

The Joy of Lent

Compiled and Edited by
Pat McDonough



Resurrection Press

An Imprint of

CATHOLIC BOOK PUBLISHING CORP.

Totowa • New Jersey

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	6
Ash Wednesday	9
First Sunday of Lent	14
Second Sunday of Lent	24
Third Sunday of Lent	35
Fourth Sunday of Lent	50
Fifth Sunday of Lent	65
Passion Sunday	79
Easter	92

Introduction

I LIKE LENT, not only because it signals that spring is on the way. I like Lent for a lot of reasons.

I like ashes. They remind me of who I am and to whom I belong. I am Christ's. I belong to a church that belongs to Him. I'm one of millions who walked into a church last Wednesday, tired of winter and spiritually half asleep. I left the church with a cross of ashes on my head. The words, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" were on my mind. My ashes and everyone else's, remind me that I need a support group to help me stay with the program. I have one. It has a billion members. It's called the Catholic church.

Remember those little mite boxes we used to get? Anytime I came across a few coins, I put them in the box for the children who had no food, no clothes, no toys. In the days of mite boxes, I gave as much as 90 percent of my income (allowance and other coins that came my way) to the poor. I haven't given that much of my income to charity since. Tithing can be tough today, but back then, I guess I was more generous. I liked those mite boxes. They brought out the best in me.

I like the color purple. Hermann Rorschach wrote a lot about colors and the important role that they play in surfacing emotion. Purple evokes sadness and a solemn tone. It keeps me focused on the journey toward Calvary. It helps to have it on the altar.

I like Lenten gospels. The characters are so real and so memorable. When I was about five, I had an illustrated book of the Bible. The Temptation of Jesus, which is

always read on the first Sunday of Lent, was vividly illustrated. Satan had a long red tail, pointed teeth and horns. I was terrified. I still am. It's not so much the hideous creature with the tail that scares me today, but demons in general, especially mine.

I like Lent because I have to make a conscious effort *not* to greet the gospel with an alleluia. I'm aware that something is missing and I feel as if I have to start looking for what's lost. That's a good way to feel in Lent.

I like Lent because it gives me the opportunity to say to my kids, "It's Lent. Let's think about what we can do differently." They reluctantly give it some thought and this year they've come up with some pretty good ideas. I like when the church helps me guide my kids toward something greater than CDs. Lent helps me shift their attention from computers and clothes to something a little more substantial.

I like Lent because St. Patrick's Day falls in the middle of it and I always feel the need for a break by March 17th. And I like St. Joseph's table because it provides a respite from fasting.

I don't like fasting, especially in the winter when carbohydrates call out to me from every corner of the house. Fasting forces me to examine my most basic activities. That's when my body and soul start to wrestle with each other's urges. My unholy diet is called into question; the ice cream and hot fudge, the cookies and brownies. Thinking about the things my body craves forces me to think about my spiritual cravings, too. Maybe my desire for chocolate is biologically based, but maybe it's a substitute for deeper longings. In an attempt to marry mind and mouth, heart, soul and body, I'll forgo the chocolate; the

Ring Dings and Oreos, the Godiva and the brownies, too. Oh, the brownies. . . .

I like Palm Sunday. I love the reading of the Passion, the dramatic way that the whole church enters into this story. I look forward to the Triduum and its beautiful rituals. The stripping of the altar on Holy Thursday always leaves me feeling as empty as the tabernacle. I'm reminded to strip away all the leftover, last minute things that keep me from God.

I like Good Friday. It's unlike any other day of the year. I like the veneration of the cross. I like the Stations of the Cross, too. I feel more in step with Jesus when I walk the steps that he walked to Calvary.

I like Lent. It's like an old friend with whom I can argue year after year and know that I'm a better person for being challenged. I like what Lent does to me. Its grace forms me and transforms me time and time again.

My love for Lent inspired this book. I wanted to know what other people thought about during these forty days. Do they fast? Do they pray? Do they honor Lent in a way I haven't thought about? I asked forty people in my life to share their thoughts on the Lenten readings. I hope you enjoy reading their responses as much as I did.

ASH WEDNESDAY

"Come back to me with your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning"
Joel 2:12

HOW CAN WE EVER FORGET the Twin Tower collapse, people fleeing for their lives, ashes clinging to faces, hair, clothing and even lungs. *"Remember that you are ashes and unto ashes you shall return."* Ash Wednesday invites us to an anointing with a smudge of ash that is no sign of pride and privilege but a renewed call to courageous compassion.

Beyond the ashen fog of Ground Zero, life has many other ways of confronting us with our vulnerability, our utter helplessness. The fearsomeness of such weakness, whether known in public confrontation or felt as quiet shackle, screams for encouragement. Anointing involves courage and strength. Ash Wednesday does not initiate some prideful gesture, nor negativistic beating up on self, but an ashen anointing for courage in the midst of our shared vulnerability. Purple, Lent's color, when properly appreciated, radiates courage and strength rather than sad disappointment.

The anointing with a smudge of ash trumpets the central conversion of Lent. More than a conversion away from sin, though this is surely involved, a call to greater compassion inaugurates the forty days. This time of special compassion always spotlights God, whose loving compassion is faithfully fleshed in Jesus.

But how do we stir up in ourselves this compassion of Lent? We learn quickly that we cannot strong arm our way to compassion. As long as we fail to embrace our basic fragility and helplessness, mature compassion

eludes us. Beyond our helplessness, there is need for surprising Good News: the Good News of God's Love revealed in the very depths of our vulnerability. This brings encouragement beyond our own power and makes possible compassion—that enticing ability to reach out and suffer with another. Compassion, therefore, is born in our discovery of love often hidden in the shrouds of our weakness. In this way we must be loved into compassion through the love both of God and of our brothers and sisters.

“Repent and believe the Good News” is the haunting invitation of Lent. It takes expression in an anointing for courage and compassion in the midst of our common vulnerability. So Lent always has more to teach us: not fearfully to flee our helplessness but to find a love that moves us out to the other suffering people. In this way, Lent is always a special season anointing us, not for pride and privilege, but for courage in compassion that renews the Body of Christ now in our midst.

George Aschenbrenner is co-founder of the Institute for Priestly Formation and the author of several books including Quickenning the Fire in Our Midst: The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality (Loyola Press, 2002).