

Lent: Penitence, Pilgrimage, Preparation



Since very ancient times, Christians of all ages and places have observed the season of Lent. Throughout that long history, it has always been a time for spiritual renewal in anticipation of the great feast of Easter, the center of the church's year. How do you keep Lent?

Did you know?

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Lent: Penitence, Pilgrimage, Preparation was written by Audrey Novak Riley.

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How to Use This Resource

This resource is an imaginative exploration of three aspects of the season of Lent: penitence, pilgrimage and preparation for baptism. It is not a history lesson (although it draws on the experiences and writings of people of faith throughout history), Bible study (although it draws on Scripture) or other intellectual exploration of Lent. It is an exercise of the imagination, and as such, depends on the willingness of the participants to put themselves into the scenes and incidents described.

This resource is intended for use by a group. It consists of an introduction that includes an opening prayer, group discussion and private journaling at home; three imaginative vignettes that include group discussion; and closing prayer. Suggested Lenten practices appear throughout this resource; some may be taken up immediately but others call for more preparation.

The three vignettes and their related “Let’s Imagine Together” sections might be read aloud by one or more persons, or they might be presented as dramas. Feel free to expand upon the brief descriptions and discussion questions here; dialogue, action and so on will make it easier to engage participants’ imaginations.

Encourage participants to draw on their own experiences and observations and to join in discussion freely; there are no right or wrong answers. The success of this program depends upon the group’s participation.

This resource may be presented as part of an afternoon retreat program or it could be presented over three or four sessions. It’s all up to you to decide how to present and use this resource to best engage your group.

Encourage participants to have a journal for the “getting ready” exercise.

No matter how you decide to present this Lenten resource, always include prayer, hospitality (a simple soup supper would be appropriate) and an opportunity for giving back. Prayer, fasting and charity or service are classic Lent practices.



Lent: A Season of Renewal

OPENING

Invitation

The leader speaks these or similar words.

Sisters in Christ, today we reflect upon the time of remembering Jesus' passover from death to life, and our life in Christ is renewed.

In this holy season of Lent, we acknowledge our need for repentance and for God's mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another and to live in harmony with creation. But our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbors and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbor. We are invited, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament. Let us continue our journey through these forty days to the great Three Days of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Hymn

"O Lord, throughout These Forty Days," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 319

Prayer

Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days.

Renew us in the gift of baptism,
that we may provide for those who are poor,
pray for those in need,
fast from self-indulgence,
and above all that we may find our treasure in the life
of your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.

(Invitation to Lent, adapted, and concluding prayer from the service for Ash Wednesday in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* © 2006. All rights reserved.

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GETTING READY FOR RENEWAL

Lent has always been a season for spiritual renewal—but how do we know if something or someone has been renewed? Paying attention to the difference between "before" and "after" is a good start. So let's take some notes on our "before" so we can compare "after" and see how our Lenten spiritual renewal went.

This "before" section comes in two parts. First, some group discussion, and later, some private reflection and journaling at home. Then tuck your journal away until after Easter, when you can take it out again and see where new spiritual growth has taken place during Lent.

Let's Talk About It

What Lenten practices have you heard of, and have you tried any of them? How did that go? What did it mean or represent to you? Was it a physical, mental, spiritual, social, financial, ecological or global practice? Did you find it spiritually renewing in some way? How? Have you always observed Lent the same way? What would you think about trying something different? Why or why not?

Reflection and Journaling

These questions are only suggestions for your private reflection and journaling at home. No one will see your notes but you. Once you've written as much as you feel called to do, tuck your journal away until after Easter.



Physically: How is my relationship with my body? Do I treat my body and other people's bodies as the beloved creation of God that they are?

Mentally: How is my relationship with my mind and other people's minds? How do I feel about taking in new ideas? If my congregation offers adult forums to learn more about our faith, have I participated? Might I? Do I respect my mind and other people's minds as the beloved creation of God that they are?

Spiritually: How is my prayer life? Do I prepare for Sunday worship by reading and pondering the appointed Scripture passages ahead of time? When was the last time I received Holy Communion? Do I respect my soul and other people's souls as the beloved creation of God that they are?

