



Throughout the years, Lent has become associated with fasting and denial. Many people talk about giving up something during Lent. Some stop eating meat. Some give up coffee. For others it's chocolate or desserts. That's all well and good, but the real intent of Lent is that should we look within. We should change our hearts and not our diets.

God doesn't want an outward display from us. God doesn't want us to change our eating habits. God wants us to change our hearts. God wants a change to occur within. The prophet Joel put it well when he said, " 'Even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments."

The first task of Lent is not fasting or alms giving. It's not giving up sweets or going off fatty foods. It is repentance — repentance that brings us before the Lord with penitent, contrite hearts. Lent tells us to repent of our sinfulness; to look within and purify our hearts. As the prophet Joel says, "Return to the Lord, your God...." Repent of your sinfulness. Turn back, change directions, make a new start from an old life and do so without making a show of it.

During Lent, we are invited to bring our sins and lay them before God. We are invited to unburden our souls in repentance. We are directed to come before our God with open hearts and make a new start within. "God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Repentance does little good if its only purpose is to show off. Repentance has no reward if it is done as a public display of our righteousness.

Lent is a time also a time of forgiveness. Lent tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son on a cross for us that through that one man's death, God might grant us forgiveness. Jesus reminds us that our God, who is unseen, will reward our penitent hearts. God will see within.

The devil really has only two lies to tell us. The first lie the devil tells us comes before we commit a sin when the devil says that it doesn't matter what we do for no one will know. The second lie the devil tells us comes after we've sinned when the devil tells us that no one can forgive us what we have done.

While no sin is too little to go without notice, but Lent also tells us that no sin is too great to be forgiven — for we have a God who can see within the heart.

We should not forget that Lent is a time of renewal. Contrary to most people's opinion, Lent is a time of hope, a time of renewal, a time of refreshment. It is a time to turn over our burdens to the Lord.

In the Musee de Chagall in Nice hangs Marc Chagall's painting of The Sacrifice of Isaac, a favorite theme of the Jewish painter. The painting depicts Abraham as he is about to plunge the knife into the heart of his only son, Isaac. But an angel has seized his hand and off to the side of the stone altar that Isaac lies upon a ram has been caught by its horns in the bushes. God provided the sacrifice to take the boy's place. Up in the corner of the painting, however, is another figure. It is Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha. It's an amazing picture, especially for a Jewish artist, but becomes a theme for us in Lent.

Lent reminds us that there is one who bears our sins before the throne of God. There is one who hears the cries of our hearts and receives them. There is one who waits to welcome us home. That is why the prophet's words are so important for us. "Return to the Lord, your God." If we repent of our sins, there is a gift of forgiveness awaiting us. If we turn from our sinful ways, there is a heavenly Father waiting to welcome us home. Let us turn to the Lord our God that the ashes of our sins be so compressed by the grace of God that we might sparkle like diamonds in the crown of the Lord, our God.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Michele Kaufman