

Pitchers and Catchers Report

Spring Training Series # 1

Luke 9: 18-27

03-01-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Winter can be such a dull and dreary season. Spirits plunge along with the temperature as winter blues fade to black. It feels like spring will never arrive.

Then one hears those four mystical, magical, marvelous, miraculous words: *“Pitchers and catchers report!”* A new season for baseball has arrived. Major League teams have begun **Spring Training** in Florida and Arizona. To quote a line by John Fogarty, *“We’re born again, there’s new grass on the field!”* The boys of summer are back, and spring cannot be far behind.

Pitchers and catchers report first to warm up their arms after the off-season. Then the rest of the players arrive to begin practice. The *Atlanta Braves* played their first practice game this past Thursday against the *Houston Astros*. Who won? Who cares! For a few blessed weeks during Spring Training, it really doesn’t matter if you win or lose—it’s how you play the game. It’s time for America’s favorite pastime.

I. Spring Training

People keep time with a variety of **calendars**. The calendar year runs from January to December. Businesses follow a fiscal year. Families with children operate according to the school calendar. Kindergarten students learn about the four seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. ESPN fans divide the year into sports’ seasons.

The church marches to the beat of its own time. The **church year** begins with Advent—the four Sunday season prior to Christmas. The *“twelve days of Christmas”* celebrate Christ’s coming into the world. Epiphany begins with Jesus’ baptism and recounts Christ’s early ministry. During Lent, believers prepare for Easter. Easter proclaims that Jesus Christ is risen indeed! Fifty days later the festival of Pentecost recalls God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.

The annual cycle rehearses the story of Christ and the church. The seasons recall Jesus’ birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension. The Christian calendar baptizes ordinary time with sacred meaning.

According to the Christian calendar, the church has begun its own version of **Spring Training**. Today is the first Sunday of **Lent**—a forty day period (excluding Sundays) before Easter that is a time of preparation and anticipation.

The final week of Jesus’ life is known as Holy Week. We rehearse Christ’s Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. On Holy Thursday, we remember the Last Supper. Then we hear the story of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and trial. On Good Friday, we stand at the cross where Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead, and buried. We pause in wonder of God’s love for his people. And we wait . . . for on the third day . . .

Lent is a somber season, a time of reflection and introspection. The paraments (altar cloths) are **purple**—the symbolic color for penitence and contrition. We are called to prepare our hearts for the Gospel story of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

II. Ash Wednesday

Lent began last week on **Ash Wednesday**. It is one of the most meaningful services of the church year. The churches of my youth did not observe Ash Wednesday. However, I vividly recall my first introduction to the service during college.

I was sitting in the lobby of the Krannert Student Center at Berry College. A coed named Kimberly Clark walked by with a dark smudge on her forehead. She noticed that I noticed. With hands on hips, she began a short monologue: “Yes, I know there is something on my head. No, it is not dirt. Yes, I am Roman Catholic. No, you don’t understand. Yes, I just came from an Ash Wednesday service. Any other questions?!?”

I couldn’t think of anything else to ask at the time! Later I learned that Ash Wednesday is the official beginning of the Lenten season. During the service, a minister marks believers’ foreheads with **ashes** in the sign of the cross. Traditionally, ashes from the previous year’s Palm Sunday fronds are used. Since Old Testament times, God’s people have observed penitential times with “*sackcloth and ashes*.”

During the imposition of the ashes, a minister typically says: “*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe in the gospel.*” The season of Lent in general and Ash Wednesday in particular call us to focus on two topics we would rather avoid: **sin** and **death**. Now there are two conversation stoppers. Next time you are at a party, just bring up either of these two exciting topics. However, these are exactly the things we are called to contemplate.

Sinfulness

We must face the fact of our human **sinfulness**. Let be put this as lovingly and delicately as possible: you're a sinner! I am, too. Romans 3: 23 declares: “*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” We are not a good people who occasionally sin but a sinful people who occasionally do good. Our sinfulness is not the sum total of our individual wrongs. Instead, it is the basic state in which all humanity dwells. Theologians speak of this as “**original sin**.” In the core of our being, something is dreadfully wrong.

Before coming to Cartersville, I served five years as the pastor of the First United Methodist Church of West Point, Georgia. A member of the congregation named Stephen Johnson discovered that we were related. He had spent a great deal of time tracing his family’s **genealogy**. He was kind enough to share some information about my section of the family tree. Part of the problem in researching genealogies, however, is that you never know what you might find!

Stephen brought me a Milledgeville paper from 1811 with a report about a certain William Burch of Hancock County, a known gambler who had discharged a pistol loaded with buckshot into the body of a man named Stephen Tilly. The governor was offering a one hundred dollar reward for his capture. William Burch was my great, great, great grandfather's brother.

But don't be too smug. Get out a calculator and total up how many ancestors you've had during the past 600 years. We all have two parents. And each of them had two parents who had two parents and so on. Figure 20 generations over 600 years. Over the past six centuries, each of us has approximately 2,097,152 ancestors swimming around in our gene pool—or cesspool as the case may be!

