

Cross Walk: Lent

1/5 in Series

Matthew 16:13-23

03 13 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-23**Marking Time**

People **mark time** in a variety of ways. January through December constitute the calendar year. Businesses operate on a fiscal year. Families follow the school year.

Kindergarten students learn about the four seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. Meteorologists warn about tornado and hurricane seasons. ESPN fans divide the year into sports' seasons. Sportsmen anticipate dove, deer, quail, and turkey seasons. Merchants depend upon the holiday season.

The church marches to the beat of its own time. We mark time with the **Christian calendar**. Different colors and symbols signify the underlying meaning of each season. The church year includes:

- ❖ **Advent:** The four Sunday season prior to Christmas.
- ❖ **Christmas:** The "*twelve days of Christmas*" celebrate Christ's birth.
- ❖ **Epiphany:** Begins with Jesus' baptism and focuses upon his early ministry.
- ❖ **Lent:** Believers prepare for Christ's suffering and death.
- ❖ **Easter:** Celebrates that "*Christ is risen, indeed!*"
- ❖ **Pentecost:** We recall God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.

The annual cycle rehearses the story of Christ and the church. The seasons recall Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. The calendar culminates with the creation of the church, reminding us of the Lord's continuing commission to make disciples of all the nations.

The Christian year baptizes ordinary time with extraordinary meaning. The secular calendar communicates the sacred gospel. The pageantry of the seasons appeals to all our senses. Sometimes the message is overt and clear, demanding our attention. Other times the significance is unspoken and subliminal, seeping into our souls.

Lent

According to the Christian calendar, today is the First Sunday of **Lent**—L-E-N-T. The word comes from the Middle English and means *springtime*—it literally refers to the *lengthening days* of spring. Lent is the forty day period prior to Easter.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Holy Saturday before Easter. Sundays are excluded from the forty days of Lent because the church considers each Sunday to be a "*mini-Easter*" which celebrates Christ's resurrection.

The time period recalls Jesus' forty days in the wilderness when he was tempted by Satan. Traditionally, Lent is a preparatory time of self-reflection and repentance. Christians prepare themselves to rehearse the events of Holy Week, including Christ's betrayal, trial, suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial.

During Lent, the color **purple** is used for the church's paraments which cover the lectern, pulpit, and altar. In liturgical worship, purple is associated with penitence. It is a time for believers to examine their souls, confess their sin, and seek God's forgiveness.

Although we are still weeks away from Holy Week, our eyes are already focusing upon Christ's crucifixion. The shadow of the **cross** overshadows this season. We notice anew the centrality of the cross in this place of worship. Last week three crosses were raised outside as a silent witness to those who pass by.

The title for our Lenten Worship Series is ***Cross Walk***. The words possess a twofold meaning. *Cross Walk* reminds us of Jesus' journey to the crucifixion. During the coming days, we will travel what in Latin is called the *Via Dolorosa*—the *Way of the Cross*. We will witness God's great love for us in the sacrifice of his Son upon the cross.

Second, we are challenged to take our own *Cross Walk*. We are invited to hear anew Christ's command: "*Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.*" Christian discipleship calls us to follow in the footsteps of our Master.

During the *Cross Walk* series, we will focus on one Biblical passage from Matthew 16: 13-28. I encourage you to add this reading to your daily Lenten devotions. The story is rich with meaning, and we will examine it closely over the next five weeks.

Ash Wednesday

Today we begin our *Cross Walk* by focusing upon the meaning of the Lenten Season. I invite you to consider how can these 40 days transform our lives and church.

Lent actually began last week on **Ash Wednesday**. Many here attended the midweek service. For some, this is a familiar tradition. For others, it is a new experience.

The churches of my youth did not observe Ash Wednesday. My first encounter with the service occurred during college. I vividly recall seeing Kimberly Clark one winter afternoon in the Student Center. She had some sort of smudge on her forehead. When she caught me staring, Kimberly curtly replied: "Yes, I know there's something on my forehead. Yes, it is a cross. Yes, it is Ash Wednesday. And, yes, I am Roman Catholic." I didn't have anything else to add to the conversation! She managed to answer four more questions than I had asked.

Today Methodists have reclaimed this ancient practice of the church. Our Ash Wednesday Service has become an annual observance in our congregation. Along with All Saints Sunday and Christmas Eve, I find it to be one of the most meaningful moments of the Christian year.

Ash Wednesday is a somber and solemn service which prepares Christians for our Lenten journey. At the culmination the worship service, the ministers mark believers' foreheads with ashes in the sign of the cross. Traditionally, ashes from the previous year's Palm Sunday fronds are used.

During the imposition of ashes, the ministers say, "*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe in the gospel.*" The ritual emphasizes two critical themes of Lent: humanity's mortality and sinfulness.

- ❖ **Mortality:** Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality. “*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.*” Part of a funeral’s committal service includes the words: “*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*” The Psalmist says that we are nothing more than dust in the wind. We are born to die.
- ❖ **Sinfulness:** Ash Wednesday also reminds us of our sinfulness. “*Repent and believe in the gospel.*” Since Old Testament times, God’s people have observed times of repentance with “*sackcloth and ashes.*” Convicted of our sin, we come before God in confession.

