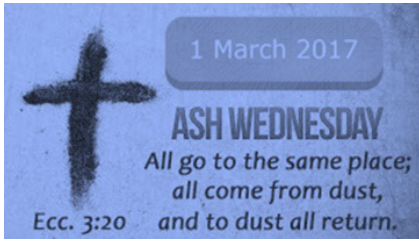


# Understanding Ash Wednesday & Lent

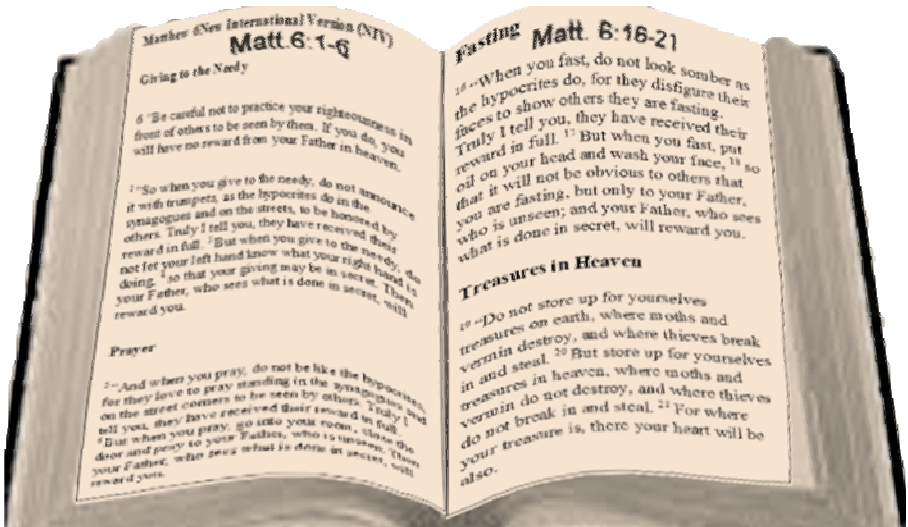
*1st March 2017 is Ash Wednesday*



(excluding the six Sundays). Since we all know the significance of Easter, we should not neglect the significance of the 40 days that Christians are called to reflect on their sins with assiduous effort towards repentance and charity as they prepare to celebrate Jesus' resurrection.

## The lectionary readings

For an understanding of the right attitude in giving to the poor, praying and fasting, our Lutheran lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday have these passages for meditation – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.



*(The lectionary readings of the Lutheran Church which you can find in every Sunday bulletin are meaningful for every Lutheran to make use of commen-*

surate with the liturgical season. Even if we don't study them diligently week after week, just a study of them purposefully from time to time would afford immense insight beneficial to our spiritual well-being.

The lectionary readings and the liturgy are dovetailed to help us focus on God and His Word. As we are thus focused, we become drawn away from the human propensity for mundane distractions.)

### Lunar New Year reminder of Lent and spring cleaning



*"Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." - William Morris*

As a useful reminder, when we do spring cleaning to welcome a new year, we ought to do a spring cleaning of the soul as well to tidy up our spiritual closets and rid them of the filth of sin that has built up over the passing year.

### Fasting and Feasting

Fasting is not simply about denying ourselves of what we normally crave after to feed the body, but also about being spiritually focused to feed on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Lenten fasting is not about abstinence from food TO BE FOLLOWED BY unrestrained Easter indulgence of feasting to compensate for the Lenten period of "deprivation".

Fasting is not a period of deprivation of life's essentials, but a practice of taking an appropriate time off from our pursuits of the flesh to go into a deeper communion time with God. Some people may practise abstinence from food "as a matter of requirement or routine" with a deliberate show to others that they are fasting (*see Matt. 6:16-18*) but nevertheless continue their lives in worldliness with nary a focus to avert the flesh and to glorify God. This is not right.

What then do you think of the following advice about Lenten fasting?<sup>1</sup>

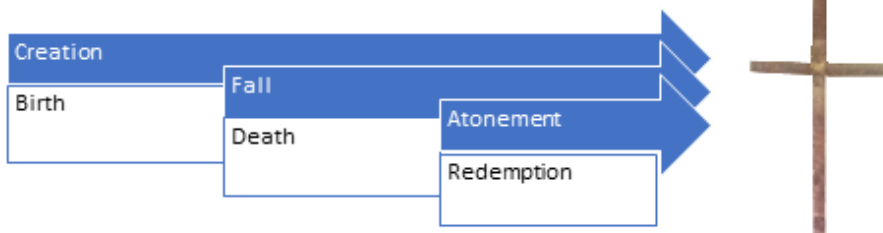
**Fast from criticism, and feast on praise.  
 Fast from self-pity, and feast on joy.  
 Fast from ill-temper, and feast on peace.  
 Fast from resentment, and feast on contentment.  
 Fast from jealousy, and feast on love.  
 Fast from pride, and feast on humility.  
 Fast from selfishness, and feast on service.  
 Fast from fear, and feast on faith.<sup>1</sup>**

