



## Lent: An Invitation to Return to God

Ruth Haley Barton

Lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17;  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

*“Yet even now, says the Lord, repent and return to me with all your heart”  
Joel 2:13*

Today is Ash Wednesday—the beginning of the Church’s observance of the Lenten season. It is a space in time in which we are called to stop whatever we are doing, no matter how important it might be, and enter more intentionally into the disciplines of prayer, self-examination and repentance. But these disciplines—as significant as they are—are not ends in themselves. They are *a means to an end* and that end is that we would return to God with all our hearts.

Unfortunately, the practice of entering into the Lenten season has often been reduced to the question: “What are you giving up for Lent?” This is a fine question, but it can only take us so far. The *real* question of the Lenten season is: How will I find ways to return to God with all my heart? This begs an even deeper question: Where in my life have I gotten away from God and what are the disciplines that will enable me to find my way back?

How many and how subtle are the ways that we as Christian leaders can “leave” God and the true spiritual journey in favor of other pursuits—even those that seem very noble and necessary! The cares and concerns of life and even the dreams and visions that God has given us can distract us from the relationship itself. One day we wake up and

realize we have tolerated that which is intolerable and compromised that which is of greatest value.

*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.* What a poignant and compelling invitation! Who among us does not want to return to God with all our heart?

### **Entering In**

The season begins as we receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads and acknowledge our human finiteness and mortality. No matter who we think we are, the traditions of Ash Wednesday remind us that “you are dust and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) This is not meant to be morbid, it is just meant to limit our grandiosity and help us to stay in touch with the real human condition that we all share.

Ash Wednesday also initiates a season of acknowledging our sinfulness. In a very intentional way, we invite God to search us and know us and (eventually) to lead us into resurrection life. The ashes marking our foreheads carry the same meaning contained in the Old Testament practice of covering oneself with ashes: they are an outward sign of an inward repentance and mourning as we become aware of our sin. This, too, is good for us because we live in so much denial. Facing our sin in the shadow of Christ’s cross and impending resurrection is the healthiest way to deal with our sin.

The disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to face the hold that our sin patterns have on us and to somehow let go. They create space for the godly grief that leads to repentance. They ask us to consider how we might be called to give

more of ourselves to others. Lent requires something of us, but there can be no feasting without fasting. Entering into the Lenten discipline of giving up something in order to create more space for prayer is the fast that prepares us to fully enjoy the Feast of the Resurrection.

### **Shaping Your Lenten Discipline**

To begin, we might consider disciplines of abstinence that help us clear out the clutter of those things that distract us from God. Whether we fast from foods that comfort our emptiness, from caffeine or alcohol that keep us stimulated, from aspects of media or technology that keep us distracted, from words that keep us overly-enamored with our own thoughts, from mindless spending that keeps us numb, from addiction to the spotlight that keeps us dependent on other people's praise... disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to clear the decks for spiritual action.

As we clear out the clutter in our souls, we become more finely attuned to what is really going on in our lives spiritually and the invitations that are there for us. As we experience a broken and contrite heart in the face of what we are seeing, the way is opened for God to teach us wisdom in our secret heart.

Ash Wednesday is also a day when we are invited to consider how we might shape our Lenten season in *positive* ways by entering into practices that help us respond to this deeper self-knowledge. The Gospel reading for today (Matthew 6) highlights concrete disciplines that have the potential to loosen the grip of sin and distraction in our lives, thus creating more space for God. As we shape our Lenten disciplines, we might ask:

- *How will I give?* (v. 2, 3) Lent is a time for “giving things up” balanced by “giving to” those in need.
- *How will I pray?* (v. 5-13) As we “give up” some of our usual distractions, it creates more space for prayer. Perhaps there is a prayer practice (such as fixed hour prayer) that God is inviting us to during Lent.
- *Who do I need to forgive and from whom do I need to seek forgiveness?* (v. 14, 15) Seeking forgiveness and offering forgiveness creates space for God’s grace to flow in our lives.
- *How will I fast?* What is distracting me from my relationship with God? What do I need to abstain from in order to create more space for God and attentiveness to God? (v. 16-18)
- *What earthly treasures am I attached to and how can I let go?* The way we use our time, financial resources and energy reflect powerfully on what we treasure. Is there any specific way in which God is inviting us to “let go” of our attachment to some earthly treasure—at least for this season? (v. 19-21)

### **From Winter to Spring**

Lent is the season in which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance—in the outer world and in our own souls. Rather than approaching Lent as drudgery or as a requirement, these questions help us approach Lent as an opportunity. One liturgy refers to Lent as “this joyful season” because it is meant to lead us into the Church’s springtime, a time when out of the darkness of sin’s winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges.<sup>1</sup> May it be so!

So let us begin together.

*“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to 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. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer. Amen.*

*~Book of Common Prayer*

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Ruth Haley Barton is founder of the Transforming Center and author of numerous resources on the spiritual life including *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Sacred Rhythms*, and *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* (InterVarsity Press). Her most recent work is the DVD curriculum *Sacred Rhythms: Spiritual Practices that Nourish Your Soul and Transform Your Life* available in late March (from Zondervan).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 2003), p. 4, 5.