



CHRIST  
THE REDEEMER  
—PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH—

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
April 6, 2025

## Welcome to CHRIST THE REDEEMER...

We're glad you've joined us. Whether you have followed Jesus your whole life or you can't remember the last time you stepped foot in a church, we want you to feel welcome to come as you are and worship with our church family. If you have any questions about our church or where to find something, please don't hesitate to ask. We're excited about what God is doing among us as we seek to live, grow and serve as followers of Jesus in Portland and in our surrounding neighborhoods. So, welcome to CTR, we'd love to have you as part of our family.

During our service, our nursery is open for babies who are crawlers through 3-year-olds. If you need help finding the nursery area, please ask any of our greeters!

Children's Church is in session. After the blessing each week, children age 4 – 1<sup>st</sup> grade are welcome to go to Children's Church. They will re-join their families after the sermon.

→ You may use this QR code to link  
to the lyrics in our worship service today.



### THE RHYTHM OF OUR WORSHIP

On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), when Jesus' disciples found themselves troubled and confused, Jesus met them along the way. When they confessed their troubles and doubts to Him, His words and presence began to change them. He unfolded God's Word to them, pointing to His own person and work. He dined with them, giving thanks and breaking bread. The disciples recognized their Lord's presence with them and hurried to tell others the good news.

In the Emmaus story, we recognize the pattern of historic Christian worship as it began to take shape. Our worship liturgy at Christ the Redeemer moves through a specific rhythm: God **SUMMONS** us as His people, God **SANCTIFIES** us to Himself, God **SPEAKS** to us in His Word, God **STRENGTHENS** us at His table, and God **SENDS** us into the world to share His grace.

The emphasis throughout our worship is upon God's action and our appropriate response. In worship, we rehearse the gospel message of Jesus' death and resurrection and are caught up into the mission of the Triune God. The flow of our liturgy aims at drawing us further into the life of the Trinity as children of God and then impelling us outward into our world.

*-adapted from City Church Philadelphia Guide to Our Worship*

## G O D S U M M O N S

[ P R A I S E ]

### C A L L T O W O R S H I P

[L] Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens!

[P] **Kings of the earth and all people!**

[L] Princes and all rulers of the earth.

[P] **Young men and women alike, old and young together!**

[L] Let them praise the Lord!

[P] **Praise the Lord!**

### SONG

ALL PEOPLE THAT ON EARTH DO DWELL

## G O D S A N C T I F I E S

[ R E N E W A L ]

### C O N F E S S I O N O F S I N

[All] **Dear Lord, we come before you today as your children. We praise you as the God of all creation and the giver of life. You have made us, saved us, and called us to be your people and to serve in your Kingdom work. We confess that we too often have forgotten that we belong to you. We try to live our lives as if we were actually in charge of them and forget or ignore you. Too many times, we aren't good witnesses to your love and we don't always do our part to engage with the world. Please forgive us. Change our hearts so that we would live for you first. Give us the courage and strength to live our faith and serve your world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.**

SONG

HAVE MERCY

WORDS OF COMFORT AND ASSURANCE OF PARDON

[L] Jesus knows our every weakness and loves us still.  
Awaken to the promise of Christ's amazing grace.  
Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.

[All] **In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!**

SONG

HIS MERCY IS MORE

LIFE OF THE PEOPLE  
[ANNOUNCEMENTS]

NEW TO CTR? Welcome! If you would like to connect, learn more about our church or subscribe to our weekly announcement email, please use this QR code.



THE PEACE OF GOD  
and THE BLESSING OF THE CHILDREN

[L] May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

[P] **And also with you.**

[L] People of God, what is our prayer for these and all our children?

