

Small Group Study Prelude

What's this Thing Called Lent?



On the surface:

1. What sort of spring cleaning have you done – as a child, at home, school, and work?
2. If you are cleaning out the garage, are you more likely to hold on to something you haven't used in over a year or throw it out? If you are married, is your spouse a keeper or a thrower?
3. When you were first married, what was the hardest thing for you to part with? For example, a man might have to take the neon “the bar is open” sign out of the living room or dispose of the table with legs made from a genuine elephant.

Going deeper:

4. What has been the greatest period of spiritual growth in your life? What made it so powerful? How were you changed?
5. When have you experienced a spiritual desert? How did you come to the oasis?
6. Someone has noted that everyone on earth has “spiritual practices” because a spiritual practice is simply anything you do on a regular basis that helps shape who you are. Watching television can be a spiritual practice because people do it and are shaped by it. So can exercise. What would you say are your key spiritual practices that shape how you feel and think?
7. When is the last time you were desperate for God to move in your life or situation?

Digging in:

From the sermon: Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning lengthening of days in the season of “spring.” Lent comes around when the world is emerging from the darkness of winter and throwing out signs of new life everywhere. It is a time of repentance, an opportunity to experience the mercy of God, to be set free from past patterns of behavior and to embrace a life of joyful holiness.

8. Many Lenten traditions focus on what we will **not** do, the emphasis being on self-discipline and restraint, as opposed to what we should be doing, like proactively seeking God's will and a closer relationship with Him. Which approach has more value for you? Why?

The sermon says that Lent is a "time of spiritual and personal spring cleaning...better than new year's resolutions. Lent traditionally is a time to clean out the cobwebs of our spiritual life. It is a time to get back on track with Jesus. It is a time of spiritual renewal and spiritual growth. It is a time to deepen our relationship with the community, with each other, and with God."

9. What do you think it means for you to "get back on track with Jesus?" What would Jesus want you to do that you aren't doing now? Would He want you to give something up or take something on?

Read Matt 4:1-11

From the sermon: We tend to assume that the devil, coming to Jesus at the end of His forty day fast, finds Him weak and vulnerable. That sneaky fiend! He creeps up on Jesus at His lowest moment, trying to kick a person while down. The truth, though, is quite the opposite. Jesus, we are told, is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, with the voice of His Father still ringing in His ears: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased (Luke 3:22)." Jews saw the desert as the territory of the demons and evil spirits. They viewed the desert as a godless and lifeless place – and I personally could not agree more. It was a place far from civilization in which the evil forces of chaos could fester. Jesus is heading into the wilderness to confront evil in its own stronghold. And so He prepares Himself. He dwells in silence, in prayer, in the presence of His Father. He fasts, building resistance to the demands of the very appetites which Satan will use to tempt Him later. And after 40 days, He is tired and hungry-certainly. But, Jesus is also **STRONG**. He is ready to confront evil on its home turf. It is a mistake to believe the devil sneakily attacks Jesus at His weakest. It is Jesus who is active. It is Jesus who crosses the border. It is Jesus who confronts. It is Jesus who is the force to be reckoned with. "The gate of Hades," Jesus once said, "shall not prevail." It is worth remembering *that when the enemy's gate is being battered down, it is not you who is under attack.*

10. Given that Jesus' experience of 40 days in the wilderness left him stronger and more ready to deal with the devil and gave him the focus for his public ministry, why are so precious few of us reluctant to even approach that kind of commitment for our lives? Even as believers, why do we most often take vacation time to pursue worldly comforts rather than emulating Christ's model for renewal?

Repentance and Forgiveness

From the sermon: A popular understanding of Lent is that it is a period of doing penance...a time during which people attempt to become more sensitive to the role of sin in their lives. Lenten sermons often speak of personal sin, coming to an awareness of the sins of others and the effect such sin might have, and finally, the sin that can be found within the larger society and culture. Awareness of sin, however, is balanced by the emphasis on the love and acceptance that God still has for humanity, despite the sinful condition in which we still find ourselves.

11. Many of us find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of having to 'repent' for the same personal sins year after year. What can you do to see that this year is the last Lenten season that finds you in the repeat, repent mode? If you are comfortable, share some specific 'repentable' offense with your group, who will help hold you accountable.

12. The sermon states that Lent is a time for giving and receiving of forgiveness. If you have broken relationships in your life, what do you need to make giving or receiving forgiveness possible?

Acts of Penance: confession, repentance, receiving/giving forgiveness, reconciliation.

After each of these acts of Penance – write down your personal need in each of these areas. Share this with your small group only if you feel comfortable.

Abstinence/self denial: Fasting

From the sermon: FASTING is probably the central discipline of self-denial. Some of us have become so fond of pointing out that fasting can mean withdrawing from any significant aspect of life (fasting from television, email, cell phones, or restaurants, for example – and there is nothing wrong with abstaining from these – to help us turn around and back to God). However, it is worth reminding ourselves of the basic meaning of fasting: withdrawing from food. Biblically, fasting is abstaining from food, drink, sleep or sex to focus on a period of spiritual growth. Specifically, we humbly deny something of the flesh to glorify God, enhance our spirit, and go deeper in our prayer life and focus deeper on God. Christian fasting isn't some kind of a "work" that's commanded by Christ or required by Scripture. However, that doesn't mean that fasting isn't recommended as a part of our spiritual growth. The Book of Acts records believers fasting before they made important decisions (Acts 13:4, 14:23). Fasting and prayer are often linked together (Luke 2:37; 5:33). The purpose of fasting is to take our eyes off the things of this world and instead focus on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God and to ourselves that we are serious about our relationship with Him. Although fasting in Scripture is almost

always a fasting from food, anything we can temporarily give up in order to better focus on God can be considered a fast (1 Cor. 7:1-5). Fasting should be limited to a set time, especially when the fasting is from food. As fasting is utilized, we need to remember it is intended to help us focus on God.

