

## Lent Training and Equipping

### Overview

- Lent is a 40-day period when the church around the world prepares for Easter (40 is connected with many biblical events – Jesus' temptation, Israel in wilderness)
- The word Lent comes from an old word that means Spring ... spring cleaning (inventory)
- Lent is a season of divine paradox: we must die to live
- We reflect on Jesus' walk to the cross, and we become aware of our own
- Lent is a microcosm of life (death, resurrection)

### Lent: Church Tradition

- St. Irenaeus (d. 203) wrote to Pope St. Victor I, commenting on the celebration of Easter and the differences between practices in the East and the West: "The dispute is not only about the day, but also about the actual character of the fast. Some think that they ought to fast for one day, some for two, others for still more; some make their 'day' last 40 hours on end. Such variation in the observance did not originate in our own day, but very much earlier, in the time of our forefathers" (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, V, 24).
- Lent becomes more regularized after the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313. The Council of Nicea (325), in its disciplinary canons, noted that two provincial synods should be held each year, "one before the 40 days of Lent."

### Terms Used in Lent

#### ***Shrove Tuesday***

Shrove comes from the word *shrive* (to confess) and refers to the absolution of a penitent's sins. It is named Shrove Tuesday because of the custom of going to confession on that day in preparation for Lent.

*Shrovetide* is the English equivalent of what is known in the greater part of Southern Europe as the "Carnival", a word which, in spite of wild suggestions to the contrary, is undoubtedly to be derived from the "taking away of flesh" (*carne levare*) which marked the beginning of Lent.

#### *Why the Pancakes?*

During Lent there are many foods that some Christians would not eat: foods such as meat and fish, fats, eggs, and milky foods. So that no food was wasted, families would have a feast on the shroving Tuesday, and eat up all the foods that wouldn't last the forty days of Lent without going off.

The need to eat up the fats gave rise to the French name *Mardi Gras* ('fat Tuesday'). Pancakes became associated with Shrove Tuesday as they were a dish that could use up all the eggs, fats and milk in the house with just the addition of flour.

#### ***Ash Wednesday***

This day marks the beginning of Lent ... the reminder of our mortality and need for repentance (Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return). The marking of the cross made of ashes reminds us that:

- Death comes to everyone
- God made the first human being by breathing life into dust, and without God, human beings are nothing more than dust and ashes
- The cross is a reminder of the mark of the cross made at baptism

### *Biblical References for Ashes*

Ashes were regarded as a symbol of personal remorse and sadness. Often an uncomfortable "sackcloth" garment made of coarse black goat's hair, was worn as well. There are many Old Testament references to the practice. Here are a few:

- **Job 42:6** "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job (*whose story was written between seventh and fifth centuries B.C.*) repented in sackcloth and ashes while prophesying the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem.
- **Daniel 9:3** (c. 550 B.C.) "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes."
- **Jonah 3:5-6** In the fifth century B.C., after Jonah's preaching of conversion and repentance, the town of Nineveh proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, and the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat in the ashes.
- **Esther 4:1** "When Mordecai perceived all that was done [*the decree of King Xerxes, 485-464 B.C., of Persia to kill all of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire*], Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry."

### *Ashes: Church Tradition*

The very early Christian church encouraged the use of sackcloth and ashes for the same symbolic reasons. Tertullian (c. 160-220 AD) wrote that the penitent must "live without joy in the roughness of sackcloth and the squalor of ashes." Eusebius (260-340 AD), the famous early church historian, recounted in his "The History of the church" how an apostate named Natalis came to Pope Zephyrinus clothed in sackcloth and ashes begging forgiveness. Also during this time, for those who were required to do public penance, the priest sprinkled ashes on the head of the person leaving confession.

### ***Maundy Thursday***

Maundy is from the word mandate. The phrase is connected to Jesus' words in John 13 after he shared communion with his friends (Thursday before Good Friday).

### ***Easter Vigil***

Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil – Saturday night or early Sunday morning. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

## **Historical Practices**

Historically, the church used three practices (or disciplines) in its preparation during Lent:

- Prayer (upward)
- Fasting (inward)
- Almsgiving (outward)

**Prayer** – This is the primary place of communion with God (source of our true identity). Dallas Willard defined prayer as a “conversational relationship with God.” Unfortunately, over time our prayer life can become one-sided prayers of thanks and help. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it doesn’t often cultivate a relationship. We need to hear God’s voice, because once the whispers of Satan become louder than God’s, we can get lulled to sleep (live cognitively and not experientially – low expectation, become risk averse).

- What is the conversation God wants to have with you?
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal an aspect of your life that He wants to change. Take time to listen. Write it down and spend time each day talking to him about this area of your life. Listen.

**Fasting** – This is the purposeful abstaining from something in order to focus on God. Unfortunately, our fasting can become routine and not strategic. King David said he humbled himself with fasting (Psalm 35:13). Fasting reveals the things that are happening below the surface that we often cover up (places we don’t trust God). So instead of just picking a familiar thing to fast from, consider being more intentional.

- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal your habits when you are stressed (shopping, eating, TV, drinking, surfing the internet, etc.).
- Ask Him to also reveal the physical/material things that you trust more than God.
- Fast from one of these things and journal about the experience.

