

Ash Wednesday 2026



Isaiah 58 "Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free . . .  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then (then) your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly"

For the Western Church, the Season of Lent begins today.  
Now the first Christians observed with great devotion the days  
of our Lord's passion and resurrection, though I am not so sure  
that we do so anymore. In the early church, it was the custom to  
prepare for the Easter celebration by having a time of penitence  
and fasting. I am uncertain these days how this season is really  
viewed by others, or what people are really focused on in Lent,  
if anything. Back in Bridgeport, the local Congregational

Minister, the neighboring Methodist Pastor, and I would meet together at the downtown railway station about 7:00 in the morning on this day, each dressed in the vestments of our tradition, and we would then stand together offering "Ashes to Go" to busy commuters rushing off to their trains, a recent liturgical and ecumenical effort to meet people where they were. All three of us were surprised how well received the practice was, and so we repeated it every year for the 15 years I served there.

People in the city seemed to have a deep hunger and longing to get "their ashes" each year. Indeed, others began asking me at the store, at the office, on the road, by text or email, where they could get ashes today, as if that was all that mattered. It is some kind of public mark of belonging, I suspect, an important badge of identification for many, and I understand that, and respect that. It was even somewhat refreshing and exciting.

But are these people equally interested, equally hungering and longing to do the work expected of us during Lent, to engage in some kind spiritual discipline, for example? Are we even interested? Few of us here are living the lives that we want to live, or the lives that God expects of us. For we all know that we could be better than we have done, that we could love more than we do, help others more than we have, understand and care

about others more. So, the question before us is, what are we doing about it, if anything? This is the time now as Lent begins to consider making some changes in our lives, in our physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being. Lent provides us a chance to begin to experiment with other possibilities, to do things differently, to change the very habits of our being.

Because ultimately the mission of the Church, I believe, is about transforming our lives, and about changing the world around us. Our spiritual disciplines help us do that, to see things differently, to engage in the world and in our communities differently. But somehow the word "discipline", unlike the words "routine" or "habit", the word 'discipline' seems to have taken on a pejorative meaning for most people. The word "discipline" conjures up images of whips and flagellation and self-mortification. But the purpose of religious disciplines, like the purposes of our secular routines and habits, is simply to make our lives easier; to help us accomplish the very things we want or need to accomplish with ease, with as little conscious thought or effort as possible.

Now I am certain that all of us have established routines in our everyday lives. We humans are by nature habitual creatures. That's why you all tend to sit in the same pews in church week after week; it's just easier than having to think about where to sit each Sunday. Our routines and our habits just

make life easier and less stressful. For instance, we all have our morning routines, whatever they are, I know I have mine, coffee, newspapers, check the weather, prayers, and catch up on emails. We engage in these personal rituals without really thinking about them in order to get done what we want or need to do in the morning, to get us where we want to be as the new day begins. I cannot help but think how similar these kinds of daily routines and habits are to the religious disciplines that many Christians focus their attention on during the season of Lent, trying to change our personal routines, to do more the things we know that we ought to do, the things that we know that God wants us to do. But sometimes we are imprisoned by our daily routines and habits, confined by them, and sometimes God is excluded by them. The question before us in Lent is how can we look at the familiar parts of our lives differently? Lent is the adventure of looking for God in fresh ways in the place where we already live and move and have our being. It is about finding God anew in our lives, that's the purpose of our prayers, of reading the Bible, or doing good works, but those sort of things usually takes some effort, at least at first.

Thus, the season of Lent is the traditional time for Christians to review our lives, to review our priorities, to think about our routines and spiritual habits, and to carefully set up some sort of new pattern for the weeks ahead. The taking

on of Lenten disciplines is not meant to "punish" us for our sins, as they are so often construed to be; they are not meant to make our lives more difficult, for Lenten disciplines are meant to make our lives easier, to aid us in organizing our lives so that we can accomplish more of the things we want to do as followers of Jesus, as the people of God. If we are truly serious about our Christian vocations, and I am not sure that we are, then much can be accomplished with a little conscious planning and altering of our familiar routines. But the practice of establishing a religious routine seems to many to only make people rigid, or to be some kind of severe form of piety. Establishing routines takes some conscious effort and thought at first; but once they are established, once the activities have become routine, then they become simply easy and effortless, like simply going to church every Sunday. They become part of the habit of our being. They become part of who we are.

And if we are successful in changing some of the habits and routines of our everyday lives during Lent, of being more deliberate in our prayers, or more active in devoting our time to charity or good works, if we are more self-reflective in our attitudes, more considerate in our thoughts, then when Easter comes around, we just might be able to continue some of these religious habits with almost no conscious effort at all. And little by little, season by season, year by year, our lives can

be changed and transformed, until finally we are not the persons we once were, but more the persons that we want to be, that we are called to be by God, full of love and mercy, storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. AMEN.