

## Ash Wednesday // Pastor Ben Sadler // Victory of the Lamb

February 17, 2021

**Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. <sup>2</sup> Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. <sup>3</sup> He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. <sup>4</sup> Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. <sup>5</sup> Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. (Deuteronomy 8:1-5)**

For most Christians there are at least two major Christian holidays: Christmas and Easter. The celebration of Jesus' birth and the celebration of Holy Week, focusing on Good Friday and Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus. What makes holidays so special is not just the day of celebration, but the anticipation and the preparation that leads up to these major festivals.

When it comes to Christmas, it's pretty easy to prepare. Because so much of Christmas is marketable, every type of business is reminding us that Christmas is coming. The radio stations start playing Christmas music. The stores are reminding us to put up our Christmas lights, decorations, trees, and, of course, buy presents. And for the most part, I think this is all a good thing. The birth of Jesus is a big deal. God has become a human being. We should do everything we can to prepare and anticipate his birthday celebration.

But what about Easter? I would argue that Easter is even more important than Christmas. Holy Week shows us the reason that Jesus was born in the first place. He came to march into Jerusalem to be our substitute, die on the cross for all our sins, and be raised to conquer death itself. That's really good news! But death and resurrection are not very marketable ideas. We might want to reenact the manger scene, but who wants to reenact Jesus' execution?

So if the world is not going to do much to help us prepare for Holy Week, how do we anticipate the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection? For about 1700 years, the Christian church has answered that question with the season of Lent. Lent is one of the most ancient traditions in the Christian Church. It is a time of preparation and anticipation, looking forward to Holy Week.

There are lots of different traditions that Christians have practiced. Maybe you grew up in a church that had Lenten services with soup and sandwich meals. Maybe you have never practiced Lent. One of the oldest traditions is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday starts off the 40 day season of Lent. And traditionally, there has been an imposition of ashes as a part of the service. In years past Victory has done this practice. People would come up to the front of church and someone would take ashes on their fingers and make the sign of the cross on their forehead and quote what the Lord said to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin. **"For dust you are and to dust you will return."**

That might sound like a morbid practice, but it really does help prepare us for Easter. You see, we need to remember that because of sin, we are all going to die. There is nothing we can do to change that. No matter how healthy we are, no matter how technologically advanced we are as a society, we are going

to die. We are dust. And we will return to dust. And yet, Jesus came into this world as a human. And as a human he let his body die also. And then he conquered death by rising on Easter. And so yes we are dust and to dust we will return, but Jesus is going to return to raise us from the dust. On the Last Day, he will transform our lowly decaying bodies to be like his glorious and indestructible body. So remembering our mortality is one way to prepare and anticipate Easter. But even if we wanted to do the imposition of Ashes we probably couldn't because of all the COVID restrictions.

So what else can we do during Lent to prepare for Holy Week and Easter? Well, Lent is a 40-day period of preparation that is supposed to imitate Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days in preparation for the work of his ministry. And during those 40 days he fasted and he was tested in his faith in his Father. Those 40 days of fasting and testing are supposed to remind us of Israel's 40 years of fasting and testing in the wilderness. So if we want to learn how we might practice the season of Lent, I think we should go back to the original Lenten journey of the Israelites and see what God was trying to do for them in those days.

Do you know the story? The Israelites had been in Egypt for 400 years. The Egyptians enslaved them, so the Israelites called out to God for rescue. And God sent Moses to rescue the people out of Egypt. He led them to victory as they passed through the Red Sea. But instead of going straight up into the Promised Land they remained in the wilderness. Now after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, Moses gives them one final speech at the banks of the Jordan River before they enter the Promised Land. This final speech is the 5th book of the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy. And in this section Moses explains what God was doing for them in their journey through the wilderness. And it is in these verses that I believe we can learn one of the best ways to practice the season of Lent.

Moses said, **Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 8:2)**

Moses wanted the Israelites to look back over those forty years and see what God was doing. He was humbling them and testing them. Humbling means that God was trying to show them that they needed him. They were not invincible. They were not superhumans. They were dust and ashes. And he was testing them. This doesn't mean he was giving them a quiz. He was trying to show them a spiritual x-ray. He wanted them to see what was in their hearts. And what did he want to be in their hearts? A love for God's command. Basically, God's commands are summoned up in this one idea: God wants us to love and trust him with our whole hearts.

