



Journey
to the *Cross*

Readings for the Lenten Season

2024

Introduction

I was reared in a small community in central Ohio. Our home was next door to the Methodist Church. My first “Christian Service” activity was ringing the church bell before Wednesday and Sunday services. By the dawn of the 1950’s, our family began attending a small country church of the Friends denomination. I look back on that church with fondness which became my home church until I went away to college. The people were good people who loved the Lord. They cared for me and prayed for me. They taught me about God’s love for me and called me to an early life of faith. However, this church had a rather simple view of God’s plan of salvation. I don’t recall ever hearing about the whole counsel of God. I don’t recall hearing about the Advent Season or the Season of Lent. There may have been reasons for this but as I look back on those years, it seemed something was lacking.

As I have grown in my Christian walk, the seasons of the Church Year have become more important to me. The four weeks of Advent and the seven weeks of Lent have taken on a deeper significance to me as I grow older. The season of Lent is approaching and I invite you to join me as once again we Journey to the Cross.

Dr. David Case

Ash Wednesday

2 Corinthians 13:1-5

This is the day we begin our Lenten journey. For the next forty days, not counting the special Sundays, we are on a spiritual journey as we approach Easter Sunday.

When our daughter was a university freshman, she lived on campus with a couple of girls she graduated with from high school. My wife and I were on campus visiting them and it happened to be the evening of Ash Wednesday. One of her roommates came into the dorm with great excitement. She had been to an Ash Wednesday service. She announced to us her big Lenten sacrifice – she was giving up her favorite candy bar for Lent!

Paul, in the scripture for this reading, calls Christians to examine themselves. Lent is a special time to engage in self-examination to make certain Christ is in us (13:5). This is a season of repentance for any shortcomings in our spiritual life. Rather than doing without, this is a special opportunity to increase and focus our spiritual activity. Perhaps we need to spend more time in prayer or more time reading God's Word. It could be that it would be pleasing to God if we started doing a special Christian service, like visiting the sick or elderly. Perhaps it would please Him if we offer our time at a local food bank or clothing give away. The opportunities are endless if we just take the time to listen to the Holy Spirit and examine our spiritual life. Our celebration of Easter Sunday will be great if we take the opportunity given us in this season of Lent. God bless us all as we start this spiritual journey.

First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:10

The three writers of our Synoptic Gospels record the events of Jesus being tempted in the Wilderness for forty days. Mark briefly mentioned it in one verse. Matthew and Luke record the events in greater detail. Whether the Temptation of Jesus is mentioned in one verse or several, the three writers have one thing in common – they all three place this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Why?

The three-year ministry of Jesus will be filled with hectic activity. Sermons will be preached. Miracles will be performed. The turning of the Twelve into disciples will be a constant battle. Every day will be an opportunity for ministry and service. But one question must be resolved right from the beginning. Who will Jesus ultimately serve? Matthew will tell his readers that “seeing the multitude, Jesus was filled with compassion” (Matthew 9:36). However, making people first in His life would not please His heavenly Father. Jesus would constantly have to respond to mistaken ideas of the public. But again, defending His reputation would not please God. Satan prompted Jesus to worship Himself. But Jesus told Satan to “go” and the Word of God told Jesus to “worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.” This must be settled right from the beginning of His ministry.

We are at the first Sunday of the Lenten Season. This is still the number one question. Who will you ultimately serve? The Lenten Season is not about giving up something for forty days. It is not even about doing something for Lent. It is all about “being.” It is all about worshipping and loving God with all one's heart, mind, and soul. This must be settled first.

Second Sunday in Lent

Matthew 17:5

On one occasion Jesus took three of His disciples (Peter, James and John) on a spiritual journey up to a mountain top. There, they were in the company of two Old Testament worthies (Elijah and Moses). The event was so impactful that Peter wanted to erect three tabernacles there. Then a cloud formed, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!"

A lesson was learned that day. No matter how sincere the human voice may sound, when in the presence of the Son of God, listen to Him! Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew this important lesson. On the occasion of a marriage in Cana of Galilee, she told the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5).

The Lenten Season is the time to make important spiritual decisions. Our first task is to determine to love and worship God only. Next, we must determine to listen for the voice of Jesus and obey His leading in our lives. The world will come to us with loud voices screaming for our attention. We must develop the spiritual discipline to shut out the voices of the world so that we can hear the voice of the Son of God.

*Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult
Of the world's wild, restless sea,
Day by day, His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying Christian, follow Me.*

Third Sunday in Lent

John 4:14

One day Jesus was going to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. Entering a city called Sychar, the disciples went to buy food. Being weary from His journey, Jesus sat by the well in the middle of town. A woman came to the well to get her daily supply of water. It was midday. Water was usually drawn early in the morning. It was now midday. The woman came when she thought no one else would be there. Her lifestyle was the talk of the town, and she didn't want to hear it again. Jesus asked her for a drink of water. The woman thought they were talking about the human need for water. But Jesus was talking about spiritual water. Jesus was talking about a water from which one would never thirst again. In fact, the water Jesus offered would become a well of water springing up to eternal life.

