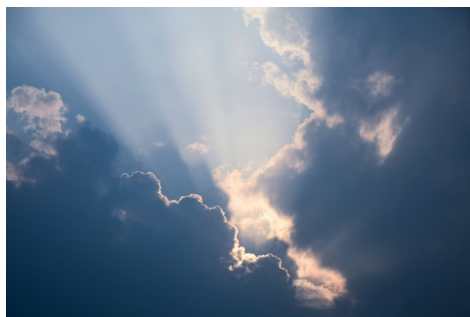
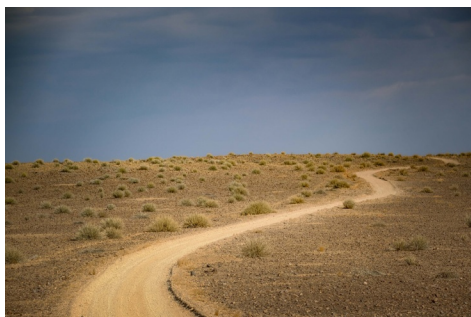




Sermon Aids

LENT CYCLE B



HE COMES TO
CHALLENGE

HE COMES TO
CONFRONT

HE COMES TO
DIE

An Introduction

By Alvin Dungan

In Roget's Thesaurus, two synonyms of the word "behold" are to get a load of (slang) and to get an eyeful of (informal). Lent is an appropriate time to do both of these things in acquainting ourselves with the ministry of Jesus and how that ministry can make an impact on our lives. It is a time for realizing that accepting the Lordship of Jesus is no small or easy thing. It is a time for accepting that becoming a follower of Jesus is both life-changing and life-threatening.

Lent, in the Early Church, was the time when people were prepared for baptism (symbolic of death to their former way of living) and incorporation into the Christian community (a new way to live in Christ). In the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and the Vigil of Easter, the catechumens had ample opportunity to "get a load of"/"get an eyeful of" the life and ministry of Jesus during their instruction. The purpose of this intense instruction was to let the catechumens know that accepting Jesus as Lord and living a life of service to him would be a radical departure from their former lives.

Confessing "Jesus as Lord" has always been a risky business because of those who seek to prevent allegiance to him in favor of some other being or ideology. In the Roman Empire it was mandated that each person, if called upon to do so, would confess that "Caesar is Lord" and in doing so would burn a pinch of incense as a sign of loyalty to him and adoration of him as a god. Early Christians found themselves incapable of making this confession because Jesus had become Lord of their lives. As a result, they came under increasingly severe persecution as heretics in the state religion of Rome.

The situation has changed little today. People still face persecution, imprisonment and/or death if they choose to publicly confess "Jesus is Lord." A recent example of this is the ongoing persecution of some Mainland Chinese Catholics by the government of The Peoples' Republic of China. More subtle examples of this in this country are the increasingly stringent interpretation of the separation of Church and State issues.

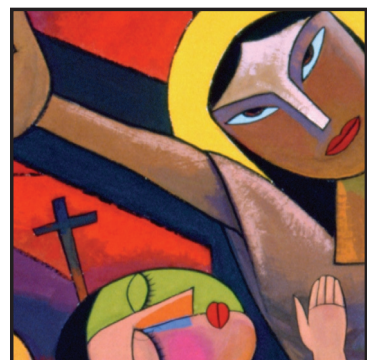
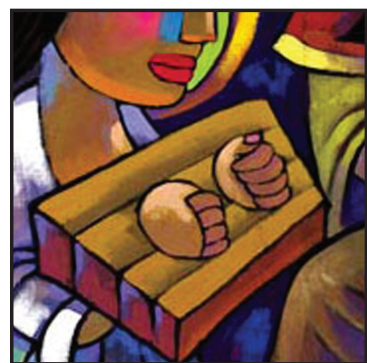
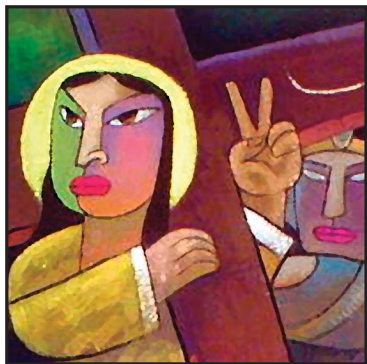
So, one of the main things we need to look at during this Lenten Season is, "Just who or what is Lord in your life?" Just what is "a Lord?" And, how is this manifested in the way you live out your faith in daily life as an individual and also as a member of a Christian community of believers?