Socially: Are my friendships and family relationships respectful and rewarding for everyone concerned? Do I take part in social activities or events at my congregation or with people I know from church? Do I respect my family, friends, neighbors and congregation as the beloved creation of God that they are?

Financially: How is my relationship to money? Do I worry about money, try not to think about it or plan and act prudently? Do I respect money as the useful tool (but no more than that) that our loving God has given us?

Ecologically: How is my relationship to the earth? Do I treat the earth and natural resources as the beloved creation of God that they are?

Globally: How is my relationship to the human race? Do I respect all humanity, far and near, as the beloved creation of God that we all are?

Lent: A Season for Penitence

Every year on Ash Wednesday, Christians all over the world have our faces marked with ashes, with a reminder that we are dust and to dust we will return. Where does this come from?

In the Scriptures, we find stories of people marking themselves with ashes as a sign of penitence, humility or grief. See, for example, Jonah 3:5–9, Job 42:6, Jeremiah 6:26 and Matthew 11:21.

The church continued this practice, using it to signify penitence. At least as far back as the third century, people who had fallen into serious sin and wanted to be reconciled with God and the community went through a penitential rite that began with a mark of ashes on the forehead on the first Sunday of Lent. On Maundy Thursday, they would be solemnly and joyfully welcomed back into full fellowship with the community.

Sympathetic friends and relatives would often present themselves for ashes alongside the repentant sinner, and before long almost everyone in the congregation received ashes on the first Sunday of Lent.

The six-week Lent observed in the western part of the Roman Empire as far back as the fourth century didn't quite add up to forty days. If we count from the first Sunday of Lent to Maundy Thursday, leaving out the Sundays (which are never fast days, being little Easters), we come up with 36.

VIGNETTE: ASHES IN THE RUINS

In about the year 575, a bright young man from a wealthy family was appointed prefect of the city of Rome. That wasn't nearly as glorious as it sounds—the last emperor had been deposed by a barbarian warlord more than a century before. Since then, the city had been sacked, besieged, recaptured and otherwise ravaged by a succession of Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, Lombards and anyone

else with an ax to grind. Refugees from all over the embattled western empire packed the crumbling city, where hunger and disease ran rampant through the overcrowded tenements and slums.

The bright young man—his name was Gregory—was an effective prefect, but after his father died, Gregory was glad to resign his post. He donated his inheritance to charity and happily turned to a life of monastic prayer and study.

God clearly had other plans.

In the year 589, a flood destroyed the municipal grain warehouses, and the many people who depended on the city's regular supply of bread were in danger of starvation. An epidemic broke out, killing thousands of people, including the bishop. The terrified people of Rome remembered how effective Gregory had been as prefect and demanded that he be elected bishop of Rome, much to his dismay.

But the people were suffering and there was no time to argue. Gregory went to work right away with the best tools he had. First, prayer. He led the people in litanies, penitential processions and unceasing prayer for God's mercy on the suffering city. Crowds of people streamed through the streets praying "Kyrie eleison," "Lord, have mercy."

Next, realizing that the tattered remnants of the civil government were simply unable to help, he organized the resources of the church to save the people from starvation. He threw open the church's granaries and directed that the food produced on the church's many farms no longer be sold to finance the church's operations—it was all for the hungry people of Rome. He said that the church's property was the property of the poor, and he held the office of steward.

Gregory ordered that food be distributed regularly, and an army of church workers went out every morning with prepared food for anyone who could not pick up their supply for any reason.



Gregory's dedication to prayer and to service makes him an example of Lenten life already, but he did one more thing—he moved the first day of Lent from Sunday back to Wednesday, making the forty-day Lenten fast really add up to forty days. And he called for everyone to receive ashes on that Wednesday, giving us Ash Wednesday.

Let's Imagine Together

Our family used to be farmers, but a gang of barbarians bristling with broadswords stole our livestock and burned our barns. We ran for our lives to Rome, where we knew we could at least get bread. We managed to find a place to live, such as it is, and the city's bread is enough to keep body and soul together. There's a church not too far away, and that's a comfort in these terrible times.

We often find ourselves murmuring phrases from the Lord's Prayer as we go about our day: Give us today our daily bread, forgive us our sins, save us from the time of trial, deliver us from evil.

