

Newsletter reflection for March

The entirety of March this year will be spent by the church in the season of Lent. Due to the warm weather, the signs of spring are already present—daffodils are beginning to sprout up from the earth, trees are beginning to show the swelling which precedes the greening to come. Around us are many signs of life being renewed and restored as we theologically prepare to walk through the darkest of times as recorded in the gospels—the recounting of the final portion of Jesus' life which led to the cross. Of course, even during Lent we are aware that the cross and death were not God's final word to us. Even during the self-examination of those forty days reminiscent of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we set aside the penitential and on the Sundays we celebrate the resurrection. On Ash Wednesday we were invited to enter a period of self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial. We are called to use these forty days as a time of reflection on our sins; ***on the ways we separate ourselves from God and from one another.*** Thus is easy to view Lent as the somber, solemn period of the church year, but there is also the possibility of joy in this journey. It is also easy to enter this season in a superficial way—by avoiding treats like chocolate for this defined period of time. In the juxtaposition of our mortality and God's eternal word, sin and grace, death and life, the path to Jesus' cross and tomb can be both a rugged and a rewarding terrain but not if treated so superficially. But even if not treated superficially Lent can also be a dangerous time. People can come to Lent looking for discipline and a new way to live; they can seek to be challenged through the journey. However there is a fallacy of Lent which can occur when Lent becomes only the season of six weeks of intentionality and introspection rather than making Lent the process by which a different life is built. There are three traditional areas of self-discipline which are often encouraged for this time: prayers, fasting and service. Thinking about these three areas of self-discipline emphasizes the truth of that danger which Lent poses---the idea that these are things that if we do them for six weeks---or the 40 days of Lent we have somehow "taken up our cross" to follow Jesus. The time that Jesus spent in the wilderness facing temptation has traditionally been viewed as not only a time of testing but a time of preparation. Lent, in the early church was a time when those who were waiting to enter the Christian community through baptism were tested for their understanding and affirmation of what being a Christ follower would be. Later, this period was expanded to include those already within the community as a call to reflect and rededicate themselves to being faithful disciples through repentance and renewed commitment. When the gospels record that Jesus speaks of taking up our cross for his sake, I don't think that what is meant or intended for the follower's life is a brief hiatus from the usual tendency to pursue self-gratification. Once highly valued as characteristic to be pursued self-discipline no longer is a goal many seek. Self-gratification is the darling of our culture. Lent calls for exactly the opposite behavior—whether is it observed by prayer, fasting or service. And while even brief exercise of self-discipline can be difficult, the beginning of these practices for the period of Lent can lead to the formation of new habits and attitudes if we approach them seriously. If we fast, not from sweets but from unkind thoughts, words or acts. If we pray, not for fulfillment of desires, but for wisdom and

guidance to see where we may witness to God's love around us. If we offer service, not for just a period of weeks but make a commitment to a cause. Scripture is clear about the kinds of behaviors which are pleasing to God. Lent is a very good time for us to reflect on these things as a way to draw closer to our Lord.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby