



**ASH WEDNESDAY**  
**AN INTRODUCTION: GENESIS 3:19**  
**2-17-17**

**Reflect:**

The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates

**Welcome**

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

**And also to you.**

Disciples of Christ, since early days Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord's death and resurrection and prepared for this by a season of penitence and fasting. By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord. I invite you, therefore, to the observance of Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

**Call to Worship**

Almighty and Triune God, You breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us for fellowship with You. You brought about our redemption through Jesus Christ to restore us to fellowship with You. Today we acknowledge You as our Creator and Redeemer. We acknowledge the frailty of our lives, the pain of sinfulness and even the weakness of our faith. Work in us, we pray, a spirit of true humility and fervor, as we join now to offer our prayers to you.

**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.**

**Reflection Romans 5:7-8**

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**Song:** How Deep The Father's Love For Us -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw01L-gfmN4>

*How deep the Father's love for us  
How vast beyond all measure  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure  
How great the pain of searing loss  
The Father turns His face away  
As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory  
Behold the man upon a cross  
My sin upon His shoulders  
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers*



*It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished  
I will not boast in anything  
No gifts, no power, no wisdom  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ  
His death and resurrection  
Why should I gain from His reward?  
I cannot give an answer  
But this I know with all my heart  
His wounds have paid my ransom*

**Reflection 1 Peter 2:24**

**He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.  
By his wounds you have been healed.**

**Song:** Come Thou Fount, Come Thou King -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1rXneeti9s>

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise  
Teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above  
Praise the mount, I'm fixed up, on it  
Mount of Thy redeeming love*

*I was lost in utter darkness 'til You came and rescued me  
I was bound by all my sin when Your love came and set me free  
Now my soul can sing a new song, now my heart has found a home  
Now Your grace is always with me  
And I'll never be alone*

*Come, Thou Fount, come, Thou King; Come, Thou precious Prince of Peace  
Hear Your bride, to You we sing, come, Thou Fount of our blessing  
Come, Thou Fount, come, Thou King; Come, Thou precious Prince of Peace  
Hear Your bride, to You we sing, come, Thou Fount of our blessing*

*O, to grace, how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love  
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it  
Seal it for Thy courts above*

*Come, Thou Fount, come, Thou King; Come, Thou precious Prince of Peace  
Hear Your bride, to You we sing, come, Thou Fount of our blessing  
Come, Thou Fount, come, Thou King; Come, Thou precious Prince of Peace  
Hear Your bride, to You we sing, come, Thou Fount of our blessing*

**Song:** Rock Of Ages -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHlTMGbGljA>



*Rock of ages cleft for me  
Let me hide myself in Thee  
Let the water and the blood  
From Thy wounded side which flowed  
Be of sin the double cure  
Save from wrath and make me pure  
Could my tears forever flow  
Could my zeal no languor know  
His for sin could not atone  
Thou must save and Thou alone  
In my hand no prize I bring  
Simply to Your cross I'll cling  
While I draw this fleeting breath  
When my eyes shall close in death  
When I rise to worlds unknown  
And behold Thee on Thy throne  
Rock of ages cleft for me  
Let me hide myself in Thee*

### **Reflection: Yes and No: Lent and the Reformed Faith Today**

The following is an excellent introduction to the practice of Lent for us Reformed folk. It is written by Calvin Theological Seminary Professor, Dr. John D. Witvliet. Given the fact that almost our entire council has never attended an Ash Wednesday service, we felt this year's at home approach could and would serve as a great way to introduce it for, Lord willing, an in-person service next year.

"We are called to "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21), to "discern what is best" (Phil. 1:10). To see this process of discernment at work, consider the history of Lent—the traditional 40-day season (not counting Sundays) of preparation for Easter.

#### **Our Recent Practice**

Many congregations in the Christian Reformed Church today observe Lent—but in a way that seems unusual to most Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Anglicans. It is an approach already reflected in a 1933 editorial in *The Banner*, where longtime editor H.J. Kuiper described both an increase of interest in and opposition to observing Lent, then firmly concluded, "We believe both views are one-sided."

Kuiper said no to the ancient idea that Lent should feature a lot of spiritual disciplines, like fasting. As Kuiper argued, if we strengthen our piety during Lent, aren't we likely to become lax afterward? Aren't we supposed to be "always excelling in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58)? Don't Lenten obligations lead us to legalism?

At the same time, Kuiper said yes to the importance of a season of preparation for Easter, citing a longstanding Reformed practice of sermons on Jesus' sufferings as a fitting approach.

For the past three generations, Christian Reformed congregations have typically been warm to sermon series on Jesus' suffering and death, rather cool to too much emphasis on spiritual disciplines including fasting and prayer, and downright cold to other traditions that grew up around Lent: Mardi Gras



parties, fish on Fridays, and setting aside the word “Alleluia” during Lenten worship (until Easter morning). This is why, for example, the 1987 Psalter Hymnal’s section on Lent focuses almost exclusively on Jesus’ suffering and death.

#### **Fourth-Century Innovation**

In part because of the limited historical information available to him, Kuiper gave no attention to another dimension of Lent: the link between Lent and baptism. As recent historical studies have shown, Lent came about as early church leaders were also saying yes and no to possible ministry practices in light of contemporary cultural challenges.

In A.D. 313 the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and made it legal—even preferable—for Roman citizens to become Christian. Suddenly the church had a lot of adult baptisms to celebrate!