13. Have you ever deliberately fasted from food or anything else? What was the experience like? Did you discover that the fast helped you focus on God – perhaps as you were reminded to turn thoughts of potato chips into thoughts of prayer?

Do you think God may be calling you to a fast? If so, what is it you want to see God do?

Where do you see the greatest need in MPC? Would you be willing to fast for it?

Solitude and Silence

From the sermon: SOLITUDE and SILENCE can go hand in hand. Both are necessary for a full and healthy spiritual life. Periods of withdrawal from the company of others draws our hearts and souls back into the vibrant presence of our living God. Many people plan to take a retreat during spring, often in Lent itself, to help them refocus for the coming year. Whether a planned event of a weekend or a planned event of an hour a day or an hour a week – apart from the normal, everyday life we live – focused solitude can be an experience of drawing us closer to God. As Jesus used His solitude for gaining strength and power and closeness to His Father, so would we benefit.

SILENCE helps us to step back from the constant flood of words and noise generated by our culture, our environment, and by ourselves. Silence allows space for us to be attentive to the still, small voice of God. Silence is hard for those of us taught that stillness equated inactivity, which some define as little more than unproductive laziness. We might want to consider, though, whether an hour spent without agenda in God's presence is time wasted or time invested. Again the focus is to be on God – our deepening relationship with God.

Silence:

Keep quiet for 5 minutes. (Set an alarm clock or your cell phone alarm – so you can be assured you won't possibly spend more...)

Listen to the noises around you. Those sounds nearer you – your own breath, the rustle of your clothes on the furniture – take note of them. Do not try to engineer any sounds. Try to avoid making them. Just listen. Move the focus of your hearing to the sounds further away. The noises of people around you, the sounds outside the room, in other parts of the house, the street. Just listen. When the alarm rings, if in a group, discuss the experience of sitting

together in silence. Was it comfortable? Was there anything which made the experience unhappy or disturbing?

14. The sermon talks about solitude and silence as places of growth. How much solitude and silence do you get in your life? Do you welcome it or do you start to crave company and noise? If you are a parent, what would you give for some solitude and silence? How would you use it?

It has been said that “the silence of prayerful meditation is not the silence of the graveyard, but the silence of a garden growing.” How does silence make us available to God’s growth process for us?

What keeps you from hearing “the still, small voice” of God? What other sounds obscure the divine voice?

Service

SERVICE is another experience that can be utilized to help us focus deeper on God. Jesus used his experience in the desert to strengthen Him and prepare Him for His life ministry. This Lenten discipline can be a personal and communal effort to reinvigorate our efforts to live beyond our often shallow and too-constricted lives. From Mother Teresa of Calcutta – One Heart full of Love – “We should gather to give thanks to God for what He has done in us, with us, through us. We thank him for having used you and us to be his love and mercy. God is still love, and He still loves the world. We believe that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. And God so loves the world today that He gives you and me to love the world, so that we may be His love and His mercy.”

15. Most of us live in tidy neighborhoods with the trappings of some level (by global standards) of affluence. But do we know our neighbors? Not just the one’s next door or directly across the street. Who among our neighbors is suffering, physically, emotionally, spiritually and feels there is nowhere to turn? When, if ever, have you made an attempt to serve those in need in your neighborhood? What was your approach?

While serving the church and your church family, have you neglected to serve those who you have an understood obligation to, i.e. parents, children, siblings? This includes praying for them.

Who/how may God be calling you or this group to serve in a new way during this Lenten season? And beyond?

Are there some projects (individual, family, small group) both large or small, within our own community of Moorpark or at church or beyond that you/we could let God’s mercy and love

be directed in and through in a new way?

Ideas: Helping out at Catholic charities; First 5; Making and taking a meal to the field workers; Making and taking a meal or desserts to the police station, fire station; weeding, trimming, vacuuming at church; assisting one of the program staffers on Sunday morning; VOLUNTEERING TO HELP WITH THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY;

Come up with your own ideas and opportunities. The needs are plentiful.

The wrap:

During this Lenten series, we are going to be engaging both our Bibles and our brains as we look at hard questions posed by people in the congregation. Some of these questions may cause debate in your small group. What is the Lenten practice of patience and love that you feel your group needs in order to look at hard questions for which there are sometimes no clear answers?

Commit to those practices in prayer.

16. From Luke 3:22, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." While we all fall far short of Our Savior's standard, given our limitations, what would The Father say about you? Are you feeling pretty good about yourself right now, or sense a stronger need for repentance and renewal?

Meditating on the Life of Jesus, His suffering and His death

Psalm 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142

Read them all every day

Or

Read one a week for a week

Or

Read one a week on the same day of every week

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the extraordinary sacrifice you have made for us. We know Your Son Jesus Christ provided the model for us this Lenten season. We ask that you guide us this spring in our journey of reflection and renewal. We pray that you provide each of us with the strength and determination to pursue the discipline and restraint we need in our lives. We also thank you for the love and compassion you show each of us and pray that we reflect that with those whose paths we cross. Amen.