G. CURTIS JONES

Moving past Ash Wednesday

Our lectionary readings for First Sunday in Lent		
1 <sup>st</sup> Lesson	Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7	The creation and fall
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lesson	Romans 5:12-19	Death through Adam, life through Christ
Gospel Lesson	Matthew 4:1-11	The temptation of Jesus

In the Lutheran lectionary readings, we always begin with a look at the OT and then move into the NT. The passages systematically trace our journey from the past (original wholesomeness) through the present (fallen into sinful unwholesomeness) into the future (of hope in Christ).



<sup>1</sup> Arthur Lichtenberger, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, USA, *The Day Is at Hand*, “Lenten Rule,” (New York: The Seabury Press, 1964)

## The creation and the fall

It is incomplete if our Lenten reflection is only looking forward to Easter. We must know why and how we have become what we are in today's forlorn state. Only then will we appreciate in fullness the justification for the exultation of Easter and offer our worship to God wholeheartedly (not simply by dint of what our pastors tell us to) because deep in our reflection we personally feel the exceeding riches of His grace and mercy.

A story like this is not uncommon:

*A child was born into a good and well-to-do family. All his needs were well taken care of and he scored superlatively academically and had a promising future, being given a prestigious scholarship to study overseas with an assured great career on hold for him.*

*Alas! A great pedigree didn't work out good enough for him. All provisions for him without worries were not good enough. All love showered on him were not good enough. The freedom given to him was abused. Tempted by evil, he wandered off from the straight path and ended up a disgrace to all (family, scholarship sponsor, friends and even the country).*

*Despite the ugly fact, his parents still waited for him. He still had hope to look forward to, to turn around and ameliorate for his past errors. Would he do so?*

Our lectionary texts tell us that Adam began his life in a good home (Eden) where he had all provisions without having to worry about anything. He was given freedom, but of course freedom came with certain rules. That kind of freedom was not good enough for him. The love from his Father was not good enough. Under temptations by the evil one, he wandered off into sin and became a blot on mankind ... (*You catch the drift*). Man's fall – what a spectacular fall, from a promising beginning to an appalling condition of having to be on his own.

As we compare the story above of the child born into a well-to-do family who became wayward and the biblical narration of Adam's rebellious act of taking matters into his own hands, how does it lead our meditation in the season of Lent?

A reflection on the sad practical life situations of people can usefully clue us to the reality of man's broken relationship with his heavenly Father all because of pride over personal knowledge (or wisdom) followed by a thoughtless act to challenge limits that are placed there for man's own good despite the idyllic provisions in a verdant garden. Thankfully, we are not without hope.

## Death through Adam, life through Christ

If our sombre reflection on the Genesis narrative of our past directs us to repentance, the 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson of the Lenten lection (Romans 5:12-19) gives us hope that reconciliation with our Father is possible.

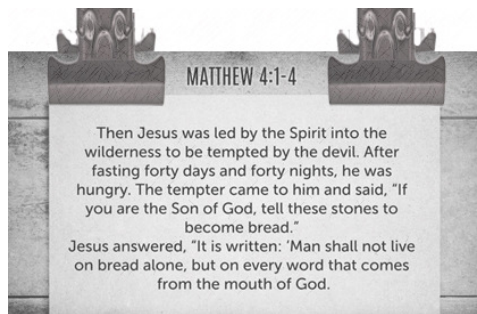
Unlike the trespass of one man (Adam) that brought death to many, the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, works the opposite (positively) to overflow to the many! The judgment followed one sin (of Adam) and brought condemnation, but the gift (of Christ) followed many trespasses and brought justification.

The serious question is: After the solemn Lenten reflection on the cause of man's sin predicament, are we ready to look ahead and receive God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness that reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ?

### The temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11)

We do not celebrate Lent. Lent is not a season of festivity.

WE OBSERVE THE SEASON OF LENT with a solemn spiritual posture of reflection with penitence as the expected outcome. The 40 days commemorate the 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert and yet did not succumb to the flesh even though he was tempted.



**Nobody can avoid being tempted. This is not the same** as saying that nobody can resist temptation. (*read 1 Cor. 10:13*)

### Conclusion

The Lutheran lectionary readings are a rich resource for me to wander purposefully through the seasons of the Christian year and wonder at the revelations from God's Word.

May you also profit from the lectionary readings in this season of Lent.

*John Lee*

