

Saint Bartholomew Lutheran Church

“Not Just Going to Church, but BEING the Church”

1748 S. Clinton Ave. Trenton, NJ 08610



7 day Lenten Devotional

*The
Season
of
Lent*



“Not Just Going to Church, but BEING the Church”
Saint Bartholomew Lutheran Church

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Lent 2021

Christians around the world celebrate “Ash Wednesday” which kicks off the 40 days before Easter (what we call “Lent”). Traditionally Lent is a season of fasting (giving up food or luxuries or vices) and repentance (which means “to re-think” things), and we put ashes on our heads made from Palm branches from the previous Easter season as a sign of our mortality (i.e. “from dust we came and to dust we shall return”).

But the question surfaces, what relevance does any of that have for us?

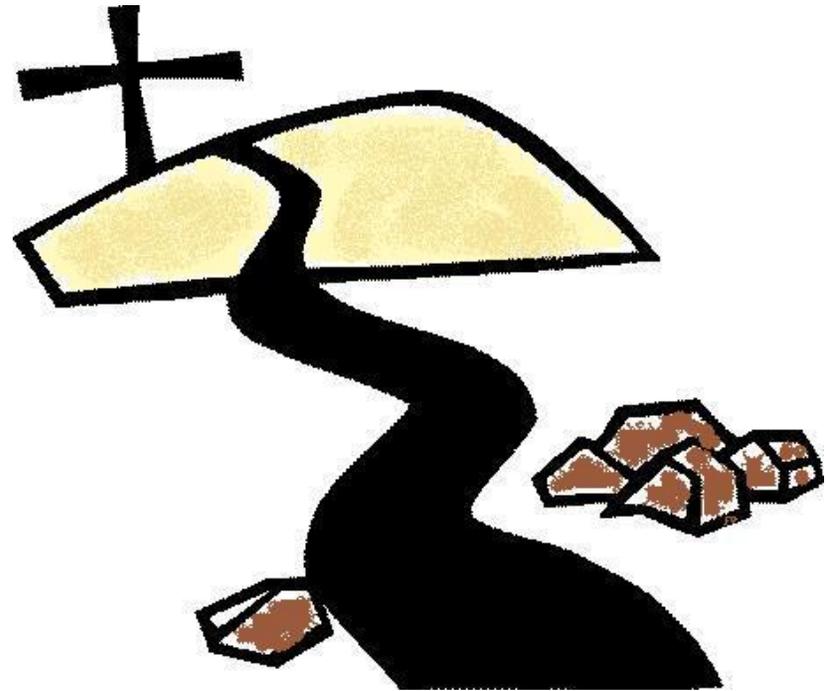
We need to be reminded that in a world where many of us are “full of ourselves” we need to be emptied of ourselves – so that our lives can make better music. All the major world religions have an element of self-denial at their core. Jews have Yom Kippur. Muslims have Ramadan. Christians have Lent.

In a world filled with clutter, noise, and hustle, Lent is a good excuse to step back and rethink how we think and live. In a world of instant gratification, it’s a chance to practice delayed gratification – to fast – so that we can truly appreciate the blessings we have. In a world where virtual friends are replacing real ones, it is an invitation to turn off TV and computer screens so we can spend time with real people again.

It’s an opportunity to give up something that is sucking the life out of us so that we can be filled with God, with life, with love again. So consider taking the invitation this Lent to “repent” – to rethink how we think and live.

There isn’t an anecdote, but there is an invitation – an excuse – to try something new. Some folks may choose, not just to give up something, but to take on something new – to exercise, read, learn a new craft, or pray. So whether it is giving up an old bad habit or take on a new holy habit... May we each use this Lenten season as an excuse to do something that empties us of ourselves so that our lives make better music.

**For more devotions in Lent ...check our FB page
and website!
www.stbartlutheran.org**



Special thank you to Barb Fletcher for writing, praying, and assisting with this endeavor!

