

Ash Wednesday

How healing will be *your* Lent?

Joel 2:12-18
Ps 51:3-6, 12-14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20 -- 6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

What victory do you need? What needs to be resurrected in your life?

For Easter to be more than just a day of colored eggs, fattening chocolates and big dinners, Lent needs to be more than just 40 days of obligatory sacrifices like meatless pizza on Fridays.

To experience the joy and power of resurrection, we have to take a journey through the experience of mourning and repentance. We have to experience the powerlessness of death: the death of our selfishness, the death of our worldliness, the death of behaviors that are not Christ-like.

In the first reading for Ash Wednesday, God beckons: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning." Fasting is worthwhile only if it improves our self-discipline so that we can resist sin and grow in holiness. We're hypocrites, like Jesus describes in in today's Gospel passage, if fasting produces no inner changes.

What will your journey through Lent be like this year? What daily exercises will promote greater holiness? Here's a suggestion: Identify one fault – just one for now: one selfish behavior or one fear or one flaw or one unloving habit – and choose a daily activity or an abstinence for the duration of Lent that will help you overcome this behavior.

Tell God about this fault. He is beckoning: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning."



The readings from Joel and Psalm 51 remind us that God is merciful toward those who recognize their sinfulness and regret it so much that they're truly motivated to change. Dealing with our need to change can feel overwhelming and shameful, but if we keep our focus on God's mercy, we feel helped, healed, and finally resurrected.

By identifying and working on just one sinful tendency as our Lenten project, we can give it to Jesus, and by the end of Lent nail it to his cross and hear him offer it to God as he cries out, "Father forgive them....!" It will die with Jesus, and we'll be resurrected to a new life, a new level of holiness, a new closeness with Christ.

As you receive and wear your ashes, do it fully conscious of your need for forgiveness, with a commitment to overcome a significant sin by Easter.

Why do we keep the black smudges on our foreheads all day?

Not to win the admiration of others. It's a sign that we know we need to change! Otherwise, we should do as Jesus said: "When you fast, see to it that you ... wash your face" so that no one but God will know what you are doing.