If we trace our family trees back far enough, we'll discover a man named Adam and a woman named Eve. We are their descendants, sharing in both the glory and shame of what it means to be human.

Mortality

The second theme of Lent is human **mortality**. Its bad news, bad news: You're not only a sinner but you're also going to die! The traditional funeral service reminds us that life ends in *"ashes to ashes, dust to dust."* In the 1970s, the group Kansas recorded a popular song with the refrain, *"Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind."*

The **Cathedral in Mainz, Germany** has beautiful stain glass windows portraying different scenes from the Bible. However, each scene's background also portrays a cloaked figure with scythe in hand. The cathedral was completed during a time when the Black Plague was sweeping across Europe. A majority of the population in the area eventually died. Death was an ever present reality.

Lent reminds us of our common end. This knowledge can either lead to despair or perspective. The Psalmist prayed: *"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."* (Psalm 90: 12) When we view our lives through the lens of eternity, we realize what is important and what is trivial. This understanding rearranges our priorities and fills each moment with meaning.

The Sign of the Cross

The imposition of ashes graphically reminds us of our sinfulness and mortality. We hear the words, *"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe in the gospel."*

The bad news is that we are all sinners. The bad news is that we are all going to die. But hear the **GOOD NEWS**: the ashes are imposed in the **sign of the cross**. God sent his Son into the world to save us. Romans 5: 8: *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* At the cross, our sin was forgiven. At the empty tomb, we were raised to new life.

Even during a somber season of penitence and preparation, there is an underlying theme of celebration and joy. Yes, we are sinners, but sin's chains have been broken. Yes, we will die, but death's power has been overturned. We are a forgiven people with the three fold gift of life, abundant life, and everlasting life.

III. Lenten Disciplines

In the Scripture lesson today, Jesus asked his disciples about the rumors of his ministry. Some said he was John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the Old Testament prophets come back to life. Then Jesus asked, *"But what about you? Who do*

YOU say that I am?" In the pregnant silence, Simon Peter gave birth to the answer that had grown within him, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"*

For the first time, Jesus told the disciples about his upcoming death. Then he warned, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"* During the forty days of Lent, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The journey will take us to the foot of the cross and the stone that was rolled away. We certainly know the story and how it ends. However, the journey reminds us anew of God's power and love. It also reminds us of the commitment of Christian discipleship.

A wide range of players are invited to Spring Training each year by baseball teams. The athletes include rookies, stars, has-beens, and those who never will be. Most have spent the off-season getting ready for the next season. Most players cannot wait until Spring Training to begin preparations.

We admire the discipline and sacrifice of athletes who excel in their sports. Every part of their life supports one goal: to become the best possible player. Their examples inspire and entertain us. However, Paul reminded the church that *"physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."* (1 Timothy 4: 8)

Paul also wrote: *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."* (1 Corinthians 9: 24-25)

We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipline is an integral part of discipleship. During this season before Easter, one of the most popular disciplines is to **give up** something for Lent.

The act of sacrificing something during Lent is an ancient church practice. The spiritual discipline reminds us of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Each time we forego something during Lent, our eyes are redirected to God.

Our modern culture, however, tends to trivialize this Lenten practice. We give up things that are less than a sacrifice. The most popular items seem to be chocolate, desserts, soft drinks, and snacks. There's certainly nothing bad about choosing to give up these things, but it sounds more like a pre-Easter diet plan than a spiritual exercise!

Here's a new twist on the old practice: ask someone else to identify what you should give up during Lent! Ask your spouse, parent, sibling, or friend what you need to give up during Lent. You might be surprised at the answer.

Here's another option: ask God. In fact, take a moment right now. What is there in your life that you need to give up—something that is either hindering your Christian walk or you need to sacrifice for a time. If something came immediately to mind, then I would suggest to you this is the Holy Spirit speaking in your life.

Some Christians pair the discipline of "giving up" with "**taking up.**" Nature abhors a vacuum. When we lay something down, we need to pick something else up.

If you fast one meal per week, then give the money saved to the Homeless Shelter. Quit smoking or dipping and donate your savings to the American Cancer

Association. Sacrifice a favorite TV program and spend that time praying. Give up novels or magazines to read the Bible. Box up video or computer games and use the gained time to visit someone who is homebound. Give up a few days of vacation for a missions' trip. Take an hour each week from work in order to mentor a child at school.

Jesus Christ calls us to give up our self-centeredness, to take up our cross daily, and to follow him.

Conclusion

In the English language, **homophones** are words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings. For example, "**lint**" spelled "l-i-n-t" is the stuff that gathers on clothing between ironing and wearing. A lint brush is used to distribute the bits of stuff evenly across one's clothes!

"**Lent**" spelled "L-e-n-t" is the forty day season in the Christian calendar. Ash Wednesday begins the season with a focus on human sinfulness and mortality. However, the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday lead us beyond human evil and death to God's grace and life.

Both words describe the mess of human existence. Only one points to the One who has done something about it—once and for all. Today we enter into Spring Training. During the next six weeks, we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. All Christians should report.