But now the river is overflowing and the city's grain supply is ruined. What will we do for food? Give us our daily bread. And now comes a plague, and even the old bishop is killed! Is it the end of the world? Forgive us our sins, save us from the time of trial.

The new bishop asks us all to pray, and he shows us ways to pray. We join in the crowds processing throughout the city praying fervently for God's mercy on us. Forgive us our sins, deliver us from evil.

Then the people from the church start spreading this news: We have food for you. Come to the church for bread and oil and cheese. If you know someone who can't come to the church to get their food, tell us.

We tell one of the people at the church about our neighbor who is sick. She comes back with us, bringing hot food and prayer. We learn that she will bring food every morning, so if anyone else is ill, we are to tell her and she will bring food for them, too.

And there, at the church, we find bread. We find the mercy we had prayed for. Give us today our daily bread.

Let's Talk About It

In the face of terrible conditions, Gregory called for both prayer and service. Why not one or the other?

Gregory was gentle to the poor and the penitent, but he could be harsh to those who he thought weren't doing enough to feed the hungry people taking refuge in Rome. Why do you suppose some people weren't as quick to serve them as Gregory would have liked?

Let's talk about the neighbor who was too sick to pick up food for herself at the church. If you were in her shoes, how would you feel about your neighbors telling the church workers that you were in need? Why or why not?

Read aloud from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, beginning at verse 31. Do you think most people see Christ in someone who's poor and hungry and homeless? Why or why not? Do you think it's harder to see Christ in poor or homeless people the closer they are? Why or why not?

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

During the epidemic, Gregory called on everyone to pray for the sick—and he specifically called for a blessing anytime anyone sneezed, to protect both sneezer and blesser. So the next time you say “God bless you!” after someone sneezes, you're carrying on a practice that goes back to a reluctant bishop doing his best to help his suffering people.

LENTEN PRACTICE: PENITENCE AND FORGIVENESS

Our Ash Wednesday service includes a beautiful penitential litany. You might pray it as part of your own Lenten practice.

Most holy and merciful God,
**we confess to you and to one another,
and before the whole company of heaven,
that we have sinned by our fault,
by our own fault,
by our own most grievous fault,
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, and
mind, and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We have not forgiven others as we have been
forgiven.

Have mercy on us, O God.

We have shut our ears to your call to serve as Christ
served us.

We have not been true to the mind of Christ.

We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our past unfaithfulness,
the pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy that have
infected our lives,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways,
and our exploitation of other people,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our negligence in prayer and worship,
and our failure to share the faith that is in us,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our neglect of human need and suffering,
and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our false judgments,
our uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors,
and our prejudice and contempt toward those who
differ from us,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our waste and pollution of your creation,
and our lack of concern for those who come after us,
we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Restore us, O God, and let your anger depart from us.

Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great.

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Lent: A Season for Pilgrimage

Sometimes people describe Lent as a journey, perhaps thinking of the Exodus story of the people journeying through the wilderness for forty years before finding the promised land, or of Jesus' Gospel journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Or maybe they're thinking of a spiritual journey of Lenten renewal.

Another kind of journey is a pilgrimage—a spiritual journey that also includes a physical journey. Traveling to see and experience a holy place has a long history. The Bible is full of pilgrimages—there are even 15 psalms that were especially intended for pilgrims to sing on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem (Psalms 120–134).

Take a look at Psalm 122. Jesus and his family and friends almost certainly sang this on the road every time they went to the Temple in Jerusalem.

VIGNETTE: A TOURIST IN THE HOLY LAND

In about the year 381, a delightful woman named Egeria set out from her home in northwestern Spain (or southwestern France) on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She kept a travel diary in which she carefully described the places she saw, the things she did, the people she met, the ways they prayed, what time they prayed, and so on, in great detail. (Scholars and liturgists just *love* Egeria.)

She paid especially close attention to how the people in Jerusalem observed Lent, marveling at how Jerusalem's Lenten practices were different from how they did things back home.

Many scholars suggest that Jerusalem's various Lenten practices were brought by the throngs of pilgrims who came from all over. The Jerusalem churches wanted to help the pilgrims pray, and so they were happy to adopt useful practices from elsewhere. Then when the pilgrims returned home, they carried memories of their experiences with them and adapted them for their own churches.

Let's take a look.