It’s a stark message that none of us enjoys hearing: “You’re a sinner—and, oh yeah, you’re going to die! Have a really nice day!” Recognition of our mortality and sinfulness is something that most people spend their lives avoiding. There’s nothing much more depressing than death and sin. And if it ended there, then Ash Wednesday would be the saddest of services.

However, it’s vital to recall that the ashes are imposed in the shape of the **cross**. Even as we enter into this most somber of seasons, we already know how the story ends. The gritty feel of the cross upon our foreheads reminds us that God has paid the price of redemption. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

- ❖ **Mortality:** In the face of human mortality, Christ brings life, abundant life, and everlasting life. At the empty tomb, God triumphed over the grave. Though Easter is still weeks away, the good news of the Resurrection is celebrated every Sunday.
- ❖ **Sinfulness:** In the face of human sinfulness, Christ offers forgiveness. While we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us. This proves God’s love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

Lenten Disciplines

Lent reminds us of these great truths of the gospel. During the 40 days of Lent, Christians are invited to practice spiritual **disciplines** that prepare our hearts for Holy Week. Typically these Lenten practices include:

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| ❖ Prayer | Intentional and intense prayer time |
| ❖ Penitence | Confession and repentance of sin |
| ❖ Almsgiving | Service to others |
| ❖ Self-Denial | The control of spirit over body and mind |

Another ancient discipline is an intentional act of self-sacrifice during Lent. Traditionally, Christians “**give up**” something during this season. The act serves as both a discipline of self-denial and a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice for us.

Ironically, the day before Ash Wednesday is known as *Fat Tuesday*. Perhaps you are more familiar with the French phrase: *Mardi Gras*! Historically, people gave up eggs and fat during Lent. So on the Tuesday before Lent it became the custom to eat pancakes in order to use up the remaining eggs and butter in the house. The practice devolved into an entire season of excessive self-indulgence prior to Lent.

Mardi Gras is a much more apt symbol of our society than Ash Wednesday. We crave instant gratification and disdain restraint. Self-denial, discipline, and sacrifice are qualities found in short supply in our culture.

Even Lenten disciplines have lost much of its meaning in the contemporary church. “Giving up” something for Lent has become the equivalent of Spring-time New Year’s Resolutions that we never mean to keep.

Oftentimes, they sound more like self-improvement projects than spiritual disciplines. People give up desserts, chocolate, soft drinks, caffeine, or saturated fat. I’ve known people who have taken it to the next level, giving up television, the Internet, and even—gasp—Facebook!

Hear clearly—there’s nothing wrong with any of these resolutions. However, they often serve as pale imitations to the deeper disciplines of Christian discipleship. I would invite you to consider a twofold question about Lenten Disciplines: “What will you give up this Lent?” And the companion question is: “What will you take up?”

In the 2000 movie, *Chocolat*, a mysterious woman moves into a French village and opens a chocolate shop in the middle of Lent. The mayor is a rigid churchman who zealously embraces the Lenten discipline of sacrifice. The woman’s actions scandalize his sensibilities. He encourages everyone to boycott the shop. In his fanaticism, however, the major had forgotten the true spirit of the season. In this scene, the mayor broke into the shop to vandalize it; but his gluttonous hunger for chocolate undid all of his resolve.

Pairing the disciplines of “giving up” and “taking up” can transform the season. We are called to not only reject evil but also to embrace holiness.

Give Up

Gossip
Grudge
Addiction
Gluttony
Surfing the Internet
Facebook
Bitterness
Covetousness
Worry
TV
Fast food

Take Up

Building others up
Forgiveness
Submission
Fasting
Reading the Bible
Face time with God in prayer
Joyfulness
Contentment
Trust
Time with family
Donate the money to a shelter

Although I’m talking in generalities here, I challenge you to make your Lenten disciplines as personal as a toothbrush. Rather than wait till the end of the sermon, I invite you into a time of prayer right now. Ask the Holy Spirit what you should give up and take up during Lent.

My guess is that the majority of us immediately thought of something that we should give up and take up. I would suggest to you that this is the Holy Spirit's voice in your life. If nothing came to your mind, continue to seek God's guidance. The twin disciplines of giving up and taking up can transform our Lenten Cross Walk.

Lint and Lent

During childhood, I heard the season of Lent mentioned in the church. I must confess that it was quite confusing in my immature mind. The only lint I knew about was spelled with an *I*: L-I-N-T. It was that stuff that gathered on clothes in the moments between ironing and wearing. A lint brush was used to spread the bits of lint evenly across one's pants and shirt.

Only later did I discover Lent with an *E*: L-E-N-T. Today I understand that Lent is a critical time in the Christian calendar that prayerfully prepares the church for Holy Week.

Both lint with an *I* and Lent with an *E* describe the mess of human existence. L-E-N-T, however, points to the One who has done something about it—now and forever.

Today we begin our Lenten *Cross Walk*. Let us commit to the spiritual disciplines of “giving up” and “taking up.” Hear Christ's words anew: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus. This Lenten journey to Holy Week and Easter will transform our lives forever. Amen.