[All] **May the Lord be with you.**

[Children] **And also with you.**

*After the blessing each week, children aged 4 – 1<sup>st</sup> grade are welcome to go to Children's Church downstairs in Fellowship Hall. They will re-join their families after the sermon.*

## SONG

O THE DEEP, DEEP LOVE OF JESUS

**G O D   S P E A K S**

[ W O R D ]

## S C R I P T U R E

John 11:1-53 ESV

Read by Haylee Freeman

*The Death of Lazarus*

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

<sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. <sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup> The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. <sup>10</sup> But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” <sup>11</sup> After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” <sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” <sup>13</sup> Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, <sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” <sup>16</sup> So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

*I Am the Resurrection and the Life*

<sup>17</sup> Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to

Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.<sup>20</sup> So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.<sup>22</sup> But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”<sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”<sup>27</sup> She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

### *Jesus Weeps*

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”<sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.<sup>32</sup> Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.<sup>34</sup> And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

### *Jesus Raises Lazarus*

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.<sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.”<sup>43</sup> When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.”<sup>44</sup> The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

*The Plot to Kill Jesus*

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

[L]    The grass withers and the flower fades,  
          but the Word of God stands forever.  
The Word of the Lord.

Isaiah 40:8

[P]    **Thanks be to God.**

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Apr 6, 2025

Sermon Series:  
THE MINISTRY OF CHRIST

Sermon:  
THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Rev. Sean J.S. Roberts  
*Lead Pastor*



AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Nicene Creed

[L] Christian, what is it that we believe?

[P] **We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.**

**And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.**

**And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets; and we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

Led by Elder Matt Reid

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

SONG  
TRISAGION

## GOD STRENGTHENS [TABLE]

### CELEBRATING HOLY COMMUNION

*A Word about Communion: Communion is the family meal of Christians. Baptized believers actively looking to Jesus as their hope for salvation are warmly invited to share in this meal with us as our brothers and sisters.*

- *Please approach the servers by coming up the middle aisle and returning to your seat via the outside aisles.*
- *Once you receive the bread and wine/juice, please hold on to it as you return to your seat. We will partake together as one body after everyone has received the elements.*
- *Children and those who are not partaking are also welcome to approach the servers for a prayer or word of God's blessing. We ask that you fold your hands as you approach so the server is aware.*
- *Please dispose of your communion cups and any other trash in the wastebasket located at the back of the sanctuary or the one near the exit at the front of the sanctuary as you leave today. Thank you!*

### WORDS OF INVITATION & INSTITUTION

### PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

### PARTAKING OF THE ELEMENTS

SONG  
WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

## PRAYERS OF REFLECTION

### PRAYER FOR THOSE SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

Lord Jesus, you claim to be the Way, the Truth and the Life. If what you claim is true, please guide me, teach me, and open to me the reality of who you are. Grant that I might be undaunted by the cost of following you as I consider the reasons for doing so. Give me an understanding for you that is coherent, convincing, and that leads to the life that you promise. Amen.

### PRAYER OF BELIEF

Lord Jesus, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before believed, but through you, I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope. I thank you for paying my debt, bearing my punishment on the cross and offering forgiveness and new life. Knowing that you have been raised from the dead, I turn from my sins and receive you as my Savior. Amen.

### PRAYER FOR THOSE STRUGGLING WITH SIN

Lord Jesus, grant that I may see in you the fulfillment of all my needs and may turn from every false satisfaction to feed on you, the true and living bread. Enable me to lay aside the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race set before me, looking only to you, the author and finisher of my faith. Amen.

### PRAYER OF COMMITMENT

Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you in baptism and in a life of committed discipleship in your church. Grant that I may take the necessary steps to be one with your people and live in the fullness of your Spirit. Amen.

## G O D   S E N D S

[MISSION]

R E S P O N S E S   O F   J O Y

## O F F E R I N G   O U R   L I V E S   A N D R E S O U R C E S

[our tithes and offerings]



If you would like to give online, please use this QR code:  
This takes you to our online giving portal.

## SONG

O LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET ME GO

## B E N E D I C T I O N   a n d   S E N D I N G

[L]     Sisters and brothers, let us claim the freedom Christ gives us by his self-giving on the cross. May he enable us to serve together in faith, hope, and love.

Go in peace and serve the Lord.