Throughout Lent and especially during Holy Week, Egeria writes, services are held at different places around Jerusalem—especially the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane—followed by processions to the church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the site of Christ's empty tomb.

These processions eventually grew into the pilgrims' practice of following a particular route from the ruins of the Fortress Antonia where the soldiers mocked Jesus, through the streets of the city where he carried his cross, to Golgotha and to the tomb. They would stop at certain places along the way and pray. No one knows how many millions of Christians have walked prayerfully along that path over the centuries.

This pilgrims' path, the Via Crucis, is the source of the Lenten practice known as the Stations of the Cross or the Way of the Cross.

Let's Imagine Together

In a chilly stone house in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains, we gather to read a long letter that just arrived from our friend Egeria, far away in the Holy Land. Our hostess sits by the window, where the light is good, and reads Egeria's letter aloud to the rest of us.

She reads what Egeria has written about the processions through the city and we all wish that we, too, could walk where Jesus walked, that we, too, could pray along the path of his Passion. And then one of the women gathered to hear the letter suddenly says, "Why don't we make our own Via Crucis here?"

We're all a little startled. What could she mean by this? She picks up her Bible and goes on: "Let's look through the Gospels and pick out places along Christ's way to the cross. From what the Scriptures

say and from what Egeria wrote to us about it, we can imagine what it must have been like.”

Another one picks up the idea: “We can ask people to make art that will help us put ourselves into the crowds witnessing his Passion.” And a third one chimes in: “Yes! And we can pray with the texts, and the art, and our friends and neighbors.”

We are all delighted with the idea and talk excitedly about how to put it into practice. Should it be permanent or temporary, indoors or outdoors? How many stops along the way of the cross should there be? Who will make the art? What kind of art? Can someone arrange prayers and hymns? Will people walk the path alone or with others? What will that look like?

By the time Lent comes around again, we have a Way of the Cross in our own village.

Let's Talk About It

Have you ever taken a pilgrimage? Would a visit to a historic church in your own town qualify? How about if it's not a historic church, but just a different church?

Have you ever prayed the Way of the Cross, sometimes called Stations of the Cross? What was your experience? Did you find it enriching? In what way? Do you think your experience might be different if you did it again?

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Egeria reports that everyone in Jerusalem keeps the Lenten fast one way or another, and she describes all those various ways (in detail!). Then she adds, “No one exacts from anyone how much they should do, but everyone does what they can. The one who does much is not praised, and the one who does less is not blamed. That is the custom here.”

LENTEN PRACTICE: WAY OF THE CROSS

There are many different versions of the Via Crucis. The ELCA's hymnal *This Far by Faith* includes a lovely service with prayers, readings and hymns for each of eight scriptural stations. The Way of the Cross here is adapted from that service.

The Way of the Cross

Each of the eight scriptural stations of this devotion may include an artistic representation of the event remembered at each station, or it may be marked with a simple cross. The procession begins in a gathering space, moves from station to station, and ends in the gathering space.

This version calls for two leaders of prayer and one or more readers. Please feel free to add appropriate hymns or other music.

The procession begins with all gathered in one place.

Opening Prayer

Leader 1 In the name of the Father, and of the +
Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All Amen.

Leader 2 Lord, have mercy.

All Christ, have mercy.

Leader 2 Lord, have mercy.

All Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Leader 2 We will glory in the cross of our Lord
Jesus Christ,

All in whom is our salvation, our life, and
resurrection.

Leader 1 Let us pray.

Mercifully assist us, O Lord God of our salvation, that
we may remember with joy the mighty acts whereby
you have given us life everlasting; through Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen.

The procession moves to the first station.

First Station: Jesus is condemned to death

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All By your holy cross you have redeemed the
world.

Reader As soon as it was morning, the chief
priests held a consultation with the elders and
scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus,
led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate
spoke to the crowd: "What do you wish me to do with
the man you call the king of the Jews?" They shouted
back, "Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Why, what
evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more,
"Crucify him!" So, after flogging Jesus, Pilate handed
him over to be crucified.

Leader 2 God did not spare his own Son,

All but delivered him up for us all.

Leader 1 Let us pray.

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at the hands of sinners and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,

All **have mercy and hear us.**

The procession moves to the second station.

