



LENT

Week One

ASH WEDNESDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit come! Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we know, believe, and experience the love you have for us. May our time spent with you be time of surrender. Soften our hearts. Lead us to a deeper understanding of how wide, deep, high, and immense your love is for us.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 12:16-21

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

MEDITATION

Memento! Remember!

an excerpt from "Reliving the Passion" by Walter Wangerin Jr.

Whenever the journey to Easter begins, it must always begin right here: at the contemplation of my death, in the cold conviction that I shall die.

"Remember," the Pastor has said for centuries, always on this day. "Remember," the Pastor has murmured, touching a finger to ash in a dish and smearing the ash on my forehead— "Remember, thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return."

Ash Wednesday, the day of personal ashes, the first of the forty days of Lent: Like a deep bell tolling, This word defines the day and starts the season and bids me begin my devotional journey: *Memento! "Remember!"*

Well! But that sounds old in a modern ear, doesn't it? Fusty, irrelevant, and positively medieval! Why should I think about death when all the world cries "Life" and "Live"?

The priests of this age urge me toward “positive thinking,” “grabbing the gusto,” “feeling good about myself.” And didn’t Jesus himself promise life in abundance? It’s annoying to find the easy flow of my full life interrupted by the morbid prophecy that it shall end.

Let’s keep things in their places, simple and safe: life now, while there is life; death later, when there must be death...

Nevertheless, *Memento!* Tolls the ageless bell. In spite of my resistance, the day and the season together warn: “Remember!” And God, in Jesus’ parable, interrupts my ease indeed with an insult. “Fool!” says God (and so long as it stays a parable, this is a caution; but when I shall hear it in fact, it has become a death kneel.) “Fool!” This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Keep it simple? says the Lord. Fool, this is as simple as it gets: if you do not interrupt your life with convictions of the death to come, then neither shall your death, when it comes, be interrupted by life. “Life now, death later,” indeed! But your life will be now only, and brief. Your death will be forever.

Ancient is this warning of the church—so ancient that the modern Christian is embarrassed to find her church ignorant, contrary to the freedoms of this age. Ancient, likewise, is the season of Lent, when the Christian is encouraged to think of her death and the sin that caused it— to examine herself, to know herself so deeply and well that knowledge becomes confession. But ancient, too, is the consolation such an exercise provides, ancient precisely because it is eternal.

It is this: that when we genuinely remember the death we deserve to die, we will be moved to remember the death the Lord in fact did die— because his took the place of ours. Ah, children, we will yearn to hear the Gospel story again and again, ever seeing therein our death in his, and rejoicing that we will therefore know a rising like his as well.

Remember now that thou art dust. Death now—yes, even in the midst of a bustling life. My death and Jesus’ death, by grace conjoined. *Memento!*—because this death, remembered now, yields life hereafter. And that life is forever.

REFLECTION

1. How does it feel to think about death?
 2. How do you relate to the idea of preservation? Do you store up “surplus” - does the demand of scripture seem unfair?
 3. As Lent begins, consider a part of your life that you are afraid to lose. Write it down. Spend time in prayer processing feelings about what would happen if this part was demanded from you.
 4. What does Christ’s actual death mean to you?
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THURSDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit come! Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we know, believe, and experience the love you have for us. May our time spent with you be time of surrender. Soften our hearts. Lead us to a deeper understanding of how wide, deep, high, and immense your love is for us.

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 15:26

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

1 Corinthians 15:55

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

MEDITATION

Facing Death, Finding Hope.

an excerpt from "Lent: The Season of Repentance and Renewal" by Esau McCaulley

All lives end. Black lives and White lives, Asian lives and Latina lives, the young and the old, men and women. Some will die terrified to their last moment. Some will pass away in deep pain and anguish. Others will say their final words surrounded by loved ones who quietly chant the Psalter. Some will die in elder care centers, alone and forgotten. We die in a thousand different ways, glorious and mundane. It's the universal characteristic of the human condition.

Yet we push death and its signals away. We dye our gray hair, trade in glasses for contact or vision surgery, and add a mile or two in our runs. We do all we can to ignore death's presence or wish it away, including hiding the elderly and infirm from sight in nursing homes and hospitals. But death is coming and we must face it.