[All]    **Thanks be to God!**

# HIGHLIGHTS

April 6, 2025

NEW TO CTR? Welcome! If you would like to connect, learn more about our church or subscribe to our weekly announcement email, please use this QR code.



## ON THE CALENDAR:

- TODAY** **CHRISTIAN FORMATION CLASSES** – 9 AM
- MON, APR 7** **WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY** – 6 PM  
We will gather each Monday at the home of Laura Wiersma, 29 Lilac Lane in New Gloucester. A light supper will be served.  
Our book this semester is: *Gospel Growth: Becoming a Faith-Filled Person*
- THURS, APR 10** **MEN'S DROP-IN EVENT** – 5 – 6:15 PM  
Men, join us at Allagash Brewing, 50 Industrial Way, Portland! Invite a co-worker or friend to join us!
- FRI, APR 11** **FRIDAY PLAY GROUP** – 10 AM – 1 PM  
Calling all stay-at-home moms or dads! Plan to join us at playgroup every Friday at 10am. We are at a different location every week, so keep a lookout on Instagram [ctrportlandkids] for more information! Any and everyone is welcome with their children. Please contact Abby Reid if you have any questions.
- SUN, APR 13** **CONGREGATIONAL MEETING** – immediately following the Worship Service.  
This congregational meeting is being called by the Session at CTR at the request of the Building Committee. This is an informational meeting to talk about a potential opportunity for CTR to purchase a building.  
  
Please plan to stay for this important meeting. We will provide childcare for young children so their parents may attend the meeting.
- WED, APR 30** **LADIES' BOOK CLUB** – 7-8:30 PM @ 64 Brook Road, Portland  
Ladies, you're invited to join us for book club this month as we dive into *The Cliffs* by J. Courtney Sullivan—a compelling and beautifully written novel that promises to spark rich conversation. Whether you've read every page or just want to connect with others, come enjoy a relaxed evening of thoughtful discussion and great company! FMI, contact Claire Roberts @ 956.270.2565.

# Holy Week

SUN, APR 13

## **PALM SUNDAY WORSHIP** – 10 AM

Please make sure you join us as we begin Holy Week together in worship. We will be blessed during this service with both our Adult Choir and our Children's Choir!

THURS, APR 17

## **MAUNDY THURSDAY SERVICES** – 5:30-7:30 PM

Maundy Thursday is the Church's commemoration of the Last Supper. This year, we're gathering as a church in four separate locations to share a meal and participate in a simple liturgy led by one of our pastors. For simplicity, we're pairing up \*community groups for the gatherings (8 groups paired = 4 locations).

Meals will be potluck style, so please RSVP. It's our hope that gathering for a shared meal in the intimacy of each other's homes will invite our minds and bodies deeper into the feel of the Last Supper.

*\*let us know if you're not in a CG so we can connect you with one of these gatherings.*

FRI, APR 18

## **GOOD FRIDAY TENEBRAE SERVICE** – 6:30 PM

Join us on **Good Friday, April 18, at 6:30 PM** for a **Tenebrae Service**, a solemn and reflective time of Scripture, song, and silence as we remember Christ's journey to the cross.

Tenebrae, meaning "shadows" or "darkness," is an ancient service that invites us to sit in the weight of Good Friday. Through the gradual extinguishing of candles, we walk through the passion of Christ, experiencing the depth of His sacrifice for us.

Come and prepare your heart for Easter by entering into the story of Christ's love poured out. We invite you to join us in this sacred time of reflection and worship.

Childcare will be provided for crawlers – age 3.

SUN, APR 20

## **EASTER WORSHIP SERVICE** – 10 AM

Come and worship with us on **Easter Sunday at 10:00 AM** as we rejoice in the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through **Scripture, prayer, and song**, we will proclaim the good news that **Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!** In His victory over sin and death, we find our hope, our salvation, and the promise of new life in Him.