Have you ever heard the saying, "he has just enough religion to make him miserable!" The Lenten Season is the time to receive from God a spring of living water that leads to eternal life. This implies several things: (1) There is an unending supply of God's grace for each of us. (2) This living water is an internal reality. One does not constantly have to "prime the pump!" (3) God's supply of living water is all sufficient. You will never thirst again!

*As a deer yearns
For running streams,
So I yearn
For you, my God.
Psalms 42:1*

Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:7

Samuel had been mourning the fact that King Saul was no longer God's choice to serve as king over Israel. There came a day when God asked Samuel, "how long will you grieve over Saul?" Samuel was called to go to the home of Jesse, the Bethlehemite and anoint one of his sons to become the next king of Israel.

Upon arriving at Jesse's home, Samuel began to examine the sons of Jesse. The oldest was named Eliab. Samuel thought surely this was God's choice until he heard God's voice. God said, "do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord at the heart."

The gospel writer, Matthew, recorded a similar moment in the life of Jesus. By way of summarizing His ministry, Matthew records that when Jesus saw the people He was filled with compassion. Why? Because He saw that they were distressed (harassed) and dispirited (thrown down), like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).

How is your eyesight? Do you just look at the outward appearance or can you see with the eyes of Jesus? The season of Lent is the perfect opportunity to begin to see people as they really are. To see with the eyes of Jesus. As we begin to see humanity as they really are, it will make us sick to our stomachs, grieve our hearts, and compel us to act as Jesus did.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 11:25-26

The journey of the season of Lent is almost over. There are only two more Sundays (Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday). This Sunday is known as Passion Sunday. A day when we consider the implications of Jesus' death on the cross. Words of Scripture and hymnody help us to begin to understand the death of Jesus on the cross. Charles Wesley has expressed the meaning of the cross in his hymn, *O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done*.

*O love divine, what hast thou done?
Th' Incarnate God hast died for me!
The Father's coeternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree!
The Son of God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.*

*Is crucified for me and you,
To bring us rebels near to God;
Believe, believe the record true,
Ye all are bought with Jesus' blood;
Pardon for all flows from His side:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.*

*Behold him, all ye that pass by,
The bleeding, Prince of life and peace!
Come, sinners, see your Savior die,
And say, was ever grief like his?
Come, feel with me his blood applied:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified. Amen.*

Charles Wesley

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:6-9

It is mid-March, 33 AD. Jesus makes His final visit to Jerusalem. Great crowds of people are in the city as the annual celebration of Passover will be observed the next weekend.

As He rides into Jerusalem surrounded by people shouting “hosanna,” cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in His path (Matthew 21:8), Jesus appears completely concentrated on something else. He does not look at the excited crowd. He does not wave. He sees beyond all the noise and movement to what is ahead of Him: an agonizing journey of betrayal, torture, crucifixion, and death.

As we participate in the spiritual exercises of the Lenten Season, we too can escape the noise of our world. We can see beyond the immediate and contemplate God’s plan and purpose for our lives. As we discern God’s will for our lives, we embrace it and by His grace determine to accomplish it.

*Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?
No, there’s a cross for everyone,
And there’s a cross for me.*

Good Friday

John 19:30, 34-37

Have you ever wondered how a day that included cruel mockery, crucifixion and death came to be known as “Good Friday?” How did the Church, over the centuries, come to call this day “good?” There is only one reason: It was good for mankind. What happened on that day was exactly what we needed to have the opportunity to become His followers.

All Gospel writers record the crucifixion. The three Synoptic writers have a particular slant on the events.

Jesus bears the cruel mockery of the crowd.

Jesus cries out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Again, Jesus cries out with a loud voice and gave up His spirit.

The fourth writer, John, takes a different one.

He records: “I am thirsty.”

He exclaims, “It is finished!” He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

Which account is correct? Both are. The Synoptic writers relate the crucifixion from the human side of Jesus. John provides the divine side of the events. Jesus is the God/Man. He is both fully human and fully divine. Both accounts provide the same conclusion: “Truly this was the Son of God!”

Easter Sunday

1 Corinthians 15:3-6, 11

As all four Gospel writers record the events of the crucifixion, all record the events of Resurrection Sunday. The amount of space given to this great event varies. Mark records the event in eleven verses. Other writers may include events that occurred in the afternoon or evening on the night of Resurrection Sunday.

The Scripture reading for today takes us to Paul's writing to the church at Corinth, some twenty years later. While the Gospel writers refer to eleven post-resurrection appearances that cover a period of forty days, Paul points to the tradition that has grown up over the twenty years following Jesus' resurrection.

The reason Paul believes in the resurrection is that he delivered to the Corinthians "as of first importance what I also received" (v. 3). In the phrase "delivered...what I received," we have the tradition of the early Church that has arisen over the past twenty years.

Today, we believe in and celebrate the resurrection from the death of our Lord Jesus, first by the post-resurrection accounts and then by the tradition of the early Church.

Today, all over the Christian world, we hear the glad refrain: "He is risen! He is risen indeed."