

Recently I have taken up a new discipline. Every other day I take 45 minutes to an hour and spin on a Peleton bike. This is the way I stay healthy, focused, sane, and connected to my body. After every workout I always feel so good about myself and every time when I try to clip my spin shoes out of the pedals my right foot gets stuck. It's like I have wasted all my strength and there is nothing left. But as I got to thinking about this funny problem that I have, it helped prepare me for Lent.

During this 40-day season of Lent we focus on the areas where we feel stuck in our lives. We carve out extra time to spend with God reading the Bible and in prayer. We give up things we enjoy so we can take a moment to be thankful for what Christ did for us. We add in spiritual practices that help center us on Christ.

Lent is an opportunity to take a close look at our lives and to respond to the Holy Spirit. This year Lent is different. As we look back over the past year, we realize that we have been in the season of Lent, in the wilderness for an entire year. We have faced our own mortality every day as we got about our lives doing simple errands. We like the Israelites have asked: “How long until we get to the Promised Land?”

So instead of focusing on death this evening, because let's be honest, we have all experienced our share of corporate and individual death this year, I would like to focus on how the season of Lent brings us life.

This evening we start Lent with a corporate prayer of repentance because we like King David seek to find life in God and not death in sin. I invite you to pray this prayer every day during the season of Lent from Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

We know that the Holy Spirit is working externally and internally. This person of the Trinity continues to invite us to turn back towards God. When we ask God for a “clean heart, and a right spirit” we are asking for a do-over. We are asking for new life only made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And if God gave David another chance, then God will give us one as well. So first we repent, of all the ways we failed to honor God this past year. But we do not sit in this place of repentance, we move past repentance into receiving new life.

On Ash Wednesday we mark our mortality with ashes. All throughout the Old Testament we see ashes used as a sign of mourning. They were worn by David after the death of his son, and they were worn by Job and many others.

Ashes were what was left over after people made sacrifices to God. So to all in the Old Testament, ashes symbolized death.

But there is something very interesting about ashes, when mixed with spring water; they were used to cleanse those deemed ritually impure. These very ashes that were cast aside as trash, as not needed, were the very elements used to invite people back into the family of God.

Tonight we see these ashes in a new way. They do not mark us for death, they mark us for life as they are put upon us in the form of a cross reminding us that we are claimed by God and that Christ already defeated death.

These ashes of life remind us that we are sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace, but they also give us hope. To be better, to do better all for God’s glory.

Tonight, is an opportunity not only to surrender part of our lives, but to holistically surrender our whole lives to God. We hear this holistic call to repentance in our Scripture tonight from Joel 2 to “return to [God] with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend [our] heart and not [our] clothing.”

So tonight, we name the big things that keep us from serving God. Since we are all virtual, I encourage you to name the biggest things keeping you from giving your whole life to God. Maybe it is fear, or grief, or pride. We are all dealing with something. Name what you are struggling with now or write it down...

Naming our sin is powerful because once we name our sin, we can address it, and give it to God. This may also be a time where you name a sin committed against you, they has kept you from feeling close to God.

For when we confess to God, God hears us and forgives us.

We all have things we need to give up this season of Lent and we also have things we need to add in.

What will you give up this Lent? This Lent I want to challenge you spiritually. Do not give up your favorite food but give up a bad habit that affects for your faith. Maybe it is complaining, or gossiping, maybe it is anger. Whatever it is give it to God and each time you find yourself tempted to do this thing, think about Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for you. If Christ could give his life so that we could live, surely we can work on these things for God.

During this season of Lent, we are also called to add in beautiful spiritual practices to our lives. I hope you will spend time each day in prayer and reading the Bible. I hope you will consider being part of the Lenten Bible study.

So, when you receive your ashes this evening, do not receive them in despair, but in hope. You know the end of this story, but we must walk with Christ from the wilderness to the garden so that we continue to be grateful for God’s greatest gift to us. Tonight we repent, we ask for forgiveness, and we move forward in the season of Lent with hope. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.