty safe guess that he wants us to use the two ears more than the one mouth most of the time.

In our Scripture readings today, we hear calls for the people to repent, to pray, to prepare. The psalmist offers us the words familiar to many of us as the traditional offertory hymn. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, but restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with your free Spirit." In this traditional psalm of penance, we call upon God to make us right with him, to cleanse our heart, mind, and soul of all unrighteousness, and make us one with him in the joy of salvation.

In more modern language, perhaps the psalmist is speaking for us something like this: "God, don't leave me to my own devices by the side of the road, but keep me in your bosom! Alone, I don't have what it takes to make it in the world, but with a clean heart washed by the blood of your Son, and the renewal and recharging of a right and proper spirit of love and devotion, you make things right in me that I cannot do by myself. Lift me up when I am weak, O God, and let me experience the joy that I once experienced as I lived and walked in your love, free from the worries of sin, death, and the devil."

God heard the pleas of the psalmist, and he hears our pleas and prayers today as well. We shouldn't leave our times of penance and reflection just to Lent, but since we are here, we should use these days of preparation to prepare ourselves for a renewed life in Christ Jesus. Now is the time to empty our hearts, minds, and souls of that which troubles us, harms us, attacks us at our very core. We enter these forty days of Lent with a sense of purpose. That purpose is not to be "better" Christians or to learn about living a "purpose-driven" life. Rather, it is the purpose of opening ourselves to God, listening to his Word to us, and experiencing the power of the life-giving Spirit renewed and restored in us as we walk before God as children of his creation, sinners of his own fold.

Lent is not about what we have to do. Lent is about what God has already done, continues to do, and will do for us by the power and mystery of the Cross. Come, let us adore him.