But that created a challenge: How was the church supposed to ensure that people who wanted to be baptized were serious about Jesus? And what did the church need to do to shape these new Christian lives? Baptism alone was not enough. More was needed to form these new Christians as disciples of Jesus.

So the church developed a 40-day course of preparation for baptism—a time of Bible study, catechism study (that’s right—catechism study 1,200 years before John Calvin), and spiritual disciplines including prayer and fasting. This was a super-charged “40-day spiritual adventure” or “40 days of purpose” (both are modern riffs on an ancient idea). The idea was that during those 40 days believers should be either preparing for their own baptism or encouraging someone who was preparing for baptism.

Instead of a time for focusing only on the suffering and death of Jesus, Lent became about focusing on our union with Christ’s death and resurrection in baptism. Romans 6:3-4 served as a theme text: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

In terms of doctrine, this put the emphasis not only on God’s gift of forgiveness (justification), but also on the gift of new life in Christ and the Holy Spirit (sanctification). Lent was a time for new and veteran Christians to live into—to “practice”—the basic moves of the Christian life: to deny oneself, to turn to Jesus, to put off gossip and bitterness, and to put on patience and compassion. Just as athletes need to drill key skills and musicians need to practice scales, so too Christians need to practice self-denial and self-giving love.

In other words, Lent was developed in what we now call a “missional context.” It was a pastoral innovation for a time much like our own, where vast numbers of people do not grow up in the church. Lent was the church’s way of saying yes to the free offer of salvation and no to cheap grace—baptism without discipleship.

In missional places, where we long for a lot of adult baptisms at Easter, there is a lot of wisdom in recovering the idea that Lent is not just about Jesus’ suffering and death, but also about our union with Christ in baptism. There may be great wisdom in intentionally practicing our new life in Christ with disciplines of prayer, fasting, and repentance—disciplines that are so life-giving that we plan on keeping them going long after Lent ends. After all, many of us live in cultures with too few—not too many—of these disciplines.



Sometimes we inherit from our spiritual ancestors settled answers to key questions. But often we inherit instead models for asking unsettling questions. How can we put Jesus at the center of how we mark time? How can we convey the beauty of baptismal identity to seekers and strengthen it for veteran believers? How can we practice disciplines in the Christian life without coming to trust in or be overly proud of those practices?

May God's Spirit equip us with all "love and spiritual knowledge to discern what is best" (Phil. 1:10)."

-----

We believe the practice of Lent is can be helpful for us to better center Jesus of Nazareth into the way we approach and mark time and to deepen the value of our baptismal identity. May this Lenten journey, through the Holy Spirit, take you deeper into a knowledge and experience of our need for grace, for Jesus of Nazareth, for saving. May we come to loathe our sin and rebellion against God more intensely.

**Genesis 3:19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Central to the journey of Lent is being made aware us of our sinfulness, rebellion and need for a Savior. It reminds us that we all sin (Romans 3:23) and that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). It reminds us to not turn our eyes away and ignore or neglect our propensity to sin nor indeed how often and how callously we do sin. It invites us deeper into our need, deeper into the bad news so that the Good News of Jesus Christ is all the more rich and deep and profound and meaningful. However, do not get overwhelmed by your sin – it is defeated in Christ and does not define you. Easter is ahead and indeed, has come in Christ. We live as new creations today in Christ. The light has come. Hope has arrived. Embrace Jesus of Nazareth as he embraces you through the Holy Spirit who lives inside of you. May we daily dance the healthy rhythm of confession (of our sins) and profession (we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus of Nazareth) for the glory of God and our joy today.

### **Prayer of Confession**

**Most Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in Your will, and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your Name. Amen.**

### **Statement of Forgiveness**

Because of the finished work of Jesus Christ and his conquering of sin and death we, by grace through faith in Jesus, are forgiven of all our sins. All condemnation is removed. We are made clean and declared forgiven, clothed in the robes of Christ's righteousness.

### **Imposition of Ashes**

**Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and repentance, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**



People of God, come now in the spirit of humility, and receive on your head in ashes the sign of the cross, the symbol of our mortality, a symbol of the cost of sin, and yet the sign of our salvation and promise of eternal life.

At this point, you would receive the marking of your forehead with ashes in a sign of the cross.

**Song:** Before The Throne Of God Above -- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_luuYO4TaI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_luuYO4TaI)

*Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong and perfect plea:  
A great High Priest, whose name is Love,  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*My name is graven on His hands,  
My name is written on His heart;  
I know that while in heaven He stands  
No tongue can bid me thence depart  
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair,  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look, and see Him there  
Who made an end to all my sin.*

*Because the sinless Savior died,  
My sinful soul is counted free;  
For God the just is satisfied  
To look on Him and pardon me  
To look on Him and pardon me*

*Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Praise the One,  
Risen Son of God!*

*Behold Him there, the Risen Lamb  
My perfect, spotless righteousness,  
The great unchangeable I am,  
The King of glory and of grace!*

*One with Himself I cannot die  
My soul is purchased by His blood  
My life is hid with Christ on high,  
With Christ, my Savior and my God  
With Christ, my Savior and my God*

**Sending:**

Go in peace, remembering that you are but dust and ashes and apart from God's grace, unworthy of being called the people of God because of our sin and rebellion. But also remember that you who were no people, God by His mercy and grace has made a people, children of his own household, beloved of His.

**We go in God's grace!**