This is a day of great joy and reverence as we gather as Christ's body to lift our hearts in worship and gratitude. Come experience the power of Easter, the beauty of community, and the promise of new life in Christ. **All are welcome. Come and worship with us.**

# COMMUNITY GROUPS

Whether you're new to CTR or have been around for years, community groups are for you! These groups consist of regular, smaller gatherings in homes throughout Greater Portland, where we meet for fellowship, Bible study and prayer. Community groups are open to everyone (families, singles, couples, students, friends) at any age or stage - all at various points in their faith journey.

As Christ the Redeemer grows, community groups are increasingly the place where people are initiated into spiritual friendships and conversations where they can be more intimately known and cared for.

Our community groups will largely remain the same - so if you were involved in a community group last year, we already have a place for you (although, if you've moved or had another significant change, please let us know.).



**If you're new to CTR, or to community groups, we hope you'll join us!**

Please use the QR code to learn more and to sign-up.

## LISTEN TO CTR ON SPOTIFY AND APPLE PODCASTS!

The sermon from each Sunday's Worship Service can be found on both Spotify and Apple Podcasts! This happens automatically each Sunday BUT please note that until the service is trimmed on Monday, the podcast will include the entire service. Once it is trimmed, it will include the scripture reading, the sermon and the prayer after the sermon. Please use the QR codes below to go straight to each platform.

Our full service is livestreamed to Facebook, YouTube and the CTR App. If you want to view the full service after Sunday, that can be viewed at any point on Facebook and YouTube.



# SERVE...

At CTR, we believe that part of what makes the church a beautiful place is that it draws people with various passions and gifts into one body. Below are some opportunities to use your passions and gifts to serve one another and our local community.

- CHILDREN’S MINISTRIES ..... Abby Reid  
Phone: 404.723.4448  
E-mail: areid@ctrportland.org
- GREETER MINISTRY ..... Abby Reid  
Phone: 404.723.4448  
E-mail: areid@ctrportland.org
- MEALS MINISTRY ..... Tammy Locke  
Phone: 207.671.0936  
E-mail: tam74maine@gmail.com
- MISSIONS COORDINATOR.....Kathi Favre  
Phone: 207.298.2089  
E-mail: klfavre@gmail.com
- MUSIC..... Kendra Hollen  
Phone: 207.272.4104  
E-mail: khollen@ctrportland.org
- SET-UP ..... EJ Kruse  
Phone: 814-392-4810  
E-mail: ejkruse89@gmail.com
- SPECIAL EVENTS.....Claire Roberts  
Phone: 956.270.2565  
E-mail: clerkus@gmail.com



# How Do I Get and Stay Connected at CTR?

*At CTR we long for clear communication and deep bonds. We are excited that you're interested in being more connected and involved. The following is a list of our communication channels and their purpose in the life of our body:*

## 1. EMAIL NEWSLETTER (*Keeping in Touch*)

**This is the primary vehicle** by which we communicate regarding the life of our church. Most weeks you will receive an email with announcements and upcoming events. From time to time, our elders will also use this vehicle for church-wide or members only correspondence. **NOTE:** *If you are not regularly checking your email from CTR, it will be difficult to feel and be connected in the life of our church.* [Use this QR code to sign up for the email.]



## 2. CTR APP & TEXT MESSAGES

**The CTR App** is designed to help those in our church interact with each other. It is largely crowd sourced and includes information on informal meetups, prayer requests, live and past sermons/services, different hobby groups, ways to give, etc. [See page 16 to download the App.]

**Text Messages** are sent exclusively as reminders about events in the days/hours immediately beforehand.

## 3. SUNDAY MORNINGS

Sunday mornings employ several communication methods, including written **announcements in our Order of Worship**, verbally highlighted **announcements**, and (new) **projected announcements** running before and after the service. Sunday Morning announcements are focused on pointing people to events and ministries that help them explore or integrate more fully into the life of our church. Given the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of those attending Sunday Morning Worship, only on rare and exceptional occasions will these vehicles be used by leadership for information that is primarily member focused.