Second Station: Jesus takes up his cross

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Reader Carrying the cross by himself, Jesus went out to the place called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches, and wisdom and strength, and honor and glory and blessing.

Leader 2 The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all:

All **for the transgression of my people was he stricken.**

Leader 1 Let us pray.

Almighty God, whose beloved Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption: Give us courage to take up our cross and follow him; who lives and reigns forever and ever.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,

All **have mercy and hear us.**

The procession moves to the third station.

Third Station: The cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Reader As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Leader 2 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me

All **cannot be my disciple.**

Leader 1 Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son came not to be served but to serve: Bless all who, following in his steps, give themselves to the service of others; that with wisdom, patience, and courage, they may minister in his name to the suffering, the friendless, and the needy; for the love of him who laid down his life for us, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,

All **have mercy and hear us.**

The procession moves to the fourth station.

Fourth Station: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Reader A great number of the people followed Jesus, and among them were women who were wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”

Leader 2 Those who sowed with tears
All will reap with songs of joy.

Leader 1 Let us pray.
Teach your church, O Lord, to mourn the sins of which it is guilty, and to repent and forsake them; that, by your pardoning grace, the results of our iniquities may not be visited upon our children and our children’s children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,
All have mercy and hear us.

The procession moves to the fifth station.

Fifth Station: Jesus is stripped of his garments

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.
All By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Reader When they came to a place called Golgotha, they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. The soldiers divided his garments among them by casting lots. This was to fulfill what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”

Leader 2 They gave me gall to eat,
All and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink.

Leader 1 Let us pray.
O God, your Son chose the path which led to pain before joy and the cross before glory. Plant his cross in our hearts, so that in its power and love we may

come at last to joy and glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,
All have mercy and hear us.

The procession moves to the sixth station.

Sixth Station: Jesus is nailed to the cross

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.
All By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Reader When they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Jesus; and with him they crucified two criminals, one on the right, and one on the left. He poured out himself to death, and yet he bore the sin of many.

Leader 2 They pierce my hands and my feet;
All they stare and gloat over me.

Leader 1 Let us pray.
Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within your saving embrace. So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,
All have mercy and hear us.

The procession moves to the seventh station.

Seventh Station: Jesus dies on the cross

Leader 1 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.
All By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Reader When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother.” After this, he said, “I am thirsty.” When Jesus had tasted the vinegar they gave him, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Leader 2 Christ for us became obedient unto death,

All **even death on a cross.**

Leader 1 Let us pray.

O God, you gave your only Son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, so that we may live with him forever in the joy of the resurrection; who lives and reigns now and forever.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,

All **have mercy and hear us.**

The procession moves to the eighth station.

Eighth Station: Jesus is laid in the tomb

Leader 2 We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Reader When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb.

Leader 2 You will not abandon me to the grave,
All **nor let your holy one see corruption.**

Leader 1 Let us pray.

O God, your blessed Son was laid in a tomb in a garden, and rested on the Sabbath day. Grant that we who have been buried with him in the waters of baptism may find our perfect rest in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns forever and ever.

Amen.

Leader 2 Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,

All **have mercy and hear us.**

The procession may move to the gathering place where it began.

Conclusion

Leader 2 Savior of the world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us.

All **Save us and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord.**

Leader 1 Let us pray.

We thank you, heavenly Father, that you have delivered us from the dominion of sin and death and brought us into the kingdom of your Son; and we pray that, as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his love he may raise us to eternal joys; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Leader 2 To Christ our Lord who loves us, washed us in his own blood, and made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen.

At the end of the devotion, participants may remain in silent prayer or silently move to another place for a Lenten meal.

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Lent: A Season for Preparation

For us, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when we are marked with ashes and reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. It leads us into the Triduum, the Three Days, when we remember and relive how God has acted to save all creation through the life, death and resurrection of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Triduum reaches its climax in the night before Easter Sunday morning.

Since very early times, these hours before sunrise have been a favored time for Holy Baptism, the sacrament that joins us to Christ and to the church throughout the ages and throughout the world, the sacrament of the new life that Christ won for us in his death and resurrection.

Baptism is when and how each one of us becomes a Christian.

It takes a while to really know how to be a Christian, as we all know—most of a lifetime, at least! But we all start somewhere, and we all need someone to help us along the way.