Paul refers to death as "the last enemy to be destroyed" (1 Corinthians 15:26). He says that when the Messiah defeats death, his people will say, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). But until we have been raised from the dead and death has been swallowed up in victory, it still stings and wounds. I carry the deaths of my father and the two children we lost to miscarriage in my heart. I carry the deaths of Black boys and girls lost to police violence and gang brutality. We carry the deaths of innocents all over the world with us. Let's tell the truth. Death hurts.

REFLECTION

1. "Death Hurts."- Can you think of times of death that you have processed (or maybe have yet to process) that have made a mark on your soul and story?
2. "Lamentation" is defined as a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. "Weeping" is a practice we are encouraged to do, particularly when we have no other way. God invites us to lament - *there is even a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations, replete with lament!* What is something God might be inviting you to lament?
3. Take some time before Jesus to lament things that came to mind, or things that are in your heart that continue to bring pain. (ex: death, loss, injustice)

FRIDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit come! Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we know, believe, and experience the love you have for us. May our time spent with you be time of surrender. Soften our hearts. Lead us to a deeper understanding of how wide, deep, high, and immense your love is for us.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:4

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark 10:38

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

MEDITATION

Repent

by William Willimon

The first week of Lent begins with old John the Baptist. His sermons could not be entitled, "Be Good to Yourself." This prophetic "voice crying in the wilderness" appears "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). He is not the Christ. John is the one who gets us ready. How does one prepare for this new age? Repent, change your ways, and get washed.

Like the prophets of old, John's word strikes abrasively against the easy certainties of the religious Establishment. He will let us take no comfort in our rites, tradition, or ancestry. Everybody must submit to be made over. Everybody must descend into the waters, especially the religiously secure and the morally sophisticated. God is able to raise up children even from stones if the Chosen fail to turn and repent.

How shocked was the church to see its Lord appear on the banks of the Jordan asking John to wash him too (Matthew 3:14-15). How can it be that the Holy One of God should be rubbing shoulders with naked sinners on their way into the waters? The church struggled with this truth. Why must our Lord be in this repenting bath?

When Jesus was baptized, his baptism was not only the inauguration of his mission, but also a revelation of the shockingly unexpected nature of his mission. His baptism becomes a vignette of his own ministry. Why so shocking?

On two occasions, Jesus uses “baptism” to refer to his own impending death. He asks his half-hearted disciples, “Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?” (Mark 10:38).

As he submits to John’s bath of repentance, Jesus shows the radical way he will confront the sin that enslaves humanity. Jesus’ “baptism,” begun in the Jordan and completed on Golgotha, is repentance, self-denial, *metanoia* to the fullest. John presents his baptism as a washing from sin, a turning from self to God. Jesus seeks even more radical *metanoia*.

His message is not the simple one of the Baptist, “Be clean.” Jesus’ word is more painful—“Be killed.” The washing of this prophetic baptism is not cheap. “You also must consider yourselves dead,” Paul tells the Romans (Romans 6:11). In baptism, the “old Adam” is drowned. “For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

To be baptized “into Christ” and “in the name of Christ” means to be incorporated into the way of life which characterized his life, the life of the empty one, the servant, the humble one, the obedient one, obedient even unto death (Philippians 2:6-11)

That day at the Jordan, knee deep in cold water, with old John drenching him, the Anointed One began his journey down the *via crucis*. His baptism intimated where he would finally end. His whole life was caught up in this single sign. Our baptism does the same.

The chief biblical analogy for baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. Discipleship is more than turning over a new leaf. It is more fitful and disorderly than gradual moral formation. Nothing less than daily, often painful, lifelong death will do. So Paul seems to know not whether to call what happened to him on the Damascus Road “birth” or “death” —it felt like both at the same time.

In all this I hear the simple assertion that we must submit to change if we would be formed into this cruciform faith. We may come singing “Just as I Am,” but we will not stay by being our same old selves. The needs of the world are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the lures of the world too seductive for us to begin to change the world unless we are changed, unless conversion of life and morals becomes our pattern. The status quo is too alluring. It is the air we breathe, the food we eat, the six-thirty news, our institutions, theologies, and politics. The only way we shall break its hold on us is to be transferred to another dominion, to be cut loose from our old certainties, to be thrust under the flood and then pulled forth fresh and newborn. Baptism takes us there.