## 4. CTR WEBSITE & SOCIAL MEDIA

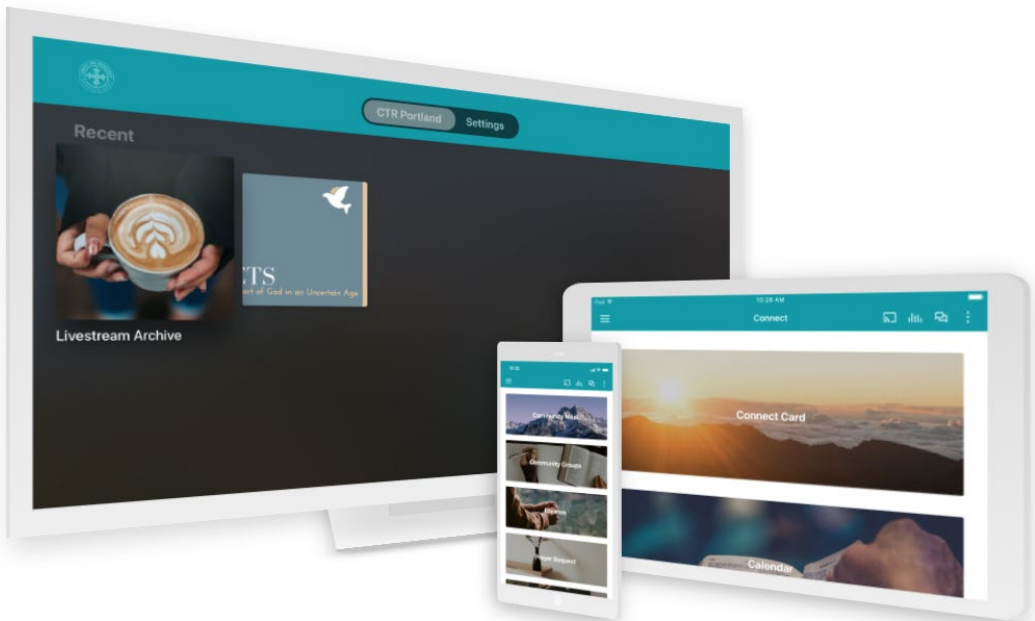
Both mediums are designed to be primarily outward facing.

**The CTR Website** [ctrportland.org] is designed to be our front door– a welcoming place for new people to discover and learn about our church. It is minimal in announcements and church life information.

**Social Media [Instagram & Facebook]** is used for promotion of church events. People are encouraged to “re-post” as a way of sharing with and inviting their friends. [@ctrportland]

*If you would like to access or have had difficulty accessing any of these vehicles, please contact [ctr@ctrportland.org](mailto:ctr@ctrportland.org). Our admin, Cheryl Sullivan, is happy to help you get integrated into our communication systems.*

# DOWNLOAD THE CTR APP!



# ON KEEPING HOLY LENT

*Rev. Craig Higgins, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Rye, NY*

People from different religious backgrounds have very different reactions to the season of Lent. Some grow up in churches where Lent is observed, but with little to no real explanation. Whether observed as a time of strict austerity or merely as a time of forgoing a few simple pleasures, in such cases Lent may seem like an empty, meaningless ritual.

On the other hand, some grow up in church traditions where Lent is not observed at all. These folks may think of Lenten observance as, at best, a hollow custom, or, at worst, quite foreign to authentic Christianity. As a matter of fact, many who grew up in church have the same the question as those who didn't: "What *is* Lent, anyway?"

## THE MEANING OF LENT

Lent's origin is hidden in the early centuries of church history, but we do know that it originated as a time of preparation for Easter. From the church's earliest days, the resurrection of Christ celebrated not only each week (on Sunday, the Lord's Day), but also in a special festival of the resurrection. This festival we call Easter Day, and it is celebrated as the Sunday of Sundays!