In the book of Acts, we have several stories of people whose encounter with one of God’s people led to their being joined to Christ in baptism.

Take a look at Acts 2:37–41, Acts 8:26–39 and Acts 9:10–18.

These scriptural stories make clear that coming to faith calls for a relationship with a person of faith and the resources of a believing community—especially the Scriptures.

VIGNETTE: CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Even before the Book of Acts was written down, maybe as early as the year 60, an anonymous author put together a little handbook for leaders and teachers to use as they helped people prepare to become members of the Christian community. Scholars have found bits of this “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” or *Didache* (DID-uh-kee) in far-flung places, written in

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many churches built in Europe included a labyrinth for people to walk as a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Many people over the centuries have walked their winding paths, mindfully following the twists and turns to the center and back out again.

There are other labyrinths of this type, ancient and modern, in churches, hospitals, gardens and other places. Do you know of one near you? Have you ever walked a labyrinth?

The medieval labyrinths weren’t always places of silent meditation, however.

At some places in France, Easter Sunday afternoon was the time for all the cathedral staff to join in a circle dance around their labyrinth. The dean would stand in the center and they’d all play catch with a leather ball and sing Easter songs as they danced. Then they’d all go back to the chapter house for a hearty lunch. (Just how punchy were they after a long austere Lent and Holy Week?) Various bishops tried over the years to suppress the Easter silliness, but it took centuries to stamp out the cheerful custom.

several languages, so it clearly had a wide readership. (Now we non-scholars can find it all over the Internet, so it has an even wider readership!)

The first part of this little book outlines the basics of the faith, and the second part describes certain important practices of the church: baptism, eucharist, prayer, how to treat traveling apostles when they visit, and so on—everything a new Christian would need to know. This oldest surviving Christian writing gives us an idea of the life of faith in small

Gentile Christian communities outside the Holy Land. (Speaking of traveling apostles, at least one scholar suggests that the first part might even be notes of a talk given by Paul and Barnabas.)

This little book of instructions, older even than the Gospels, says that the person seeking baptism should fast for one or two days before—and so should everyone else who can. So we can see that the whole community was called to support those preparing for baptism by fasting along with them. That practice of fasting in solidarity with those preparing for baptism is at the source of “giving up something for Lent.”

Let's Imagine Together

A few years ago, a fiery preacher named Paul and his gentler companion Barnabas visited our little village, speaking to the neighbors who gathered at the home of one of the more established families one cool spring evening. Their testimony inspired dozens of people to ask for baptism, and so we were joyfully baptized in the little stream that wanders through the fields.

Since then, people's lives have been transformed. Older women who had once tyrannized their daughters-in-law now treat them as equals and friends. Young women who had once cared only about their clothes and their sweethearts now put that same energy to work in service to those in need. Rivals are now friends, misers are now generous and worriers are now serene. No one goes hungry. If someone falls sick, we make sure not only that the patient has everything necessary, but that the family is fed, the crops cared for and the livestock tended.

And every Sunday morning, almost everyone in town gathers to pray together, to hear stories of Christ and to share a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. *Almost* everyone. One neighbor was hesitant for quite some time, but she recently asked to be baptized. Why now? She won't say. All she says is, “It's time.”

There are a few families in the village who aren't interested in our new life at all, for various reasons or maybe for no reason at all—we don't know. Some of us have tried to talk with them about it, but they

politely turn those conversations aside. We still haven't quite figured out quite how we feel about that, and sometimes talk about it among ourselves.

But we're not concerned about them now. Our neighbor's baptism is just a few weeks away. A couple of the older members of the church are helping her learn the basics, most of which she already knows.

LENTEN PRACTICE: PRAYER

People preparing for baptism were (and still are) always surrounded by a cloud of witnesses praying for them throughout their time of preparation. Will someone be baptized in your congregation at the Easter Vigil? That person—and her family, sponsors or godparents, and catechists—needs your prayers. Even if your congregation isn't so blessed this year, please pray for all the other people around the world who are looking forward to baptism at Easter. After Easter, keep praying for them. In the baptismal rite, the assembly (that's us!) promises to support and pray for the newly baptized.

Here are some prayer texts that you can adapt for your own situation.

