

LENT: A TIME TO FOLLOW JESUS TO THE CROSS

Ash Wednesday
February 6, 2008

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5.20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Stepping Back from the World's Distractions

The church year, like any cycle, can be broken into at any point. Historically, Ash Wednesday and Lent marked the time of year when new Christians who wished to enter the church through baptism on Easter began their spiritual instruction. "Lent" is the Old English word for "spring," a season of planting and patient preparation. It is a time of transition when, after the harshness of winter, we experience both the fragility of life and the anticipation of renewal.

In today's Old Testament lesson, we are challenged by the prophet Joel's warning of a coming judgment ("Day of the LORD," Joel 2:1) that God will bring upon rebellious people. As fair as such a punishment would be, Joel reminds the people that the LORD is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger" (2:13). What this loving God desires most is for the people to experience a change of heart. Also known as "repentance," this is to be a sincere, "inside out" kind of change. "Rend your hearts," Joel proclaims, "and not your clothing," referring to the ancient practice of tearing one's clothes and throwing ashes on one's head to show sorrow for one's sins.

Many people find that a period of examining their heart is helped by stepping back from the distractions of the world, by "shutting down an engine or two." A sacrifice as simple as watching less television can be a great way to give yourself an opportunity to reflect on your life and your relationship with God. Whatever you do to make Lent a time of spiritual renewal, remember what Jesus said about where to put your focus. Inner change is more important than any outward show of piety. Jesus reminds us that God is our Father. And like a modern day parent, God is ready and willing to spend "quality time" with each of his children (Matthew 6:6).

During Lent reflect on the challenges in your life that you find most frightening. What can you learn by facing these fears? How is God asking you to change? What gifts ("weapons of righteousness," 2 Corinthians 6:7) has God given you to successfully take on these challenges? What must you do to show that both your inner and outer life demonstrate that you have not accepted "the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1)?

This week's Reflection was prepared by Charles S. Houser, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Editorial and Publications Manager in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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Today we remember to pray for: Time for quiet reflection and time to step back from the world's distractions. Gracious God, fill us with your spirit and change us inside out. Teach us true repentance and grant us forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Activity Corner: Psalm 51 Litany

Read Psalm 51 as a family devotional. Consider dividing up the reading as follows: Reader 1: verses 1-2; Reader 2: verses 3-5; Reader 3: verses 6-9; Reader 4: verses 10-12; Reader 5: verses 13-14; Reader 6: verses 15-17; Reader 7: verses 18-19. At the end of each section, invite all family members to respond together, "CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD."