

# Night Prayer

## March 2022: Joyful Lent



In the early centuries of the Church, Easter was the principal occasion for (adult) baptism and for the reconciliation of anyone who had been excluded from the Church's fellowship for apostasy or other serious faults.

As the candidates for baptism were instructed in Christian faith, and as penitents prepared themselves, through fasting and penance, to be readmitted to communion, the whole Christian community was invited to join them in the process of study and repentance, which extended over forty days would remind them of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tested by Satan.

This gave rise to the characteristic themes of Lent – self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter, to which traditionally almsgiving was also added.

Now is the healing time decreed  
for sins of heart and word and deed,  
when we in humble fear record  
the wrong that we have done the Lord.  
(*Latin, before 12th century*)

Ashes are an ancient sign of penitence; from the middle-ages it became the custom to begin Lent by being marked in ash with the sign of the cross.

In modern times baptism occurs at any time of the year, and excommunication is not high on anyone's agenda, so the impetus to pay attention to Lent has changed. The element of Lenten practice that would have had the most impact was probably fasting, generally interpreted as abstaining from meat and other rich foods. In popular belief this has morphed into giving something up or doing things you don't really want to do.

But the word Lent is derived from the Old English word *lencten* which means Springtime. It is a time of renewal as nature sheds off the remains of winter and prepares for the burst of new life. We can therefore see Lent as a journey from the dead to the living, a movement that is positive and joyful. Yes, we acknowledge the dead hand of sin, but also claim the promise of God's forgiving love.

### Hymn

Forty Days and Forty Nights. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9N29ZnwU4LM>

## **We pray**

### **Prayer for Lent**

O God, who makes all things new,  
new stars, new dust, new life;  
take my heart,  
every hardened edge and measured beat,  
and create something new in me.

I need your newness, God,  
the rough parts of me made smooth;  
the stagnant, stirred;  
the stuck, freed;  
the unkind, forgiven.

And then, by the power of your Spirit,  
I need to be turned toward Love again. Amen.

*by Pamela C. Hawkins, in The Awkward Season: Prayers for Lent. Posted on Prayer and Creeds*

### **Ash Wednesday – Ashes**

*Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

You only have to look at the monuments in our churches to see what are called a *memento mori*: a reminder of death, usually in the form of a skull or in pictures, an hour-glass or dying flowers. The same is true of the ashes placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, with the repetition of the words above. It is indeed an acknowledgement of our mortality, something that is not exactly common-place today.

You are invited to open a link below to a very short video of a modern example of a *memento mori*. This is an art installation, commissioned in 2017 by the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, and called *hash2ash: everything saved will be lost*.

The installation display prompts visitors to take a selfie on their phones, which it translates into an image of digital particles on a monitor. These particles drop and disperse, triggering the release of black gravel that collects in a mound at the base. In this way the watcher observes their picture dissolve before their eyes and become an ashy residue. To say the least it is unsettling to watch, so you have been warned – although the same could be said to be true of any account of Holy Week.

<https://pangenerator.com/projects/hash2ash/>

Click on the arrow bottom left of main picture.

## We Pray

There is a wisdom in ash,  
that we need so much,  
but seldom hear.

It's the wisdom of grief,  
that reminds us of our mortality,  
and that Life is more than this dust can contain.

It's the wisdom of confession,  
that brings our darkness out of hiding,  
and opens the windows to Light.

It's the wisdom of repentance,  
that stops us in our tracks,  
and charts the way to Love.

There's a wisdom in ash,  
and we welcome it, Jesus,  
thankful for the renewing gifts it brings.  
Amen



## Fasting

Fasting is an ancient practice undertaken in many religions. But it is not a means of gaining God's attention or a demonstration of personal piety. Isaiah explains:

### True fasting Isaiah 58

**58** 'Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion  
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup>For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.

<sup>3</sup>"Why have we fasted," they say,  
"and you have not seen it?"

Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?"

‘Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.

<sup>4</sup>Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

<sup>5</sup>Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?

<sup>6</sup>‘Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup>Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: here am I.

Isaiah is quite clear on this. Fasting is not a (rather irksome) ritual, but taking positive action to do the things that matter.

### **We Pray**

Your prophets have called us to change the way we worship—  
to make internal sacrifices instead of external ones.

To seek justice, and love kindness,  
and walk humbly with You  
each and every one of our days.

If we don’t give anything up for Lent,  
then let us at least give up this:  
that we might live cease living in ways that disconnect us from You,  
for every one of our steps is like a circle around Your temple.

Perhaps this Lent,  
we can give up our way  
and give ourselves to Your way for us.

So, lead and guide us on this Lenten way.  
May we walk with Jesus toward the hill just outside of Jerusalem.  
May we like Him take up our cross and follow,  
spending each moment of our lives living responsively to You,  
just as Christ Himself did.  
For that is the faithful way. **Amen.**

*(written by Patrick Ryan, Pastor at Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church in Barboursville,  
West Virginia.)*

### **As we move through Lent**

Lent 4    March 27

The Gospel reading for today is Luke 15 1-2 and 11-32, the parable of the Lost or Prodigal Son. It amongst other things a parable about reconciliation, surely one of the positive elements we should be aiming for in Lent. Before we read a reminder from another Old Testament prophet.

