

**Sermon at the beginning of Lent**  
**“Lent – re-focus our lives to be more in line with God”**

Sisters and brothers,  
it was Ash Wednesday, and I tried to find some quiet moments in my office. After all this was the beginning of the season of Lent. I needed time to reflect on some personal issues – just as much as I needed time to make plans for our worship life in those 40 days following Ash Wednesday up to Easter.  
But as many of you know, Peace Church office can be like Piccadilly Circus. The door bell is ringing, phone calls come, people drop in. Somebody needs certified photocopies, French-speaking asylum seekers need baby’s clothes, somebody returns a book borrowed some time ago... Certifying photocopies so that German authorities will accept them, takes time. Communicating in French does also – since my French skills do by no means reach up to my English or my German. Handing over theological books almost always brings about a chat over a cup of tea and some sharing about what had been read...  
All fine with me.

And when I looked at my watch, it was almost lunch time, and I had promised to cook a warm meal. Time to leave the desk, and no thought had been spent on Lent... I thought.  
But, was this true?  
Wasn’t I somehow already getting close to the theme of Lent? Close to what Lent has to do with me?

It is pretty easy to get caught up in the drama of work, school, relationships, and family. Our lives are filled with distractions that take us away from what we mean to focus on, or take us away from what we had planned to do, what we had in mind...

In the morning of Ash Wednesday I had focussed on “living through the year with Jesus”, and trying to see where this could lead us as a church family in this time of Lent.  
By lunch time I had lost track of that completely. And after lunch there were so many calls on the answering machine (do other people have no lunch break?) that I got carried away by responding to them and organising baptisms, the delivery of clothes to an asylum seekers’ place, book orders from a Christian bookshop in the South of England, payments for Sunday School material to be made overseas, this guy from Munich Found magazine for English speakers who wants information about the English-speaking Prisoners’ Support group and their work in Bavarian prisons, and last but not least this journalist from Bavaria’s most important television company who wants to start her film about Peace Church already before Easter...

And suddenly in the middle of it all, I realized that I had lost my focus. And if I didn’t somehow get it back, I’d feel absolutely dissatisfied and empty but also totally exhausted by the time I closed the office door behind me in the evening. Then I’d fill the emptiness inside me with mindless TV, meaningless distraction, some red wine... We all do this at times, don’t we?

We avoid the silence because we don't want to be alone – which could actually mean alone with God. Instead we fill our moments, our free time, our bodies with “stuff” which we don't need, which doesn't do us any good.

Television soaps – what a waste of time!?! Food and drink to distract us rather than to simply feed us. How silly?! How mindless!?! And how frustrating at times...

Ash Wednesday however, should not end like this, I was determined. I would still carve out some time for reflection and prayer, as well as for some over-all thoughts for this time before Easter in this church.

Like Jesus on the mountain or in the desert I needed to take some serious time to pray and figure out where God is in my life, and where God is calling me to serve, and who God wants me to be.

Of course, as a minister I could pretend to be always working for God, couldn't I? Which isn't true, when I lose my balance and my centre in the busy-ness of the days. No matter which job we work in, I am sure we all know these times when we realise that we have to re-focus our lives to be more in line with God.

Lent lends itself to that.

Lent is the season of the Christian year when people are invited to simplify their lives in order to focus on their relationship with God. Lent is the time of the year when people are invited to change things, to renew aspects of their lives, to pray more, to read and meditate more, to simply make a difference!

But before we have a closer look at that, let us briefly ask where the idea of Lent comes from, and how it can be celebrated. Since not all of us in this church come from the same background (actually the opposite is true: we have almost as many different backgrounds as there are people in this church), some of us may have no clue what Lent is about, and others may have strong and vivid childhood memories of ash crosses marked on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday.

If you remember some of the stories of Jesus, you may recall the story of Jesus' baptism. On this day the sky split open, and the spirit of God, which looked like a dove, descended and landed on Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, “you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

After this, Jesus was sent out into the wilderness (Mark 1).

Maybe Jesus needed some time with God.

Maybe God needed some time with Jesus?

Maybe those two needed to sort and clarify some of those major changes happening in Jesus' life.

Maybe Jesus was searching for directions and answers?

Maybe he needed to get away from family, friends and the familiar routine in order to see God and himself more clearly?

For whatever reason – Jesus retreated into the wilderness for forty days to fast and pray.

This is where the idea of Lent comes from.

Forty days to find yourself, to be tempted and to resist.

Forty days to find strength, to renew one’s life, to make some serious decisions, to find out about God, and to find out what kind of person God wanted Jesus to be, - and wants us to be.