Becoming a follower of Jesus is both life-changing and life-giving.



Ash Wednesday

He comes...



LESSONS

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

His People return to Him

His People will be cleansed of sin

His People to be reconciled to God

His People to be unobtrusive

Ash Wednesday is a very special day in the church year. On this day, in many Christian denominations and congregations, ashes in the form of a cross are placed on believers' foreheads as a reminder of their mortality and their fellowship with the Crucified One. Ash Wednesday also gives us the opportunity to sharpen our focus on the days of the Lenten season during which we recall and live through the final days of our Lord. The cross is on the far horizon and during each of the days of Lent we move closer to it, step by step—not just remembering the end of Jesus' life, but also reminding ourselves this is our destination if we remain faithful to our Lord. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred Lutheran pastor, wrote that when Christ calls someone, he calls them to come and die. Ash Wednesday challenges us to "take up the cross" and follow Jesus. The Sundays in Lent challenge and confront us asking us to be clear reflections of our Lord's ministry. And, if we are faithful, we will be brought to our own cross and death. But, as we know from this side of Easter, that's not the end and so we can look forward confidently to our times of testing and challenge, counting ourselves worthy to suffer as our Lord did.

Historical Setting and Context

JOEL: We know nothing about Joel, the man, except that his father's name was Pethuel. Because of his comments regarding corporate worship, he may have been a member of the priestly community or a cult prophet who prophesied in a worship setting. Biblical scholars date the writing of this short prophetic statement sometime between 400 and 350 B.C. Joel perceived a severe plague of locusts as Yahweh's judgment on the people, and he uses this disastrous event to call Israel to repentance. In this call to repentance Israel is challenged to return to Yahweh before the terrible "Day of the Lord" appears—a day in which there is darkness, gloom and the sound of an approaching, conquering army (of which the locust plague is symbolic). However, if the proper changes are made within the hearts of the people, if their behavior (weeping, fasting and mourning) is genuine then Yahweh will be gracious and merciful and remove the threat of destruction from them. The key is for Israel to present itself as truly repentant on all levels of life. You might also want to check out what Amos has to say about "The Day of the Lord" for an expansion of that concept.

PSALMS: This psalm is probably one of the better known psalms because of its connection to David's prayer for cleansing and pardon after he had slept with the wife of one of his mercenaries and then had him killed in battle to cover it up. Yahweh, through Nathan the prophet, challenged David to be cleansed from his sins of adultery and murder and David accepted the challenge. He acknowledged his transgressions and pled with Yahweh to forgive him. Psalm 51 can also be a plea for healing and moral renewal for a community that has strayed away from its commitment to live a God-directed, God-pleasing life.



2 CORINTHIANS: Paul's relationship with the Corinthian Church was, in a word, tense by the time this letter was written. There were those who had appeared in the church in Corinth who stood in definite opposition to Paul's ministry and message and who denigrated him as a false apostle. These opponents had created chaos among the Corinthian believers and because of this Paul had apparently written a very harsh letter (which is no longer extant) to the church to address their actions. This letter (2nd Corinthians) is a partial attempt to mend fences with those who remained faithful. He makes a serious attempt to help them regain their original focus of being saved by grace through God's action in Jesus. He then goes on to remind them of his commitment to them and what he has had to experience in order for them to know the gospel.

MATTHEW: From the Sermon on The Mount, Chapter 6 is a series of sayings on practical piety and on how this piety is to be unobtrusive, even unnoticed, if it is to be God-pleasing. The purpose of piety is to enrich the inner life, not to "trumpet" to the rest of the world how religiously observant a person is. The emphasis of this text is about "in secret" almsgiving, prayer and fasting which is what God rewards. It is also a reminder that it is useless to trust in worldly goods that we may have today but which may disappear tomorrow due to the vagaries of life. The only place to store up treasure is in heaven "where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." Your heart, Jesus said, will be where your treasure is.

Key Points

1. Challenges bring out the best in us. If there are no challenges, life becomes boring and dull. What challenges do each of the above texts give us? Which of the challenges are we willing to accept in order to clarify our relationship to Jesus as Lord?
2. Can you think of some challenges you experienced this week as a Christian? If you can, what were they? If you can't, why not?
3. What's the big deal about God wanting us to return and be reconciled? How is being cleansed from sin like hitting the delete key on your computer?
4. What's the value of unobtrusive piety? What difference does it make anyway?