Lent, as a season of preparation, is traditionally focused on repentance. Speaking biblically, to repent means to make a change in our attitudes, words, and lifestyles. As 16th century reformer Martin Luther taught, the Christian life in its

totality is a life of repentance. Beginning when we first commit our lives to Christ, and continuing throughout our lives, we are more and more turning away from sin and self-centeredness and more and more turning to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Even though a repentant spirit should mark all we do, it is still appropriate that certain times be set aside for a particular focus on repentance.<sup>1</sup> The church has traditionally done this at the Lenten season (and, to a lesser extent, in the pre-Christmas season of Advent).

Lent, therefore, is a time for focusing on the heart, a time for asking questions about our spiritual health:

- What are my characteristic sins, and how can I work and pray for change?
- What idols have captured my imagination so that my love for the living God has grown cold?
- In what ways is my devotion to Christ and his church less than wholehearted?

The Lenten season is the spiritual equivalent of an annual physical exam; it's a time to take stock of our lives, our hearts.

Keeping Lent, however, is potentially dangerous, precisely because of this focus on the heart. After all, it is much easier to read a book on prayer than to spend time leisurely speaking with our heavenly Father. It is much easier to fast from certain foods than it is to

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<sup>1</sup> In much the same way, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ each Sunday, but especially at Easter; and while we should always thank

God for the Incarnation, we especially celebrate it at Christmas. These periodic reminders keep us from becoming forgetful and imbalanced.

turn from idols of the heart. It is much easier to write a check than to spend time in ministries of mercy. Consequently, Lent is easily trivialized. The point of Lent is not to give up chocolate; it's to give up sin!

Even with this warning, however, we need to beware of going from one extreme to the other. Yes, it is possible so completely to *externalize* your Lenten observance that you end up trivializing it. Yet we need to remember that we are not purely spiritual beings. God created humans as *physical* beings; we are psychosomatic creatures, a “nexus of body and soul.”<sup>2</sup> What we do physically has an effect on us spiritually—and we neglect this principle to our peril.

For example, it is unquestionably true that my attitude in prayer is more important than my posture in prayer. However, sometimes being in a physical posture of humility—kneeling in prayer—helps me get in the right frame of mind. It shouldn't surprise us in the least that there is a connection between the physical and spiritual; it simply reflects how God created us. That's why, at the center of Christian worship, God gave us the sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist—simple physical rites involving water, bread, and wine, but rites that communicate to us the most profound of spiritual realities. That's also why, in the pages of Holy Scripture and throughout the history of the church, we find many physical acts and postures<sup>3</sup> designed to help us worship, to help us pray, to help us in our spiritual growth.

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase comes from Dr. Jack Collins of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis.

<sup>3</sup> The list could be quite long, such as standing for prayer and praise, bowing one's head and closing one's eyes for prayer. Two practices not generally practiced by Presbyterians also come to mind: Lifting up one's

Recognizing this God-created link between the physical and the spiritual, the Lenten season has historically included a physical element, specifically fasting and other acts of self-denial. We'll deal with these more fully below.

## SHOULD WE OBSERVE LENT?

I am sometimes asked why churches should observe Lent at all. Well, I certainly agree that of all the seasons of the church year Lent is the most-often trivialized. Consequently, many churches (including some Presbyterian churches) do not observe the season. There are, however, two good reasons for keeping this tradition:

First, this is a *wise* tradition. Realizing that repentance should characterize the totality of the Christian life, we should see the practical wisdom in setting aside time especially for this purpose. Just as a baseball player may work at staying in shape year round but still give special attention to conditioning before the start of spring training, so we may find great spiritual benefits in setting aside a few weeks to give special attention to the state of our souls.

Second, it is right that we *honor* the traditional wisdom of the church, and Lent is a tradition that the church has observed for centuries. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has been present throughout church history, guiding God's people into an ever-increasing awareness of biblical truth, we believe that it is foolhardy to disregard history and constantly to try to “reinvent the wheel.” We

hands for prayer and praise is seen in both Scripture and history. And making the sign of the cross, while post-biblical, has a long history (yes, even in Protestant circles!).

dishonor our spiritual ancestors when we casually disregard their wisdom.

