



Rivière, Briton. The Temptation in the Wilderness, 1898.

Greetings!

Please read -

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)

[Psalm 51: 1-17](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b –6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21](#)

When I was a local church pastor Ash Wednesday was always a special time. There is something about worship at night that speaks deeply to me. In some churches we would have stone soup or half sandwiches or some dish that would seem as if we were symbolizing simplicity and introspection before worship. We used food to help us create a portion of an experience.

The experience that we were trying to create of course was a time for reflection on the interior life. Our culture struggles with cultivating the interior and when we submit to it it pricks us like a pin and quickly deflates our carefully crafted illusions of self-importance. At the worship service where we would celebrate the ancient tradition of the Imposition of Ashes, I would read the ***Invitation to the Lenten Discipline:***

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ:
The early Christians observed with great devotion
The days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
And it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
There should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.
During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
And had separated themselves from the community of faith

Were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
And restored to participation in the life of the Church.
In this way the whole congregation was reminded of the mercy and forgiveness
proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ
And the need we all have to renew our faith.
I invite you, therefore, in the name of the church,
To observe a holy Lent:
By self-examination and repentance;
By prayer, fasting, and self-denial,
And by reading and meditation on God's Holy Word.¹

The reading of the Invitation sets the tone for the scriptures for such an observance:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near-*
~ Joel 2:1, NRSV

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.*
~ Psalm 51:1, NRSV

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.*
~ Psalm 51:10, NRSV

*As we work together with him,
we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,
"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."
See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*
~ 2 Corinthians 6: 1-2, NRSV

*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*
~ Matthew 6:1, NRSV

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the gospel.²

You may not like the words, and I understand. I don't like the words either, but there is comfort in their confrontation. The words and the palm ashes mixed with oil



Richardson, Jan. Ash Wednesday Cross. Jan was a seminary classmate of mine and painted this piece after her husband Gary's untimely death. It personalizes the ancient words and the mystery that confronts and comforts us.

from last year's Palm Sunday Procession make a visible mark and scent, reminding all that submit themselves to this ancient practice that individually and corporately we can stand present to difficult realities.

The Pandemics of Racism and Covid-19 are difficult realities and there is no way around them. Each must be faced head on. Even if we don't want to do so, there will be comfort in the confrontation that comes with standing present rather than ignoring or denying. Too many lives have been lost in death because of denial and countless persons marginalized because of false narratives or alternative realities. In the

church we call those kinds of stances – SIN. But we don't call it sin anymore. Dominant culture never has. Instead, dominant culture thinks of itself an aggrandizement of its excess as grace, when really it is separation from God. Separation from God is SIN. This is precisely what the Lenten Discipline is for. It calls us out of our perceived comfort with our carefully crafted illusions as we confess it to the Holy and step into the reality of God's love and forgiveness.

Reflection Questions:

- Is there a word or phrase, from either the Invitation or the scripture that grabs your imagination?
- What comfort and confrontation are you wrestling with these days?
- How are you preparing for the 40 day; will there be a different rhythm to your daily life?
- What new creation are you hoping God will create within you?

Enjoy some seasonal music:

- [*Lord Who Throughout These Forty Days*](#)
- [*Psalms 51*](#)
- [*Sunday's Palms are Wednesday's Ashes*](#)

¹ Discipleship Ministries: [*A Service of Worship For Ash Wednesday*](#)

² Ibid.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Todd". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Dr. Todd D. Anderson, West Ohio Superintendent
Ohio River Valley District, United Methodist Church

