

Ash Wednesday



A Blessing on Our Turning

God our caring Guide,
you who see what is hidden,
you who know the deepest secrets of our hearts,
help us turn to you without hypocrisy,
with all our energies focused on you.

Show us your gracious mercy,
your reluctance to punish.

Be vibrantly in our midst
so that people who know us
will not ask,

“Where is their God?”

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son, who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Wednesday, February 22, 2012 Gather the Community for This Work

Today's Readings: Joel 2:12–18; Psalm 51:3–4, 5–6ab, 12–13, 14 and 17 (see 3a); 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving: the three traditional Lenten practices are all described in today's Gospel through Jesus' characteristic lens. Don't do any of it, he says, to appear virtuous to others. Be not smug and self-righteous! (Some will enjoy the irony that we emerge from hearing this reading with a prominent cross marked in ashes on our foreheads. That's intended to be a visible challenge not to act hypocritically, to have an inner accord with the outer sign.)

The prophet Joel describes the Lenten season not as grim or punitive, but as a turning to the Lord who is gracious, merciful, and kind. A trumpet should gather the whole community to this work—more important than anything else we might be doing!

What could possibly take priority over deepening our relationship with God? “Now is the time,” Paul insists (2 Corinthians 6:2). He repeats for emphasis: Don't put this on hold or wait for a more convenient break in the calendar. Now is the time to act, to do what Christians have done for centuries. Let's take advantage of the fact that a whole season, honored by a large community, is set aside to do what we know we should be doing anyway.

Some people “get religion” with fear when they hear a diagnosis of terminal illness, or with gratitude when they emerge unscathed from an accident. Today's readings urge us to turn to the God of all goodness simply from love, not from any lesser motive.



This Week at Home

Monday, February 20

A Time of Festival

Today's Readings: James 3:13–18; Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 15 (9a); Mark 9:14–29. In many places, Christians celebrate Mardi Gras, or Carnival. When no meat or dairy products were eaten during Lent, people feasted to use up those ingredients before the fast. It's also a time for merrymaking: parades, dances, jazz music, masks, and puppets—before the great seriousness of Lent begins..

Tuesday, February 21

A Time of Preparation

Today's Readings: James 4:1–10; Psalm 55:7–8, 9–10a, 10b–11a, 23 (23a); Mark 9:30–37. Shrove Tuesday comes from the word “shrive,” which means to be forgiven. One custom for today is to “bury the Alleluia.” A scroll on which the word is beautifully written is placed in a box and put in the earth. We won't use the word again until Easter, when we sing it joyously. What Lenten practices will we adopt this year? Will it be daily Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, centering prayer? Saint Leo the Great said that during Lent we do with greater care what we should be doing at all times.

Wednesday, February 22

A Time for Almsgiving

Today's Readings: Joel 2:12–18; 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2; Psalm 51:3–4, 5–6ab, 12–13, 14 and 17 (see 3a); Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18. Today, decide what work of justice you will support during Lent. You might donate the difference in grocery bills when you have simpler, meatless meals. One good option is Operation Rice Bowl, whose small cardboard boxes symbolize the season in many homes. For more information, visit Catholic Relief Services at <http://orb.crs.org> or call 1-800-222-0025. They channel donations to needy people overseas and provide Lenten prayers and weekly reflections.

Thursday, February 23

Saint Polycarp, Bishop and Martyr

Today's Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Psalm 1:1–2, 3, 4 and 6 (40:5a); Luke 9:22–25. A leader in the early Christian church, Saint Polycarp was killed in 156 at the age of 86. His martyrdom makes today's Gospel, about losing one's life for Christ, especially appropriate. Polycarp passed on to the first apostles what he had learned from Saint John.

Friday, February 24

Why Christians Fast

Today's Readings: Isaiah 58:1–9a; Psalm 51:3–4, 5–6ab, 18–19 (19b); Matthew 9:14–15. When asked why the disciples of John and the Pharisees fasted often, but his disciples didn't, Jesus responded with wisdom. Fasting is an essential Lenten practice, which disciplines our attachment to physical comforts, focuses us on the spiritual, and increases our compassion for the world's hungry. Meatless Fridays are also an ethical choice, especially now when rainforests are being destroyed to produce hamburgers. Yet Jesus points to an even more important goal: fasting from anything which blocks our intimacy with God. And as he says in the Gospel, we should also recognize appropriate times to break the fast. Other ways to fast include refraining from wasting time or natural resources, from gossip or negativity.

Saturday, February 25

Lent Brings Springtime

Today's Readings: Isaiah 58:9b–14; Psalm 86:1–2, 3–4, 5–6 (11ab); Luke 5:27–32. Can we respond as immediately and joyfully to Christ's call as Levi did in today's Gospel? He invited all his friends to a banquet, and Jesus didn't mind at all that some were “shady” characters. Do something to honor this life-giving, inclusive spirit. For instance, when weather permits, walk outside. The word “Lent” is related to “spring.” Where do you see signs of spring, or where will they emerge in the next month? Will it be a greening lawn, a first crocus, a birdsong, a brighter sky, or a later sunset?