**Almsgiving** – This is serving and giving to those in need ... living out the great commandment, *to love our neighbors as ourselves*. Unfortunately, we can become addicted to comfort, protecting our private space, and unwilling to extend ourselves sacrificially.

- Ask the Holy Spirit if there is anyone in your life He wants you to spend time with (co-worker, neighbor, family member). This may begin with the practice of simplicity (removing the clutter in your life).
- Pay attention to his promptings (words of encouragement, practical things to do, etc.) AND be willing to be interrupted.

## **Resources**

### ***Individual Homes or House Churches***

Consider ways to experience Lent at home or in HC. Here are a few suggestions:

- Practice the discipline of prayer, especially prayers of confession. Read a book on prayer (*Prayer*, Richard Foster or *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen).
- Practice the discipline of fasting one day each week of Lent (consider the day your HC meets). Fasting could be linked to concern for the poor who are forced to fast by their poverty. Following Jesus requires us to show love to the poor. Read Isaiah 58.
- Practice the discipline of giving (almsgiving). As followers of Jesus, we are called to works of charity and justice. Connect with one of Common Ground’s ministry partners, giving financially or of your time/service.
- Follow the weekly ***Lent Devotional*** that includes a daily Experiential Calendar.

## **Family**

As parents of young children, Lent can seem so “heavy” in comparison to the anticipation and excitement of preparing for Christmas. For many of us growing up, Lent meant “giving up candy.” That wasn’t a bad way to introduce the notion of self-discipline, but simply giving up something for Lent, without a whole spirituality that children can enter into, can leave kids dreading Lent more than looking forward to it. So a few simple ideas:

1. The most important help for little children is for adults to understand Lent and enter into it with real devotion and joy. If Lent makes its way into the home and into conversations and practices that children can see, they will naturally grow up in a culture that embraces Lent as a season of grace (life and expectation).
2. Symbols can be very helpful to children that provide a context to understand something new like Lent. For example, having a bowl of water in a central place in your home, can be an “entry point” to the season of Lent. The water is a great symbol of baptism. Lent is a time that can renew our baptism commitment. It may lead to sharing with your kids about your own baptism.

If your family enjoys Advent wreaths, set up seven candles in the shape of a cross to mark the weeks of Lent. Use purple candles for each week of Lent, but put a white one in the center or at the top for Easter Sunday. Each Sunday of Lent, light a new candle and use the **Lent Devotional**.

3. Help children open their imagination to God’s story of salvation. Telling stories helps it all “fit together” for children, and for us. For children, Lent can be a time for developing good spiritual habits. A few thoughts:
  - Have a weekly Sabbath meal. Make time for the whole family to sit around the table once a week and talk about what God is doing in you, around you and through you. This is a good time to use the **Lent Devotional**.
  - Purchase a mini plant kit that can grow inside, such as grass or herbs. Talk to your kids about the rhythms of planting by faith, watering and caring for something they can’t see yet, and watching new life grow in its own timing. To follow the planting metaphor, use the book *Good Dirt* as a family devotional (Lacy Finn Borgo and Ben Barczi).
  - Together as a family, decide on one or two things to fast from during Lent. Perhaps your family could give up eating at fast food restaurants or watching television on a designated evening of the week. Read about Jesus’ fast in Luke 4:1-13, and “wonder” why he fasted. Along the way, consider how much money you have saved from not eating out and donate it to a Common Ground’s ministry partners.

**Lenten Activity**  
**Formation at Home**  
**Matthew 13:44**

**Easter Treasure Box**

What if on Easter morning we awoke not just with a hankering for chocolate bunnies, but with a hunger to know Jesus and his gift of life...to take a fresh look at the mystery of his death and resurrection and to embrace him as our greatest treasure? What if we kept a tradition that grew sweeter over time and became more meaningful than our Easter baskets?

With this hope in mind, Jim and I introduced Easter treasure boxes to our kids a few years ago. We invited them to personalize the boxes with acrylic paints and a cut-out cross that they also painted and glued to the box. And then on Easter morning, before the grandparents' yummy treats were brought out, we sent the kids on a hunt for real treasure. They searched the house and found their boxes. And then we gathered to read the special gift found inside each box: a scripture verse representing what we sensed God was doing in each child's life. Every Easter since then, Jim and I have asked God again for a special verse to add to each child's treasure box. We also put inside a new item they can use to decorate the outside of the box—a 3-D butterfly sticker to represent metamorphosis, or adhesive gems to represent they're precious to God, etc. For us, the treasure box has become the most anticipated tradition of Easter.

**Instructions**

Purchase a bare treasure box that can serve an individual or a whole family/group. We suggest that on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter you read the provided story, "Treasure Hunt!" from the *Jesus Storybook Bible* (This is a children's Bible, but it speaks powerfully to all ages). Talk about the story and allow it to lay a foundation for understanding real treasure. Then decorate the box in preparation for your own treasure hunt. Prayerfully consider what verses you will put inside—one for each child or for each member of the household to remember God's word to you in this year. And finally on Easter morning, allow the treasure box to be your first (or only, if you choose) gift of Easter to your household. A treasure that will not rust or fade; a treasure that celebrates that in exchange for death, Jesus gives us abundant life.

*Happy Easter,*  
*Janna and Jim Matthies*