

Gather the People
March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday

INVITATION TO THE OBSERVANCE OF LENTEN DISCIPLINE

*Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:
the early Christians observed with great devotion
the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.
During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
and had separated themselves from the community of faith
were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
and restored to participation in the life of the Church.
In this way the whole congregation was reminded
of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ
and the need we all have to renew our faith.
I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to observe a holy Lent:
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.*

from United Methodist Book of Worship

Every Ash Wednesday, we hear the same readings: the prophet Joel, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, and Matthew. Joel tell us that the Israelites are, once again, in trouble. Locusts have descended and eaten the crops. The normal migration of locusts has them start off in the Sudan, move up through northeast Africa, through the Arabah, and into the Levant. Joel lists three different types of locusts, letting us know that their destruction of the crops is complete. On top of that, the country has been invaded by an unnamed country. In the prophetic writings, when things go badly for the people, it is their fault because they are not living out the covenant. Joel calls for the people to come together, to lament, to call a fast, and to repent – to turn back to God. The people actually do it and God relents. The end of the book of Joel celebrates the glorious future of the land of Judah.

Our call to observe a Holy Lent and to turn from all that distances us from the Holy One is a call to live a life of spiritual discipline. It is so easy for us to get caught up in the busyness of daily living. The space we give to God is often relegated to a small corner of our life. Lent provides the opportunity for us to his

the 'Reset' button. We can be intentional about setting aside time for God as we read scripture, spend time in prayer, fast, and practice acts of mercy and justice. It is a chance to reconnect or to connect more fully.

Matthew, in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, also calls us to examine our faith practices. They are not to be used to show other people how good we are. The life of faith is not some kind of public relations program. Our use of spiritual disciplines is a way to embody the life of faith in such a way that it becomes fully lived and not as a performance for others.

Paul, on the other hand, recognizes that the Christian life is lived out in the world. He calls the members of the church at Corinth ambassadors – representatives of Christ in the world. We cannot authentically do that as people living in broken relationship with one another and with God. When we get those relationships right, we are truly countercultural people. The world pulls one way and we are called to another way. "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

So, on this Ash Wednesday, we have gathered the people, as Joel commanded. We are here ready to examine our hearts, minds, and souls. We are here to be smeared with ashes as a reminder of our mortality and brokenness. We are here also to celebrate and feast together.

Hear again those words I spoke at the beginning:
*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to observe a holy Lent:
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.*

Amen.