LESSONS

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

A Challenge to Remember

A Challenge to Learn

A Challenge to Follow

A Challenge to Believe

LENT WEEK I

HE COMES TO CHALLENGE

Historical Setting and Context

GENESIS: Every time you see the rainbow, remember God's grace. That's the challenge of this text: remembrance. We are to remember our Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The rainbow has been the assurance of this from the time of Noah until today. For just as God promised to Noah and his sons, there has never again been a world-inundating flood, nor will there be. The bow of God is the sign of this covenant with humankind. The ancients knew nothing about the refraction of light through raindrops. Even if they had, they probably wouldn't have cared. This was their way of fixing in their awareness the eternal nature of God's promises. Their lives were filled with signs and events like this to help them to remember the mighty acts of God. Sadly, all we have is the scientific fact of refracted light through tiny drops of water. What is there of significance about that? It steals the power and mystery of a faith story. Perhaps it's time to re-mythologize our faith so that we can recapture the mystery of God's grace.

PSALMS: This psalm is attributed to David who knew a lot about the need for God's guidance and deliverance. He never got enough. So just as he recognized the need to continue to learn about the mercies of God, we also need to follow his example. It is an ongoing challenge God puts before us to learn about God and all God has to offer. We are never more than one generation away from total unbelief and rejection of God's grace. Therefore, it is critical during this season of the Church to acknowledge the importance of continuing to humbly learn the ways of our God and, then, pass them on to our children.

1 PETER: Sometimes it is difficult to understand unjust suffering. We can accept punishment if it is justified, if we have done something wrong that needs to be made right. Early Christians struggled with this concept just as we do today. There has even been a book written about this: *Why Bad Things Happen To Good People*. If there was ever an example of someone who suffered unjustly, Jesus was that person. And He did it without complaint. If that happened to the one we call Lord, then it is not only understandable but also acceptable that we be willing to suffer unjustly as well. The important thing is that we do it with good grace, rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer for Him who suffered for us. It would be easy to whine and complain when we experience suffering in the name of Jesus. But that is not the witness we are to give. Our witness is to be one of acceptance and prayer for those who cause us to suffer. Mary Ellen Jegen says it well in her book, *A New Moment: An Invitation to Nonviolence*, "...we know that the first real victim of violence is the perpetrator. We need to remember that as we pray for our enemies. What Gandhi said is true: An eye for an eye results only in two blind persons."

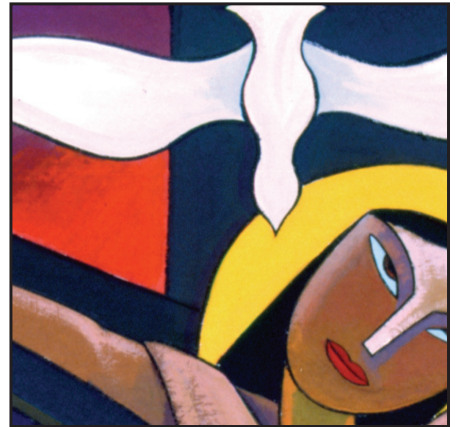
MARK: The whole of Mark's gospel is an elaboration of this statement in chapter 1, verse 15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This is the challenge Jesus puts before the people of his day and continues to put before us today. It has not changed in 2000 years and it will not change, ever. When we accept Jesus as Lord, then we no longer live on clock time (chronos) but on God's time (kairos) and put our lives into a whole new frame of reference. When we accept Jesus as Lord, then we are no longer citizens of a particular country. We become citizens of the kingdom of God including people of all times and places, all races and languages, all economic levels and social classes. As St. Paul states so well, "We are all one in Christ Jesus." When we accept Jesus as Lord, then we ask God's forgiveness for our times of rebellion and entreat

God to reconcile us for Jesus' sake. When we accept Jesus as Lord, then we believe that He is the "Good News" bringer that God loves us all and would have us serve in loving obedience. That's the challenge of believing the Gospel.

Key Points

1. How can we regain a sense of mystery in relation to our faith? Is this what Jesus meant when He said, "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"? Children have a sense of awe and wonder about the world that many adults seem to have lost. Shouldn't we let them be our teachers rather than the other way around when it comes to the mysterious and unseen?
2. What are some specific things that we can do to put into action the grace, mercy and steadfast love that God has given us? Remember the words of the hymn that states "...but not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes." Incorporate one or two of those "deeds of love and mercy" in your life this week.
3. Christianity is a "counter-culture" religion. We are to be "in the world" but not "of the world. What does that mean in terms of our Lenten walk? How does that affect how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis?





Copyright © Faith Inkubators. For use by current yearly members only. Any other use of this material is prohibited. www.faithink.com