Are Christians required to observe Lent? Strictly speaking, no; Presbyterians have long emphasized that our consciences are bound to Scripture alone, and there is no biblical mandate to celebrate Lent. But countless generations of Christians have found this a helpful tool.

## WHEN IS LENT?

The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts until Holy Saturday, the Saturday before Easter Day. The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, which includes both Maundy Thursday (commemorating the institution of the Eucharist) and Good Friday (commemorating the crucifixion of our Lord).

Reminiscent of Jesus' fasting for forty days in the wilderness, the Lenten season, not counting Sundays, lasts forty days. Sundays are not included because the Lord's Day, according to church tradition, is never a fast day but always a *feast day*—a celebration of the resurrection! Therefore, during Lent the Lord's Days are listed as Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent.

## HOW CAN I (& MY FAMILY) KEEP A HOLY LENT?

Traditionally, the Lenten season is observed in four basic (and often overlapping) ways:

***Self-examination.*** As we've discussed, this is central to the traditional Lenten observance. Use this time to ask yourself some hard questions about your spiritual life, your spiritual maturity.<sup>4\*</sup> If you're married, ask your spouse to

give you his or her evaluation of your spiritual health. Many Christians have a Christian friend, or a small group of fellow believers, who have agreed to hold them accountable. If you don't have an accountability group or partner, Lent might be a good time to initiate such a relationship. Parents—especially fathers—could use Lent as time to spend more time with their children individually, trying to understand their particular spiritual struggles and providing them encouragement.

With all this emphasis on self-examination, however, it is crucial to keep your focus the *gospel*: All of us are more sinful and helpless than we would've ever dared admit, yet it Christ we are more accepted and forgiven than we would've ever dared hope. Be careful that your self-examination is centered on this good news. There is always the danger of falling into morbid introspection, which can lead to despair over your own spiritual health and to a harsh legalism toward others.

***Self-denial.*** The Lenten season traditionally is also a time for acts of self-discipline and self-denial, a time to remind ourselves that we do not live by bread alone. Self-denial helps us remember what is so beautifully signified in the Eucharist—that Jesus is the true bread of life, our only source of strength and sustenance.

The two major fast days of the traditional church year—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—both occur during the Lenten season. Traditionally, the other days of Lent—except Sundays, of course<sup>5</sup>—are marked by other acts of self-denial. Some common examples would be giving up one meal a day or giving up a

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<sup>4</sup> See the questions at the end of this paper for a place to start.

<sup>5</sup> The traditional church calendar sometimes has a few other "feast days" during Lent as well.

particular food. Self-denial, however, doesn't always involve what we eat; some people may work on other habits, seeking better to use their time. (I've known some people to fast from watching too much television!) For families in this dangerously frenetic culture, Lent would be certainly be an appropriate time to cut back on the seemingly-endless flow of activities and spend time worshipping, praying, and learning together.

Since fasting is so unfamiliar to many in our culture, it is wise to consult with a pastor or other spiritual leader before making any decisions in this area. (Some people, of course—such as expectant or nursing mothers, the sick, and those on special diets—should not fast.) Before you begin fasting, I would recommend that you look at what the Scriptures say about the practice (see especially Matthew 6), and perhaps get some guidance from good books on the subject.<sup>6</sup> And again, remember that there is nothing magic in these spiritual disciplines; they are tools to help you grow closer to Christ.

**Acts of compassion.** The Lenten season is a particularly appropriate time to ask God to fill you with compassion for the poor and oppressed and to put this into practice in concrete ways. This can take many practical forms. For example, there are Christians who give up one meal a day as a Lenten discipline, and then give the money they've saved by doing so to the poor. Many churches—including ours—have an Easter offering for ministries of mercy, so money saved during Lent could be given at that time. There are many ways in which families can practice compassion during Lent. In your

neighborhood, there may be a poor family you could help (with or without drawing attention to yourselves). Or maybe you know an older person who lives alone who could use some help around the house—or would simply like having a friend. Some families save their loose change or forego some simple expenditures, then give the money to the poor. Lent can be an excellent opportunity to teach our children the value of compassion.<sup>7</sup>

**Using the means of grace.** Finally, the Lenten season is a time for renewing our focus on the means of grace—a focus that all-too-easily fades when not given adequate attention. Historically, the church has said there are three means of grace—three instruments through which God helps us grow to be more and more like Christ: the Scriptures, prayer, and the sacraments.

