

WHAT A SACRIFICE!

First Sunday in Lent

Today is the first Sunday during the season of Lent. The practice of celebrating Lent began in the 4th Century as a period of 40 days, not including Sundays – to reflect on the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. It starts with Ash Wednesday – which was a few days ago – and ends on Easter.

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.

The "Forty-Day period" was chosen for several reasons. We just heard how Jesus spent 40 days praying and fasting before he began his earthly ministry.

It rained for 40 days and 40 nights as God cleansed the world in Noah's time.

Moses was up on the mountain for 40 days when God gave him the 10 commandments.

So back in the early Church during this Lenten season of 40 days, 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.

Now, many of us have heard of Lent, but our only exposure may be the way our Catholic brothers and sisters celebrate Lent. So let's take a few minutes look at what our Catholic brothers and sisters do during Lent and let's look at the purpose.

Let's look at what we know: They get ashes on their heads on Ash Wednesday, eat fish on Friday's, go to the Priest for Confession, and give "something" up.

Let's first look at the reason for the ashes: In biblical times, it was tradition that when someone was in repentance or mourning they would put ashes on their head.

Like Catholics, some Protestant churches – including some Methodist Churches – have Ash Wednesday Serves. And Last Wednesday ashes were put on several of our foreheads in the sign of the cross for two reasons. 1) as a symbol of our identification with Christ and 2) as a reminder that we are all sinners and we are in need of repentance and salvation. And it is a reminder for us that salvation doesn't come from what we do, but because of what Jesus did for us.

Many churches focus solely on this aspect -- the mourning aspect of Lent. The crucifixion, our need for repentance and sacrifice, and focusing solely on our sinful nature.

While that is one theme of Lent, I feel the entire Lenten message goes much deeper. So during Lent this year, we will be focusing on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus but it is important for us to look to God and be thankful that he cares so much about us that he gives us eternal life through Jesus.

Now besides Ashes on Ash Wednesday, our Catholic Brothers and Sisters are known for eating Fish on Friday's – or even fasting. Fasting is normally thought of as going with little or no food for a day.

Fasting is biblically sound as it is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Now it is important to remember that fasting is not meant as a way to get favor with God. It isn't meant to please God.

Fasting gives us a special opportunity to focus and meditate on God. It is meant as a time where we take our focus off of earthly things like food, sex, drink and even sleep to concentrate on the spiritual things.

In the Bible we read that fasting was commonly done in conjunction with praying before making big decisions or starting ministries.

Now for us, today, fasting doesn't have to be just giving up food. It can be giving up something else. As many of you know, I grew up Catholic, and it was commonplace to ask my friends, "What are you giving up for Lent?"

Of course I always gave up spinach and broccoli.

But the real concept behind this is to give up something important to us. Make a sacrifice like Jesus did for us.

Again, it isn't meant to find favor with God – but to bring us closer to him and focus more on him.

Unfortunately, many Protestant churches today try to distinguish themselves as being as far from Catholic as possible that they just completely ignore the Lenten season.

Lent isn't a season that should be ignored. It is a great time for us to remember to draw closer to Christ no matter if we are Catholic or Protestant.

With that in mind, I encourage everyone to "Give something up" for Lent. Nothing that is going to hurt you – but something that is a type of indulgence – like that Latte from Starbucks you might get every day – or meat on Fridays – or whatever it is. Something that is at least a little bit of a sacrifice. For me – spinach and broccoli is not a sacrifice.

And during these 40 days, when we think about that item we gave up for Lent – we should take a moment right there and thank God for loving us so much that he gave Jesus up for us.

A warning about fasting - the Bible tells us that when we fast we shouldn't be out there saying, "look at me – I'm fasting" – or "I gave up something more important than you did."

But it tells us we should do it in private. Now this doesn't mean that we can't share with others what we gave up. I don't think there is anything wrong with talking to someone else who also decided to give up something for Lent. But the Bible tells us not to try to get a pity party or have people focus on us – but it is for our own private focus on God.

Now some people don't give up anything for Lent, but they decide to add something to their daily lives. In St. Mark's Newsletter that just came out, their Pastor, Paul Caseman suggested that everyone do a daily devotion.

While I believe this is a great idea, I would like to challenge all of us a little more than that. Most of you already have the Lenten Daily Devotionals and I highly encourage you to read them every day.

But I would like to challenge all of us here to actually give something up for Lent. Or do something special for someone else during Lent as another way to draw closer to God.

I really had to think about what I would give up this year. I thought about some type of food to give up – like pizza or burgers, but the diet program I am on right now doesn't have any room for indulgences anyway.

So I thought about giving up Diet Coke. I used to drink a whole lot of it - but I pretty much have given that up anyway so it wouldn't be much of a sacrifice.

So I thought about it and I prayed about it and decided that the biggest sacrifice for me during this Lent season would be to give up some of my free time.

For almost a year now my wife hasn't pushed me to go Square Dancing with her on Thursday nights – and I have taken that time to either just relax, or work on my sermons. I probably have been Square Dancing only 10 times in the past year.

So for the rest of Lent, I will give up some of that free time and reflect on what it means to give to others – and go Square Dancing with her every week. She loves to Square Dance and it means a lot to her if I go as well. Now I don't personally care for it that much so I don't normally make an effort to go.

But once I got thinking about it, Christ wasn't sacrificed for himself – I am pretty sure that he wasn't personally excited about hanging out on that cross – But it wasn't about Him - he was sacrificed for you and me.

He gave us a gift that words can't even begin to explain. He showed us a type of unconditional love that is very hard for us to fully understand.

So this Lenten Season, I challenge you to pray and decide what you will give up that is a sacrifice.

If you give something up or not, remember that God gave us Jesus – and be focused on God a little more during this Lenten season.

No matter where we are in our Faith Journey, let's try to focus more on God and focus less on ourselves for the next 40 days. Let's all try to pray more, and be open to God a little more than we normally are. This is a great time for us to renew our faith with Christ and work toward really accepting him into our lives even more than we do today.

The Apostle Paul says it so well in his letter to the Romans. I am going to re-read what Janice read for you earlier:
READ Romans 10:8b – 13.

Let's all call on the name of the Lord during this season – and rejoice in the Salvation that comes from his love.

Thanks be to God!

Pastor: Mark Maddox
520-780-4889
pastor@umcSanctuary.org
www.umcSanctuary.org