So that is what God was doing. He wanted them to go through this challenging season so that he could reveal to them their faith, their true allegiance, what they really trusted in. And how did God give them a spiritual X-ray? What was the challenge that they had to experience? **He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known... (Deuteronomy 8:3)**

God caused them to fast from food. They had nothing to eat in the desert. Their tummies started to growl, and they were humbled and helpless. They couldn't fix this problem on their own. They couldn't find bread or animals or plants in the wilderness. But then God provided manna from heaven, which was a type of bread that he put on the ground every day except the Sabbath day.

Why did God put them through this process? Moses goes on to say that God sent manna **to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3)**

This is the reason God caused them to fast in the wilderness. He wanted to show them that what they really need was not just bread but God. That is why Jesus fasted in the wilderness to show that what he really needed in his ministry was the word of love from his Father.

Have you ever fasted from something? Maybe you grew up giving up something for Lent. Or maybe you or some of your friends gave up meat for Lent. But you never really understood why people would do such a thing. People fast for lots of reasons. Some people do it for show. And Jesus tells us emphatically in the sermon on the Mount **"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full." (Matthew 6:16)** So Jesus expects that we will fast. It was a common practice especially in the Old Testament. But he does tell us not to do it for show.

So why fast? **Fasting reminds us that we need God above all else.** That's what God was trying to teach the Israelites in the wilderness. And that's what we need to learn as we prepare for Holy Week. More than anything else, we need Jesus. We need his presence. We need his provision. We need his blessing. We need his death and resurrection. We need Jesus above all else.

You see every ding on our phone and every pop-up ad and every picture-perfect post from our friends is sending us message, we are missing something. And so we click and consume and buy and indulge and we feel emotionally and sometimes physically bloated and unsatisfied. We think we need something else besides God to satisfy us. And I struggle with this as much as anyone here. I've bought into the lie that there is something out there that I'm lacking and if I could just get the one tangible thing that seems so elusive, well then, I would be satisfied.

But it is a lie. Yes, food and friends and phones and entertainment are good gifts from God, but what we really need above all else is God himself, God on a cross, God resurrected, the presence of God, and his favor and blessing.

So could I encourage you to try this ancient Lenten practice of fasting from something for 40 days in preparation for Holy Week? But what should you fast from? Well, the most ancient practice is fasting from food at least once a week in order to remember that you need God even more than food. But it could be anything that you cling to as a coping mechanism or an idol.

Try this. Complete this sentence: **I thought I needed \_\_\_\_\_, but I really need Jesus.** What would you put into that blank? Maybe I thought I needed my phone to cope with life, or I thought I needed social media. Or I thought I needed Netflix. I thought I needed dessert, but I needed Jesus.

You are choosing to give this up for 40 days to remember how much you need Jesus, NOT in order to do something for God or earn his love or become a super-Christian. It is about humbling yourself and remembering that you really need is Jesus.

Not only would I encourage you to give up something for lent, I would encourage you to replace that "something" with God and his Word. Remember Moses said, **man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3)** What we really need is God

and his Word. So replace the thing you thought you needed with worship, the Word, and prayer. If you decide to fast from your phone or social media, take that time you used to be scrolling, and take a walk, worship the God of creation, call out to him in prayer, and read a Psalm or a passage from the Gospels. If you are fasting from food, take that time you would be eating, and spend time in worship, the Word and prayer. So fast from something, and replace it with worship, the Word and prayer.

This is going to be hard for all of us for many reasons. We are all so addicted to all our coping strategies that it will be painful to not listen to them all. And so I would encourage you to do this with a group of people. If you are in a Life Group or mentoring program, consider telling them what you want to give up. But even with all this encouragement, all of us will probably slip up at some time during this season. But even those challenges and slipups reinforce how much we need Jesus, his cross of forgiveness, and the new life that is ours through this resurrection. And that's what this process is about, relying more and more on the one thing needful, Jesus himself.

Preparing for Christmas is easier than preparing for Easter. Not only do we get lots of help from society to celebrate Christmas, it's just easier to buy something than to fast from something. It is easier to talk about the birth of a baby than the death of our Savior. But we need Lent. We need to take the time to face our sin and our mortality. We need to recognize our weakness and our idols. We need to confess that it was our wrongdoing that put Jesus on that cross. We need Lent. And so take this time to participate in the season of Lent.

Repent, fast, read Scripture, and pray. The more you participate in these practices of Lent, the more you will be prepared to praise our resurrected King on Easter morning. Amen.