



From Epiphany to Lent

In the month of January, we saw the season of Christmas end and the season of Epiphany begin. The season of Epiphany is a celebration of the mystery of the triune God that has been revealed to us in power and love in Jesus. It highlights moments in which the glory of God was manifested and recognized in the person of Jesus – these experiences can be called ‘epiphanies’ or ‘theophanies.’ The season began with the Feast of Epiphany on January 6th, which celebrates the coming of the Magi to visit the infant Christ child. Upon seeing the child, the Gospel According to Matthew declares that they “fell down and worshiped him” – recognizing him as true God, and thus a proper object of worship. The lectionary for this season directs us to other moments such as these, both on Sundays and on other feast days that occur in this season, including the baptism of Jesus by John (Matt. 3:13-17; John 1:29-42) and the presentation of Jesus in the temple and his encounter with Simeon (Luke 2:22-40). The season climaxes on Transfiguration Sunday, in which the disciples Peter, James, and John see a vision of the glorified Christ talking with Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-9). It is a wonderful season, characterized by a celebration of the majesty of God and the mystery of the incarnation.

With the celebration of Ash Wednesday on February 18th, we begin the new liturgical season of Lent, and the mood shifts dramatically. Lent is the period of forty days preceding the celebration of Easter. It has its origins in the ancient church, where new converts would be baptized on Easter Sunday after a three-year period of instruction and training in the faith. This baptism would be preceded by a period of fasting in the days prior. By the fourth century, this had become a church-wide practice of

fasting, prayer, and almsgiving and extended to the forty days before Easter (excluding Sundays). The practice of a forty-day fast has Biblical significance as Jesus (Matt. 4:1-2), Moses (Ex. 24:18), and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) are all said to fast for forty days and forty nights.

The practice has not been without critique. The Swiss Reformation’s major catalyst was a public protest against the Lenten food prohibitions in which a group of people broke the fast by eating sausages. Their arrest and subsequent trial would see them defended by reform-minded pastor Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), who rejected the practice of the fast as unsupported by scripture. For a long time, Protestants rejected the practice, however the renewed interest in ecumenical dialogue led to a resurgence of popularity in the celebration of Lent. Today many people try to celebrate Lent by giving up something for the season or by trying to keep a regular devotional practice. The goal of this is not to make ourselves more righteous or holy, nor is it to fulfill a legalistic requirement, but to attempt to center our attention on God and deepen our faith.

There are many wonderful devotional guides on the market for the season that will give you readings from the Bible or writings by theologians and pastors and guide you in prayer. Another great option would be to commit to reading the lectionary passages each week. Try to commit yourself to carefully and prayerfully read and re-read the assigned scriptural passages each week prior to our Sunday worship services see how God is speaking to you and addressing you through the texts. Whatever your choices about how to celebrate Lent this season, may it be a time that you feel the presence of God.