If regular times of prayer and Bible study have never been a part of your life (or if they once were but have become less so) then Lent is a wonderful opportunity to begin these life-changing practice. There are scores of lectionaries and Bible-reading plans out there; talk with a pastor or mature Christian to help you find one right for you; there are also many helpful aids for developing a consistent life of prayer. The Lenten season would also be a good time to get involved in a small group—a practice that generations of Christians have commended as key to their spiritual growth. And if your family doesn't have a time of worship together, Lent is a great time to start—and then keep going the rest of the year!

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<sup>6</sup> An excellent discussion on fasting and other spiritual disciplines is found in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> For more ideas on building compassion as a value in your family, see John & Susan Yates, *What Really Matters at Home: Eight Crucial Elements for Building Character in Your Family* (Word, 1992), especially chapter 5.

In our individualistic culture, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Christianity is a *communal* faith, that the center of Christian life is not private religious devotion but corporate worship, gathering with fellow believers to sing, pray, and receive Holy Communion. There are many today who identify themselves as Christians but for whom the church is peripheral and tangential. If this sounds like you, then use this Lenten season to commit yourself to the community of God's people. If you are a follower of Christ and yet have never been baptized, then make every effort to be baptized as soon as possible. If you have been baptized, remember that in baptism you were incorporated into a community, the family of God, and that you are to join in the family meal, the Eucharist. And parents, the Lenten season is a wonderful time to help your children realize that the church is their family, that worship is their first duty and greatest joy. And if your children understand the gospel, then this season could be a wonderful time to take the steps toward having them admitted to the Lord's Table.

**A**s Lent begins this year, my prayer for you is that this would be a truly blessed season, a time of genuine and significant spiritual growth for you and for your family. May God grant you a truly holy Lent.

*Lord God, eternal and almighty Father, we join with the first Christians in praising you for the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received forgiveness and eternal life. We thank you too that it became the custom of the church to prepare for the celebration of Christ's resurrection in a time of penitence and self-examination. Grant us, therefore, gracious Father, the grace to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by*

*prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on your holy Word. Grant that we may remember that though we are dust, and to dust we shall return, that we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

## Appendix: Questions for Self-Examination:

1. *Have I been fervent in prayer? Was there warmth? Access?*
2. *Have I prayed at my stated times? With my family?*
3. *Have I practiced God's presence, at least every hour?*
4. *Have I, before every deliberate action or conversation, considered how it might be turned to God's glory?*
5. *Have I sought to center conversations on the other person's interests and needs and ultimately toward God, or did I turn them toward my own interests?*
6. *Have I given thanks to God after every pleasant occurrence or time?*
7. *Have I thought or spoken unkindly of anyone?*
8. *Have I been careful to avoid proud thoughts or comparing myself to others? Have I done things just for appearance? Have I mused on my own fame or acclaim?*
9. *Have I been sensitive, warm, and cheerful toward everyone?*
10. *Have I been impure in my thoughts or glances?*
11. *Have I confessed sins toward God and others swiftly?*
12. *Have I over- or under-eaten, -slept, -worked?*
13. *Have I twisted the truth to look good?*
14. *Have I been leading in my home, or only reacting to situations?*

\*In his set of questions for self-examination, the late Jack Miller gets right to the point:

1. *Is God working in your life?*
2. *Have you been repenting of your sin lately?*
3. *Are you building your life on Christ's free justification or are you insecure and guilt-ridden?*
4. *Have you done anything simply because you love Jesus?*
5. *Have you stopped anything simply because you love Jesus?*

\*These questions are from *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Zondervan, 1986).