February 23, 2021

Psalm 25

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.*

We sit in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that has upended countless lives, as well as political and social upheaval that often seems unsolvable. Despair and distress are the order of the day. In this Lenten season, we approach the cross with dread and yes, hope. These verses from Psalm 25 sound like a prayer Jesus could have uttered as the sickening fear of what lay ahead became ever more present and there was no turning back. As I imagine Jesus praying this psalm, I am reminded that he knows and holds our distress and affliction because he has known them, as well. Jesus pleads for God to turn to him, just as we do. In this season of loss and of trial, this gives me courage to face even the most difficult days. Because there is hope in God. Always hope.



Confession for Ash Wednesday

In the dark of night God calls to us;
beckoning us on,
seeking us out,
calling us to peace,
to quietness,
to wholeness.

The world is dark around us,
filled with coldness, terror and restlessness.

It is a darkness of our creation:
greed, hatred, envy: brokenness.

Take us and heal us of every evil.

Bring us back into the comfort and closeness
of your embrace, O God.

Your cleansing love, O God,
purifies our darkness restoring it to us:
warm, comforting, restful: complete.

In the dark of our night we hear God call,
offering love and strength and forgiveness.

With God the darkness brings comfort not fear,
love not hatred,

righteousness not punishment.

Walk in the darkness of your life as in the light,
for both the dark and the light belong to God,

as do you.

Amen.

Ashes are imposed on the forehead in the sign of a cross and the words of Genesis 3:19 are repeated: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Write something you want to get rid of this Lenten season on the paper provided, and burn it!
(Careful it burns quick!)

FEBRUARY 17, 2021 – ASH WEDNESDAY

Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“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.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew is giving us some valuable advice today about how we should wear our faith. When we attend service on Ash Wednesday and receive ashes, and then wear them on our foreheads all day, we don't do it to show everyone what a great Christian we are. We don't do it as a declaration of piety that says: “I don't know about you, but I have a ticket to heaven because I performed the required ritual today.” And it's more than comical to imagine sounding a trumpet every time we donate money or time to those in need, just so everyone within earshot knows how generous we are! But there are nuances to Matthew's words if we look more closely.

How we wear our faith before others is important. We can wear arrogance and conceit, judgment and condemnation. Or we can be like Jesus, and wear love and peace, generosity, forgiveness and acceptance. Most importantly, we should wear joy, that all-consuming joy of knowing Jesus and all that He has given us. The season of Lent is the perfect time to show unbelievers an open, loving Christian heart. It is only that which will encourage them to open theirs to Jesus.

February 22, 2021

John 2:1-12

His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” [NIV]

In this passage, the wine runs out at a wedding. As moms do, Mary offers her son, Jesus, to help out in the situation. With confidence, Mary turns to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Like the wine, what in your life has run out? Are your hopes and dreams depleted? Do you have any fight left in you? Well, servant of God, you have your instructions. Do whatever Jesus tells you to do, by way of the Holy Spirit who is constantly speaking.

Note, the path forward was not obvious. The servants could not have anticipated what to do next or the marvel they were about to witness. Containers normally set aside for ceremonial washing, a seemingly different purpose, were the channels for a miracle. A different path and method were required for wonder and amazement to show up.

The instruction we receive to restore our hope, revive our dreams, and regain our fight may require us to do something or go somewhere new. If you can muster up the courage to take an uncharted path, you may find choice wine. You may end up with greater hope, bigger dreams, and more fight than ever before.

FEBRUARY 22, 2021
Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

With these words, Paul is reminding the people of the early church in Ephesus of the miraculous salvation they have received through faith in Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, Paul has perfectly encapsulated the Good News that is available to all of us, no matter who we are, what we have done in the past, and how many times we may fall in the future. All we must do is be honest about our weakness, realize and regret the wrongs we have done, place all of our trust in Jesus, and let Him turn our life around.

If you are reading this, and you haven't yet experienced this awesome transformation, know that you can, simply by opening your heart to a loving savior who wants so much to be known by you. If you have already been saved, there couldn't be a better time than during Lent to tell someone your story. Tell everyone! Let us not keep this amazing gift to ourselves. Let us share it. Let us live it in everything we say and do. Let us not be quiet when there is such Good News to be told!