On the bank of some dark river, as we are thrust backward, onlookers will remark, “They could kill somebody like that.” To which old John might say, “Good, you’re finally catching on.”

REFLECTION

1. What areas in your life might need to die?
2. Is there a sin you are lingering in, hoping that no one calls you out / finds out?
Write one down in your journal. Invite the Holy Spirit to search you and reveal the lies that are at work.
3. Spend time in confession before the Lord. Allow space for his forgiveness to meet you and his love to cover you.

SATURDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit come! Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we know, believe, and experience the love you have for us. May our time spent with you be time of surrender. Soften our hearts. Lead us to a deeper understanding of how wide, deep, high, and immense your love is for us.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 53:4-6

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all."

MEDITATION

In Mirrors

an excerpt from "Reliving the Passion" by Walter Wangerin Jr.

In mirrors I see myself. But in mirrors made of glass and silver I never see the whole of myself. I see the me I want to see, and I ignore the rest.

Mirrors that hide nothing hurt me. They reveal an ugliness I'd rather deny. Yow! Avoid these mirrors of veracity!

My wife is such a mirror. When I have sinned against her, my sin appears in the suffering of her face. Her tears reflect with terrible accuracy my selfishness. My self! But I hate the sight, and the same selfishness I see now makes me look away.

"Stop crying!" I command, as though the mirror were at fault. Or else I just leave the room. Walk away.

Oh, what a coward I am, and what a fool! Only when I have the courage to fully look, clearly to know myself—even the evil of myself—will I admit my need for healing.

But if I look away from her whom I have hurt, I have also turned away from her who might forgive me. I reject the very source of my healing.

My denial of my sin protects, preserves, perpetuates that sin! Ugliness in me, while I live in illusions, can only grow uglier.

Mirrors that hide nothing hurt me. But this is the hurt of purging and precious renewal—and these are the mirrors of dangerous grace.

The passion of Christ, his suffering and his death, is such a mirror. Are the tears of my dear wife hard to look at? Well, the pain in the face of Jesus is harder. It is my *self* in my extremest truth. My sinful self. The death he died reflects a selfishness so extreme that by it I was divorced from God and life and light completely: I raised my *self* higher than God! But because the Lord God is the only true God, my pride did no more, in the end, than to condemn this false god of my *self* to death. For God will be God, and all the false gods will fall before him.

So that's what I see reflected in the mirror of Christ's crucifixion: my death. My rightful punishment. My sin and its just consequence. Me. And precisely because it is so accurate, the sight is nearly intolerable.

Nevertheless I will not avoid this mirror! No, I will carefully rehearse, again this year, the passion of my Jesus—with courage, with clarity and faith; for this is the mirror of dangerous grace, purging more purely than any other.

For this one is not made of glass and silver, nor of fallen flesh only. This mirror is made of righteous flesh and of divinity, both—and this one loves me absolutely. My wife did not choose to take my sin and so to reflect my truth to me. She was driven, poor woman. But Jesus did choose—not only to take the sin within himself, not only to reflect the squalid truth of my personal need, but also to reveal the tremendous truth of this grace and forgiveness. He took that sin *away*.

This mirror is not passive only, showing what is; it is active, creating new things to be. It shows me a new me behind the shadow of a sinner. For when I gaze at his crucifixion, I see my death indeed—but death *done!* His death is the death of the selfish one, whom I called ugly and hated to look upon.

And resurrection is another me.

REFLECTION

1. Yesterday, we spent time in confession before the Lord. Revisit this confession and tend to any “unfinished business” you might have with the Lord as it relates.
2. Repenting means to turn back; to go the other way. What does it mean to “go the other way” for the specific parts of your life that need to *die*?
3. The good news is that “Resurrection is another me,” as Walt Wangerin puts it. Embrace being made new. Sit in silence, or quietly recount your gratitude to God (perhaps reciting, “Thank you, God”) as you allow God to reveal the ways in which he is making you new.

CLOSING PRAYER

May it be so, Lord.

May we know you more deeply. May we continue to yearn for you. May we shed the dead things in our lives. You came to make us new. May we embrace the new creation you are calling us to be. Let the darkness be cast out by light. Let the ashes turn to beauty. Let the mourning turn to gladness. May your kingdom come.

May it be so, Lord!

Amen.