And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God. *(Micah 6:8)*

### **The Parable of the Lost Son**

**15** Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.



*Return of the Prodigal Son Rembrandt 1669*

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

**Reflection** (From Church of Scotland website)

It is easy to rush to the second part of verse 11 and get into the detail of this much loved parable. But it is worth pausing with verses 1 and 2. Who was listening then and who are we who listen now? There is an implicit invitation to place ourselves in this story from the

outset. Do we approach as a listener (v1) or are we grumbling before the story has even begun (v2)?

Reading this familiar story through the lens of walking humbly (a Lenten theme) there is a distinction in this story between humiliation and humility.

The younger son reaches the point of ultimate humiliation and rejection in v6. He would even have eaten the food of the unclean animals! The listening Pharisees would have found this scandalous. The phrase "no one gave him anything", further carves out his humiliation, this is rock bottom.

This poignant phrase is echoed by the elder brother in his angry response to the father in verse 29: "You have never given me even a young goat..."

Both brothers have real or imagined scarcity and need. Whether or not they choose humility is the key to their different responses and why the story ends with one brother partying and the other outside in a furious huff. One brother chooses, in humility, to turn towards the father, the other, in pride, stays away.

Braced with all the right sounding, contrite words, the younger brother sets out for home. In rehearsing his homecoming speech that he is "no longer worthy to be called your son," he has fallen foul of defining humility as something many of us have done. That is, being humble is to belittle our identity in the world, we are 'being backward about coming forward'. What this story conveys so well, is that in choosing to walk humbly towards God, we discover the embrace and acceptance of being a child of God. An idea encapsulated so well in that beautiful poem by Marianne Williamson, cited in part here:

We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you *not* to be?  
You are a child of God.

Your playing small  
Does not serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,  
As children do.  
We were born to make manifest  
The glory of God that is within us.

It is the older brother who has played by the rules and yet missed the part about walking humbly as a requirement by God (Micah 6:8), who is left outside in the dark listening to the party music. He chooses pride over humility and remains resistant to his father's embrace. He remains trapped in a mindset of scarcity, his heart closed to all that is his.

## Worship music

It is one of life's realities that it is easy to understand and accept the message we have been hearing about Lent, but it is another thing to make it happen.

The song 'Willing Minds' by Liturgical Folk expresses the problem we face. It has been derived from the collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order  
the unruly wills and affections of sinners:  
Grant your people grace to love what you command  
and desire what you promise;  
that, among the swift and varied changes of the world,  
our hearts may surely there be fixed  
where true joys are to be found;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The words of the song are below.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhuGIFf\\_53g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhuGIFf_53g)

### VERSE 1

Our minds are fickle and our wills are flighty,  
They flit about like dry petals in the wind.  
Feelings chase their tails, they turn and tumble;  
Our inmost selves are all undisciplined.

### VERSE 2

No, we cannot control the will's affections,  
Our hearts are all self-centered, they cannot hold.  
We don't even know what we desire,  
Without a cause or goal our lives unfold.

### VERSE 3

You could constrain or force our wills to order,  
But then Imago Dei in us would be lost.  
We would be machines instead of humans  
But God would have His friends whate'er the cost.

### VERSE 4

Let Jesus shape our minds and wills, O Father.  
Yes, let Him change our hearts by His holy grace.  
Help us freely love what you desire,  
And let us will your will and seek your face.

## **Sending out for our Lenten journey**

In the footsteps of centuries of pilgrims,  
go now to embark on your Lenten journey.  
Consider how you may simplify your days,  
so that you may travel lightly.

Be alert to all that could side-track you:  
notice that which beckons alluringly,  
or with apparently greater urgency,  
than the pilgrim journey Christ invites.

Do not try to cover  
more than one good day's journey at a time.  
Know when to stop for food and sleep,  
so that the journey will not be too great for you.

Walk humbly, knowing that the goal  
is not recognition, achievement or reward,  
but simply to have come to know Christ  
and yourself more intimately.

Be on the lookout for other pilgrims,  
caring for those who limp, or fall;  
those who cannot see the way forward:  
pilgrimage is richer in community.

Go now: place your hand  
into the outstretched hand of Jesus Christ,  
allow the words of the story to guide you,  
and pray for purity of heart and mind. **Amen.**

*(written by Ann Siddall, in Lent to Easter liturgies: Year C. Posted on the website of  
the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre.)*

## **Closing music and dance**

You might like to watch 'Seas of Crimson' by Bethel Music. This is not a song but a dance in which Jessica Lind of the Oregon Ballet Theatre dances with dust that starts ash-grey but by the composition's end turns to vibrant colour. A metaphor for the Lenten journey, perhaps?

<https://vimeo.com/135068026>

## Blessing

May we find the road that leads to life;  
may we take the turns that brings right relationships;  
may we pause to accompany others on the way;  
and may we journey with God through Lent,  
and long for the horizon and dawn.

*(written by Roddy Hamilton, and posted on the Church of Scotland's Starters for Sunday website)*



*Sawai Chinnawong  
(Thai, 1959–), Genesis 9:13,  
2004.*

*This depicts the covenant of  
the rainbow after the flood.  
(The story is one of the  
Lenten lectionary readings)*

*It also serves to remind us  
that Lent can be a joyful  
time too!*