



## Repent and Believe in the Gospel Journey Through Lent

### Scripture Readings For Ash Wednesday:

Reading I: Joel 2:12–18

Reading II: 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2

Gospel: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

Use this resource alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflections aloud, pausing between paragraphs. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance for larger groups. Share with each other your Lenten commitments and promises, keeping within the silence of your own heart those things which belong only there.

### Opening Ritual and Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.



**Leader:** + In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Leader:** Let us remember that we are always in the holy presence of God.

**All:** We welcome you, God, and ask that you be with us today.

**Leader:** Gracious and compassionate God, open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to you throughout this Lenten season.

**All:** Amen

### An Invitation from God

Lent begins with an invitation from God: “Come back to me, with all your heart” (see Joel 2:12). Our Lenten journey is our response to God’s invitation.

**Talk!**

An invitation to a party sets up expectations and hopes for anyone who is invited. In Lent, we are invited by God to renew our relationship with him with his Son, Jesus, and with one another. Share what you think or feel that God is inviting you to do this Lent. Who are the people in your life who can help you respond to God’s invitation?

## Study Rekindling Our Relationship with God and One Another

Participants read Joel 2:12-18 and then these faith statements aloud, rotating among the members of the group with each bullet.

- Ashes are the end product of a fire that has burnt out. Ashes also remind us of destruction.
- When a house is burnt to the ground or a log is burnt up in a fireplace a heap of ashes is left behind.
- These need to be cleaned up. Lent is a time for cleaning up the ashes of our lives.
- There are times when the glowing fire of our faith has diminished or burned out.
- Ash Wednesday is a time to reflect on what we need to rekindle in our relationship with God and one another.
- Whenever people are marked with ashes, the symbolism is that during the Lenten season they are to turn their hearts back to God.
- The first reading for Ash Wednesday is from the prophet Joel. In it we hear God's call for the people of Israel to repent, to return to the Lord.
- The prophet has God pleading his case before the people: *"Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness."*
- The entire assembly/congregation is called together to repent---the aged, infants, children, men, and women.
- How do we do this today? We do it by imitating God. Why? Because we are all made in the image and likeness of God.
- Our God is compassionate; we are called to be compassionate.
- Our God is a reconciler; we are called to be reconcilers. Our God forgives; we are called to forgive.
- Our God is holy; we are called to be holy.
- Lent is the season of returning to the image of God that we were fashioned to reflect.
- It is a time when we work anew at being reconcilers, peacemakers, forgivers, holy people, prophets, those who speak on behalf of God and Christ.

### Talk!

What aspect of your faith needs to be rekindled this Lent? What do you need to clean up or clean out of your life so as to return to the Lord with your whole heart?

## Gospel Challenges for Lent

Participants read Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 and then these faith statements aloud, rotating among the members of the group with each bullet.

- The Ash Wednesday Gospel reading comes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon Jesus outlines what it means to be one of his disciples.
- The Gospel passage provides the biblical foundation for the church's traditions and teachings about Lent — fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which were traditional, practices of the Jewish people and of Jesus himself, a Jew.

- Fasting is making do with less food. The result of not eating so much and getting hungry is that we have a heightened sense of awareness. When we fast from food we are more alert and open to the activities of God in our life.
- Fasting from food cleanses our bodies and prepares us to pray more deeply.
- Fasting is not limited to food. It also includes fasting from anger, pessimism, worry, complaining, hostility, bitterness, idle gossip, arrogance, lying, and fault finding.
- Almsgiving is much more than giving money to the poor or to your favorite charity. It is all the things we can do by means of our time, talent and treasure to make the broken world whole again.
- Fasting and almsgiving require an act of trust in God that is sustained only by prayer.
- Prayer is described as the raising of the mind and heart to God or conversing with God. Lent is a time to make a conscious daily effort to pray more and with greater regularity.
- Jesus admonishes his disciples and all of us not to show and tell everyone how we fast, pray and give alms. He calls this behavior hypocritical.
- The Greek word *“hypocrite”* means an actor on a stage. Lent is not a time to show off our Lenten discipline for an audience to applaud. Rather it is only for God to see.
- As we journey through Lent let us remember that our goal is to return to God.
- God invites us to, “come back to me with all your heart, soul, and mind.”

## Talk!

What steps can you and your family take to share your money, food, time and talent with those in need? How can you rearrange your schedule each day to provide time for prayer?

## Lent and Self-Denial

Participants read these faith statements aloud, rotating among the members of the group with each bullet.

- Our Lenten practice is not about self-denial for its own sake or self-aggrandizement. Put another way, Lent is not a time to go on a diet so as to look good on Easter.
- Jesus warns us in the Gospel reading: *“Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.”*
- We do not ask what foods or behaviors or habits did we give up for Lent so that others can praise us for our choice.
- Rather, our Lenten practices are directed toward renewing our relationship with others, God, and self.
- We do this through acts of charity, prayer, and fasting.
- Our Lenten practices are not done for self-reward but for the sake of returning to God wholeheartedly.
- Lent is a time for a heart to heart talk with God.
- The Gospel teachings about Lent make clear that renewed relationships with God and one another can only be realized through the self-denial that turns us away from our selves.

- Lent is that time of the year when we deny ourselves so that we may better give of ourselves.

**Do!**

Develop an action plan for the rest of Lent where you will daily deny yourself some personal pleasure and in turn give yourself to others. What specific aspects of your time, talent and treasure will be part of your plan?

## Closing Prayer

**Leader:** God, come and journey with us this Lent.

**All:** Be our guide as we travel.

**Leader:** Help us to follow in your ways and to stay on your path.

**All:** May you always be our companion, especially throughout these 40 days of Lent.

**Leader:** God, may your breath be the wind behind us and your presence before us as we journey.

**All:** Amen

**Pray together the Our Father. Exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.**