

Lent

A Sense of the Season

The word *Lent* means springtime. This word comes from the same root as *lengthen*. Daytime lengthens during Lent. The northern hemisphere turns toward the sun, the source of life, and winter turns into spring. In Hebrew, the word for *repentance* is the same as the word that means to *turn*, like the turning of the earth to the sun, like the turning of the soil before planting.

“Even now, says the Lord, turn to me.” (Joel 2:12) The word *sin* means separation. We are called to turn from our separate selves, from our sin, to come together in community. Self-denial is the way we express our repentance. In the lengthening brightness from Ash Wednesday until Holy Thursday afternoon, our holy Lent, we turn to God as our source of life.

Self-denial is threefold, advises Matthew’s gospel. We pray: “Go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private.” We fast: “No one must see you are fasting but your Father.” We give alms: “Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” Through the Lenten exercise of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we spring-clean our lives, sharpen our senses, put tomorrow in its place and treasure the day at hand.

Why are there forty days in Lent? It took forty days for sinfulness to drown in the flood before a new creation could inherit the earth. It took forty years for the generation of slaves to die before the freeborn could enter the promised land. For forty days Moses and Elijah and Jesus fasted and prayed to prepare themselves for a life’s work.

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