In Lent Jesus’ 40 days in the desert are remembered. But we are also reminded of the forty days which Elijah and Moses both spent with God, or the forty years which Israel spent wandering in the desert. Lent is the season of journeying into something new, the season of solitude and self-reflection. Lent is the invitation to bring simplicity into our lives!  
...and by doing so return to Christ.

Generally people try to do so by cutting out all that distracts us. For some people that means giving up something like sweets, television, beer, cigarettes, coffee or meat as a way to purify their bodies and their lives.

Others take something on which they usually don’t do: some social commitment, charity work, additional prayer time, extra meditations, writing a diary, or a poem, walk more, smile more, argue less...

Whatever is given up or taken on, the intention must be to live closer to Christ, to become more like him, to make us aware of how much he loves us, and how much we through that can love others.

Back to Ash Wednesday: can you guess what I decided half way through my reflections? I am giving up the television distraction and the glass of wine in the evenings. And I am curious what sides in myself and what sides of God I will be able to discover through more quiet time...

This is one aspect of Lent.

Another is that as we journey through Lent, the shadow of the cross falls upon our way.

During Lent we are reminded of the root meaning of sacrifice, which is to make holy, to make whole.

It is a season of reflection and repentance.

We remember not only Jesus suffering, we remember men and women whose dreams, hopes, often very lives, were threatened, destroyed or sacrificed by others. We remember those who are suffering, who are poor, discriminated against, rejected and persecuted. And in remembering and touching the wounds (our own and those of others in the past and in the present time) our journey may lead us through painful places, yet it can give us a great amount of strength. Lent invites us to remember the pain – just think of the stations of the cross, and to prepare the way...

One significant story in those weeks of Lent is Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11). This familiar story which has inspired songs, poetry and paintings tells us of Jesus’ sending two disciples ahead to prepare the way, and of the crowd that greets him with hosannas. It focuses a festive and dramatic moment in a dangerous story that had already started going “the wrong way”.

And here people come to my mind who are with Jesus in his final days. They accompany him in times of fear, despair and loneliness. And I find one such

companion in the woman who anoints Jesus’ head as he sits at the table in the house of Simon (Mark 14).

At this table, most likely filled by men, this woman seems to know what Jesus is and what he needs. In her anointing, which is both a gift and a sign, she offers a prophetic act of beauty and grace. In her touch she reveals her awareness of his pain and her longing to heal it.

Jesus knows the depth of her gift, the significance of her having the heart to touch him.

And in his receiving he makes known his openness to those who possess the courage to touch, to love, to heal – beyond the boundaries set by others.

Lent invites us to touch, to love, to heal, and to overcome boundaries.

This small story of one of those many nameless women of the Bible has often been overseen. But it is worth discovering, while we journey through Lent. We can live with it, and in it...

...as we can live in some other stories of people who journeyed with Jesus. We can live in the circle of friends in the night of the last supper, in those waiting in these dark hours in the garden and eventually falling asleep... in those promising and failing, and in the one betraying... not always getting it right.

We live with those stories, we are part of them.

And one of the stories I’d love to be part of most is the story of the women who stayed with Jesus at his cross, till the end. They have seen Christ’s pain, have held it and felt it themselves. What they show is passion, commitment, faithfulness, courage and love. And they invite us in this season to do the same.

Inspired by his vision, healed by his touch, empowered by his friendship the women around Jesus share his passion for wholeness, for salvation and life. This shared passion prepares them for all that comes... They do not leave Jesus alone during this time, not even at the cross.

What would we have done?

While we journey through Lent and put our focus on living with Jesus, we may remember the passionate companions of Jesus.

With them we may move through the shadows of the cross.

With them we may break bread, overcome fear, ask questions, and dream new dreams.

With them we may grieve, bear witness and wait.

With them we may experience the joy of resurrection.

With them we may work and pray for an end to suffering, for the healing of Christ’s body, for the healing of the world.

By the end of Ash Wednesday I had forgotten the distractions of the morning and the early afternoon. I had found myself and my place in this time of Lent. And I took a deep breath of life that kept me going for days, when I read the following affirmation of faith:

### **Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in God.

When there was nothing but an ocean of tears,  
God sighed over the waters  
and dreamed a small dream:  
light in the darkness,  
a small planet in space.

We believe in Jesus Christ.

When hate and fear were raging,  
when love was beaten down,  
when hope was nailed and left to die,  
Christ entered into our deep secret places  
and went down into our death to find us.

We believe in the Holy Spirit

who weeps with us in our despair,  
who breathes on prison doors,  
never admitting it's hopeless,  
always expecting the bars to bend and sway  
and break forth into blossom.

Amen.