

A PSALM FOR LENT

PSALM 103:8–18

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us, *
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins, *
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth, *
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west, *
so far has he removed our sins from us.
As a father cares for his children, *
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.
For he himself knows whereof we are made; *
he remembers that we are but dust.
Our days are like the grass; *
we flourish like a flower of the field;
When the wind goes over it, it is gone, *
and its place shall know it no more.
But the merciful goodness of the Lord
endures for ever
on those who fear him, *
and his righteousness on children's children;
On those who keep his covenant *
and remember his commandments
and do them.

A LITTLE LENTEN GLOSSARY

LENT

Lent comes from the Old English word *lencen*, meaning 'spring' or 'springtime'. In the northern hemisphere it captures the 'lengthening' days of Spring. For us in the south, we choose to explore the longer nights.

REPENT

Repent is a Latin word that means 'to regret very much'. However, it is a translation of the Greek word *metanoia* that denotes a 'change of mind/heart', a 'turning around', and 'a conversion.' This reversal is always back to face God.

THE HEART

In Judaism the heart is the totality of the inner person. It is the central control room for thought, will, and feeling combined. There is no distinction between the "rational" head and the "emotional" heart. The heart is the Seat of the Mind: Biblical Hebrew lacks a specific word for "brain". Instead, the heart is where a person thinks, understands, and remembers.

Hear God's invitation to you this Lent:
"Return to me with all your heart"
(Joel 2.12).



LENT

RETURN TO ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART

Lent is the season of the Church that prepares us for Holy Week: for Christ's death and resurrection. It is a period of 40 days and that is no accident. Throughout the Bible, the number 40 is symbolic of radical transformation – Noah in the Ark, Jews in the wilderness, the Temptation of Jesus, and so much more. It can help to think of the 40 weeks it takes for an embryo to become a baby. There is struggle, change, and ultimately joy.

The three pillars of Lent are prayer (justice toward God), fasting (justice toward self) and almsgiving (justice toward others). In Christian terms, to act justly simply means to 'set things right'.

May these pillars be the foundation of your forty days, and may Christ the master builder be alongside you as you set things right.

Ngaa manaakitanga ki a koe – be blessed.

Photo credit: Michael Jeans



FAST | SOMETHING TO PUT DOWN

Fasting has always been a spiritual practice in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. People have used it as a way of preparing and repenting (turning back to God). Fasting is a way of praying with your whole body that can free you from some things that might be holding you down.

And it is not all about food. In fact, for many of us, it should not be. So be creative. Fasting creates space in our lives to allow more of God in. It is by giving things up that we have greater capacity to give ourselves over to Jesus.

Pause for a moment and think about something you can put down for Lent. Traditionally people have chosen to drop a food group or ingredient (like sugar, flour, dairy, eggs or meat). Others have devoted their efforts to reducing or removing their alcohol intake, coffee consumption, or even stop buying fast food.

Other options challenge us to step back from the things that get a lot of our attention. This could be social media, Netflix, doom scrolling, online shopping, staying up late or sleeping in too often. Whatever you choose, it needs to be achievable and meaningful. Ask yourself what you are putting down and wonder why it has risen to the top. What might God be inviting you to do? Whatever it is, may God also give you the strength to cope as well as reap the rich rewards ahead.

PRAY | SOMETHING TO PICK UP

As we seek to put something down with one hand we also want to pick something up with the other. Again, Lent is not just about what we choose to say 'no' to for a season, it is also about what we choose to say 'yes' to.

Saint John Vianney said, "Prayer is the inner bath of love into which the soul plunges itself." When we immerse ourselves in God, we abide with God. In the New Testament (especially John 15), "to abide" really means "to set up home." In that spirit, what is something you can pick up that will help you set your home up in God – the bath to plunge your soul into?

You might find it helpful to try the daily office. This is a daily commitment to praying and reading Scripture. (The Tuia app is an easy and free way to start this practice.) Or you might simply commit yourself to reading a portion of the Gospel each day with your morning beverage. Read and be present to God. Some feel closest to God in nature; so take your prayer time to a window, a park, or a trail.

Whatever you do, try to stick with it. New spiritual practices are not always easy but spiritual struggles almost invariably yield the greatest results.

May the prayers you pick up make you feel collected by God.

GIVE | SOMETHING TO GIVE OUT

So, as we try to draw nearer to God by putting something down and picking something up we also want to give something out. Again, this practice is about creating space for God, especially at a time when we see so much excess and wasteful consumption. At the same time, when we give something out we respond to God's goodness given to us.

We are created in God's image to be like God. As God is the ultimate giver of good things, we are invited to become givers ourselves. There are many ways that we can "give out" and like all practices recommended here, we invite you to pray about what God is asking you to give. Is it time or money? Could it be donations to charity stores? If you have given something up for Lent, could you spend that time or money for someone or something else?

FINAL NOTE

Lent runs for 40 days, but there are in fact 46 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day. This is because we do not observe Lent on Sundays. On each Sunday in Lent we celebrate the resurrection. This means that you can enjoy whatever you are giving up for that one day each week.

Just try not to do overdo it ...