How to Celebrate Lent

Some ideas for tending your soul

Stay in the Red*. Fundamentally, the Season of Lent is about Jesus. Lent is the period of 40 days between Ash Wednesday (see Repent, below) and Easter Sunday. The season is inspired by Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness in which he fasted and prayed in preparation for His ministry. We live into the Lenten season, first and foremost, by staying close to Jesus: hearing and obeying His teaching, watching how He lives a life of love for God and others, and surrendering and entrusting our lives to Him. It might be a great idea to pick a Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) and read it all the way through, a passage or a chapter a day. Be sure to focus on the last week of Jesus' life during Holy Week (the week which begins on Palm Sunday) – a great place to end up is John 12-21.

Pray. Lent is a time to re-center our lives on God, and one of the ways we do this is through prayer. We pray in many different ways, for many different things. Lent is a great time to focus our prayers on listening to God, repenting (see below) and surrendering our lives to Him. When our prayers grow dry, and we run out of words, it's helpful to pray the Psalms, and even imagine Jesus praying them with you.

Repent. Lent is traditionally a season of repentance, marked by Ash Wednesday, which gets its name from the ancient practice of weeping over our sins in dust and ashes. The emphasis on repentance is a timely one. As Lent comes to a close on Good Friday, we worship Jesus as He hangs upon the cross—held there by our sins. Lent is a time to ask God to search us and know us (Psalm 139) and to purify us from all unrighteousness (I John 1).

Fast. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days before beginning His earthly ministry. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that prompts us to pray. As you "hunger" for food, allow God to convert your physical hunger into spiritual hunger for more of Him. People might set aside a meal a week, or a day a week, or 30 hours, to fast during Lent. You might choose to fast for a cause, or a specific prayer request, or simply for your own spiritual discipline and relationship with God. You can fast from food, or fast from other things that you enjoy or depend on (such as, television and movies, Facebook, dessert, meat, media, etc.). Whatever you fast from, the object is to keep the focus on prayer and your relationship with God—not what you're fasting from. Jesus wants to make sure that when we fast, we do so in complete humility before God, not as a means of being admired or respected by others (Matthew 6).

Center Your Suffering on the Cross. We all suffer. During the season of Lent, in particular, we gain an eternal perspective on suffering. Spend time meditating on the voluntary suffering of Jesus, and how His suffering was redeemed through what it accomplished and through the resurrection of His body. Ask God for strength and courage to persevere through hardship and trials with faith. Resist the temptation to ask God to take away your suffering. Rather, pray that you'll be united with Jesus both in and through it. Some helpful texts are found in Philippians 3, Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15.

*the words of Jesus are printed in red type in many Bibles.

Bill Hodgeman, 2010