

Looking into the Mirror

A Lenten Reflection



Sister Joan Chittister has said that “souls die from lack of reflection.” Lent is a good time for 40 days of reflection, 40 days of spiritual evaluation—an annual check-up, as it were. This resource invites you to use the Lenten season to refocus your faith life and realign your relationship with God.

Lent is about looking into the mirror. Not the compact in your purse or the mirror above the bathroom sink, and not the big mirrored doors in a hotel room that show more than you might care to see. It’s not even the 360-degree mirror made famous by the TV show “What Not to Wear.” The mirror of Lent creates reflections even larger than that, for as author Annie Dillard reminds us, “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” To ask questions about how we give, how we pray, and how we care for our neighbor is to hold a metaphorical mirror up to our souls. It is to lay open and bare before God our very lives, including all the things we hide from others and even that which we try to hide from ourselves.

One of the ways we enter into this soul-searching reflection is in the extended confession of sins in the Ash Wednesday liturgy that begins the Lenten period. The presiding minister first invites us into the discipline of Lent with these or similar words:

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and for God’s mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. But our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbor. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance,



This resource is designed to take about 60 minutes. It could be expanded by allowing further time for reflection and discussion. Open and close the session with prayer. Participants will need a copy of this resource, and pen and paper. If you wish to incorporate scripture, have participants bring a Bible. The discussion questions will work best in small groups. Allow time for participants to jot down answers to the questions before beginning discussion.

prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament.

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leaders Desk Edition, p. 617)

When we take a look in the mirror, an honest and deep look in the mirror, we find that the problem is worse than we had ever imagined. Our sinful thoughts and actions permeate our entire lives. The extended Confession of Sin, beginning on page 252 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, reminds us that:

We have not loved God with our whole heart, and mind, and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.

We have shut our ears to God's call to serve as Christ served us.

Our past unfaithfulness, pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy have infected our lives.

We are self-indulgent and we exploit others.

We neglect prayer and worship.

We fail to share the faith that is in us.

We neglect human need and suffering.

We are indifferent to injustice and cruelty.

We have uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors.

We exhibit prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us.

We waste and pollute God's creation and show little concern for those who will come after us.

It's a scathing indictment, isn't it? Do you see yourself there? Do you see your congregational unit of Women of the ELCA there? Most of us have learned ways to cover up or conceal what we might call our shortcomings. We don't want to see them in the mirror, and we certainly don't want our

friends, families and co-workers—or others in our congregations and units—seeing those shortcomings. But Ash Wednesday, and all of Lent, calls us to take an honest and deep look at ourselves, to bare our souls before our loving and forgiving God.

Before the extended Confession of Sin, the Ash Wednesday liturgy provides a time of silence for "reflection and self-examination." Rarely do we pause long enough at this point; if we were to truly reflect and examine ourselves in the extensive way that the confession sets out, it would take some time, wouldn't it?

Martin Luther said in the 95 Theses that the whole life of a disciple is to be one of repentance.

- **How might you use the 40 days of Lent this year for extended self-examination that leads to repentance?**
- **What would you have to say "no" to in order to say "yes" to extending your self-examination?**
- **How would this realignment through the Lenten season help you live out the Purpose Statement of Women of the ELCA? (See the last page.)**



Personal reflections on Lent

When I was growing up, Lent was such a long dreary season. It was like a 40-day funeral. Our congregation had mid-week Lenten services every Wednesday evening. The adults rarely talked with each other before or after the service, and when they did talk, it was in hushed tones. Maybe we just had poor lighting in the nave, but I remember it being pretty dark in there too. Most of the music seemed to be in minor keys. Lent felt like sort of the cod liver oil of the liturgical calendar. You knew it was good for you, you didn't like it while it was happening, and you were glad when it was over.

What do you recall of Lenten seasons when you were a child?

As a young adult, I experienced Lenten seasons very differently. Our congregation gathered for a soup supper every Wednesday before worship. We pared down our abundant potlucks to a simple meal of bread and soup, a type of fasting. In addition to the regular offering, we would take up another offering and give it to ministries in our community. We sometimes "adopted" those ministries and completed service projects for them as well. We were practicing almsgiving, sharing our gifts with those living in poverty and need. Our evening prayer liturgy was lyrical and poetic, no longer a mournful dirge. We were consciously following the Lenten disciplines with a renewed focus on prayer, almsgiving, fasting.

What do you recall of Lenten seasons when you were a young adult?

Women of the ELCA Purpose Statement

As a community of women
 created in the image of God,
 called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
 empowered by the Holy Spirit,
 we commit ourselves to
 grow in faith,
 affirm our gifts,
 support one another in our callings,
 engage in ministry and action, and
 promote healing and wholeness
 in the church,
 the society, and
 the world.

I'm now middle-aged, and I continue to understand more about Lent and I experience the season more fully. The gloomy penitential tone of my childhood Lent is gone. Penitence is still a part of Lent, of course, but it has been reshaped for me as 40 days of repentance and renewal. I turned "giving up" something for Lent into a realignment of my relationship with God. The Lenten disciplines help me do this. Fasting helps me see what is truly necessary in my life, reorienting myself to what is needed, not what is wanted.

How do the Lenten disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting help you realign your relationship with God?

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