

In just a few moments I am going to invite you into the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

Sometimes this invitation is reduced to "are you going to give something up or take something on?". These are two sides of the same coin, one without the other does not engage us full in the discipline of Lent so it is not an either/or choice.

Lent is by its nature a challenging time. Most of us shy away from that word discipline, it brings to mind images of punishment rather than opportunity. While discipline can certainly be a punishment it is also what any of us practice when we are learning a new skill or improving an existing one. Athletes and musicians practice discipline. Our legal system is (theoretically) a way to organize our social interactions, following the lectionary and the liturgy from the book of Common Prayer is a discipline because it gives us a common way to worship and to understand our faith. We have to discipline ourselves to get out of bed in the morning in order to get to work, to send the children off to school, or even to walk the dog. Discipline takes many forms and we follow a discipline in order to operate effectively in pretty much anything we do. And so it is with our relationship with God. We practice our Lenten discipline to deepen our relationship with God as we follow Jesus to the cross.

Both Advent and Lent are considered penitential seasons. Advent less so because it is also a time of waiting on two levels, on one level for the celebration of the birth of our Lord and the other for his coming again at the end of time. When I think of Advent I imagine a candle burning in the darkness reminding us to have faith and to trust that the true light will come.

I experience Lent as being a whole lot more amorphous, it's like a journey through fog where we are not sure of our way, not because we don't connect this journey with Christ to his passion and resurrection but because we don't know what is going to happen to us along the way. In short, Lent is a time of transformation into the heart and mind of Jesus Christ and the Lenten disciplines prepares us, equips us, and guide us along our way.

We begin our Lenten journey reflecting on past sins and the ways in which we participate in the sins that continue to mar our relationships as a society, chief among them racism but there are many others. Repentance is the first step towards reconciliation with God and each other in Christ.

Prayer can provide respite and comfort; it can also be a time when we wrestle with our demons. Prayer, corporate prayer in worship, reading the Daily Office or Forward Day-by-Day, or personal devotions, opens our hearts not only to speak to God but to sit and listen for what God has to say to us.

Fasting liberates us from the appetites that tie us down; some of those appetites are very hard to let go of but when we do they can make it easier to pray – either because we are

praying and asking God for help to suppress our appetites, or to remind us that we fast in order to remember the God who lived, died, and rose again for us. However difficult it is to keep our fast it can be helpful to remember the admonition that Jesus gave to Peter when he fell asleep on him in the Garden of Gethsemane – “Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come to the time of trial; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:37-38)

Self-denial can be practiced in many ways: abstinence, foregoing pleasurable activities, or almsgiving. The closing words of our gospel are a helpful reminder here. “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19) In almsgiving we can take a step for justice, helping those in need with our personal resources and this where we really struggle. We struggle to let go of the value that we place on money. We are challenged to give not out of our abundance but based on the needs of others. For some of us, time is our most precious commodity and giving up time to volunteering activities and sharing our skills and talents is another form of self-denial.

Lastly, we need to nourish our hearts and minds by engaging with scripture which brings alive to us our very reason for being, the gracious acts of God in creation, and the tremendous gift that we have been given in new life in Christ, and the example of those who tried to follow him.

We are supposed to eat an elephant one bite at a time, so make your disciplines manageable and not overly harsh and you will finish your Lenten journey with a sense of accomplishment and a deeper understanding of Christ’s triumph over sin and death and the true joy of the resurrection at Easter.

I invite you therefore, in the name of the Church into the observance of 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.