FEBRUARY 18, 2021
Psalm 25:1-10

¹ To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. ² O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. ³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. ⁴ Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. ⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. ⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord! ⁸ Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰ All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my god, in you I trust ...” I don't know about you, but these days I'm finding it harder and harder to trust. Throughout this last year or so, it has seemed like our whole world is going to hell in a hand-basket! And when my flesh takes over, I can get hopelessly lost in the negatives: the friends and family I can't visit; the traveling I've had to put on hold; the boredom of looking at the same four walls day in and day out; not to mention the uncertainty of what might be coming next! Truth is, I can get downright sorry for myself. Until God thumps me on the back of my head, and reminds me that there are millions of people who are not nearly as fortunate as I am. Not to mention, I am not entitled to anything. Every single thing in my life is a blessing, from the goodness of a loving God. When we have the urge to wonder what in the world God is doing, maybe it's time for some humility. Verse 9 says that God “leads the humble in what is right”. God has his own reasons for everything that happens in this world, even Covid 19, and there are always lessons to learn, if we will just stop grumbling long enough. Isn't the season of Lent an appropriate time to dedicate ourselves to perfecting a humble heart, one that stops complaining and listens for the voice of God? We will never be able to trust that God knows what he's doing, if we persist in thinking we know better! As the psalmist says, it is only in quiet humility that we can lift up our soul, quiet our own voice, and trust in God's.

FEBRUARY 19, 2021

Reading: 2 Timothy 4:1-5

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

In this second letter to Timothy, Paul couldn't possibly be sending us a message more fitting to the challenges we face in our world today. When has there ever been a time when sound Christian doctrine has been more roundly rejected in favor of teaching that suits our own sinful desires? When have we heard more conspiracy theories designed to point an accusing finger at someone else? When has our language been based more on myth: “America first!” “Look out for number one!” “Don't trust them, they don't look like you!” “There isn't enough for all of us; make sure you get yours!” “Circle the wagons before it's too late!” “I worked for what I have; those people need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps!” “Don't give him money; he's just looking for a handout; he'll probably buy drugs!” – Sound familiar? Welcome to our world.

It doesn't have to be this way. We have forgotten who we are. We are Jesus' disciples! We know the better way -- the way of love and mercy, the way of understanding and patience and tolerance, the way of Jesus, who showed us everything we'll ever need to know about loving others as ourselves. We know the truth. We should be shouting it from our rooftops; living it in everything we do and say; pointing a lost world toward the Savior who loves everyone. There has never been a better time to proclaim that Good News far-and-wide. Let's get busy!

FEBRUARY 20, 2021

Reading: Matthew 9:2-13

2 And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” 3 Then some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” 4 But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? 6 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” - he then said to the paralytic - “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” 7 And he stood up and went to his home. 8 When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings. 9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. 10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12 But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Why do we humans always feel the need to divide ourselves into “us” and “them”. I suppose it's a basic human survival instinct to keep ourselves safe from the stranger, but it certainly seems that we let it get out of hand. We constantly set aside certain people or groups of people who are not deserving of the same respect that we are. There are many different versions of who becomes “them” in our minds. However, one thing is constant: we all put ourselves in the “us” group, and that should tell us something. If we are all “us”, then who is left? The truth is we are all “them”! We are all entirely imperfect, supremely lacking, and hopelessly sinful. You and I are, and never will be, anymore worthy than any other human being on this earth. And that's exactly why God sent his Son into this fallen world to save us all. Jesus, the only perfect one, sees no “us and them.” He spent time with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, corrupt officials, all the “unclean”, and, yes, sinners just like you and me. He came for every one of us, no exception, no upper class, no popularity club, no favorites, no “us and them”. Jesus loves us all, and thank God he does, or where in the world would we be? Maybe it's high time we learned to love each other. **5**