Creator God, during this holy season of Lent, we pray for people everywhere who will be born anew in the waters of baptism at the Vigil of Easter. (Especially, we pray for name/s.) Surround them, their families, and their sponsors and godparents with a love that knows no bounds. In Jesus' saving name we pray. Amen.

After Easter you might pray in these words:

Saving God, as we rejoice in the glory of the resurrection, we pray for name/s, their sponsors and godparents, their family, and for all those newly baptized into Christ throughout the world. Continue to raise them up with your Spirit, feed them by your word, and empower them to be your hands in a broken world. In the name of the risen Christ we pray. Amen.

She's praying, of course, every day. She's acting on her new-found faith in service. And as the day comes closer, she's going to fast. She won't do any of this alone—we're all going to be right by her side, every step of the way.

Let's Talk About It

We all know how close-knit a rural community can be. How do you imagine people feel about what their neighbor is getting ready to do? What makes you say that? There are probably some neighbors who feel differently about it than others. What are they feeling? How do people act on their feelings?

How do you imagine your neighbor feels as the day of her baptism approaches? How about the people arranging the baptismal service? How do you imagine they feel?

Now put yourself in the shoes of another neighbor who was baptized the evening of Paul and Barnabas' visit. How do you feel about what your friend is doing? How do you act on those feelings?

What about those neighbors who aren't interested in the life of the church, who politely turn away any conversation about faith or God or Christ? How do you imagine they feel about what's going on in the village? How do you imagine the church people feel about them? What about our neighbor who's preparing for her own baptism? How does she feel about them? What if they're her own relatives? What if they're our own relatives?

Lent: A Season for the Glory of God

CLOSING

Conclusion

The leader speaks in these or similar words:

The season of Lent is a season of spiritual renewal. Will we be renewed this year by penitence, by pilgrimage, or by preparation for baptism? Will it be the same for us next Lent, or will it be different?

In every case, our forty-day journey toward the feast of victory for our Lord is a season for prayer, fasting and service, to the greater glory of God. Thanks be to God.

Closing Prayer

Merciful God,
Accompany our journey through these forty days.
Renew in us the gift of baptism,
that we may provide for those who are poor,
pray for those who are in need,
fast from self-indulgence,
and above all that we may find our treasure in the life
of your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit,
let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

Let us go forth into the world to serve God
with gladness and with courage;
holding fast to that which is good;
rendering to no one evil for evil;
strengthening the fainthearted;
supporting the weak;
helping the afflicted;
honoring all people;
loving and serving God,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Hymn

“The Glory of These Forty Days,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 320

(Concluding prayer and dismissal, adapted, from the service for Ash Wednesday in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* © 2006. All rights reserved. Adapted by permission.

LENTEN PRACTICE: THE THREE DAYS

The season of Lent ends with the beginning of the Maundy Thursday evening service. From ancient times, the penitents who received ashes at the beginning of Lent have been reconciled with God and the church on Maundy Thursday.

Even still today, our Maundy Thursday service opens with a ritual of confession and forgiveness. The refugees who had prayed together for God's mercy on the ruined city of Rome rejoiced in that Thursday reconciliation so long ago, and the whole church rejoiced (and still rejoices) together in God's forgiveness.

In the Good Friday service, we gather around the cross—the saving cross by which Christ won eternal life for us all. Egeria and the other pilgrims in Jerusalem gathered to pray before a piece of wood that tradition held to be a fragment of the True Cross. Still today, the church throughout the world gathers on Good Friday to pray before the wood of the cross, commemorating the death of the Lord—the death that conquered death forever.

The Saturday evening Easter Vigil service is a feast of word and sacrament, as we hear the scriptural history of God's work of salvation, from creation to resurrection—and the story continues still, from the little village that Paul and Barnabas visited so long ago even up to our own place and time, with the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

If you have ever participated in the services of the Triduum, you know how spiritually enriching they are. Prayerfully and mindfully participating in the church's ancient and renewed services of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil will truly bring a new and deeper perspective on the joy of Easter Sunday morning.

If you haven't done so in years past, why not make a Lenten resolution to attend those services this year? If your own congregation does not schedule these Triduum services, you might make a pilgrimage to another church that does. Perhaps the members of this group gathered today could attend together, sharing transportation. Wouldn't that would make a wonderful conclusion to Lent!