Ashes to Stone:

Symbols of Lent

A Lent by Candlelight Meditation

The following Lent by Candlelight meditation was written to encourage a renewed appreciated for the passion of our Lord and what it means to each of us individually. Ideally it would be held just before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. A desert or snacks may be served before the program itself to encourage fellowship. The focus is on the passion of Christ in Word and hymns, and on seven candles which are extinguished one by one during the readings. (If everyone is sitting at tables, seven candles could be used as the centerpiece and one lady at each table instructed to extinguish a candle per the program.) This meditation was written by Missy Martens of Eastside Lutheran Church in Madison, WI. The theological content was reviewed by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor-emeritus Joel Gerlach.

Ashes to Stone: Symbols of Lent

Welcome Ladies! Thank you all for coming to our Lent by Candlelight evening. We hope this evening will give you an opportunity to relax and enjoy a night out with others, and also more importantly, that it will help you to look upon our Savior’s passion with a renewed sense of appreciation. Let’s join together in prayer and then you may enjoy your dessert.

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us all safely here this evening. Thank you also for the food which we are about to eat. Please use this evening to focus our hearts and minds on what is truly important during this Lenten season. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

 (The fellowship portion of the evening begins. Allow 30-60 minutes for this.)

Our program begins with a look at the season of Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Holy Saturday, a period of 40 days (not including Sundays) which are set aside to reflect on our Savior's suffering and death. The word is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten*, which means "lengthen," and finally, "spring," as this is the time when the days lengthen into spring. During Lent we follow Jesus on his path to the cross, and wait in anticipation for his triumph over the tomb. This spring, as we see new life bloom all around us, we remember that Jesus’ passion means new life and salvation for all who believe.

The season of Lent has many symbols connected to it. This evening we will be looking at several of these symbols, their significance for the season as well as their significance for our personal journey through life. Tonight as we extinguish the candles on our tables, we recall the darkness of Jesus’ passion and his burning desire to save us.

OPENING PRAYER: (spoken together, printed in bulletin): Lord God, you have brought us safely to this hour of evening prayer. We thank you for providing all that we need for body and life. Bless us who have gathered in your name. Forgive our sins. Speak to our hearts. Dispel our sorrows with the comfort of your Word, and receive our hymns of thanks and praise, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

 (Extinguish first candle)

Ashes

In Old Testament times, when there was great sorrow, people would clothe themselves in sackcloth (think burlap) and cover their heads with dust and ashes. This was to show humility and repentance. In our first reading which is printed in your bulletin, we hear how Job, after questioning the LORD, repented: Then Job replied to the LORD*… “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."* (Job 42:3,6)

And the prophet Jeremiah had this command for the people of his day, *“O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; mourn with wailing as for an only son…”*

The first day of the Lenten season is Ash Wednesday, a day when ancient Christians would go to church wearing sackcloth. As they mourned their sins, they threw ashes on their heads as a sign of their sorrow.

While we may no longer clothe ourselves in sackcloth and throw ashes on our heads, it is fitting for us to begin each Lenten journey as did the Christians of years past. We take the time each Lenten season to reflect on our own lives. It was our sin that put Jesus on the cross.

Remember the symbolism of the ashes when you blow out a candle. The ash on the wick is black, like our sin. Remember to daily go to God to ask for and receive his forgiveness, won for us by His Son’s death on the cross.

 (Extinguish second candle)

In asking for forgiveness, we also ask that God would change our hearts, turning us away from the darkness of sin to the light of His Son, the holy Lamb of God

**HYMN** – *Lamb of God* (CW 268)

Palms

The next symbol of Lent that catches our attention is the palm frond. The palm frond was recognized as a symbol of triumph and a national emblem of Palestine. It was the Jewish flag, as precious to the people as Old Glory is to an American. In times of war, when there had been a great victory, the triumphant general would be greeted by a throng of people singing his praise, waving palm fronds.

Listen (and join in with the bold print) to the account of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem on what has become known as Palm Sunday. We read John 12:12-19:

*The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast (the Jewish Passover) heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, (all)*

***"Hosanna!"***

***"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"***

***"Blessed is the King of Israel!"***

*Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"*

Jesus is our King of Kings, to whom we give all glory, laud and honor. Let us greet him with joyful voices of triumph as we sing verses 1, 3, and 4 of this hymn together.

HYMN—All Glory, Laud, and Honor vs. 1, 3, 4 (CW 131)

Imagine the sound that a great crowd of thousands would have made as they waved branches before Jesus! Would you have been part of the crowd shouting praises to Jesus? What an amazing sight that must have been! And yet it was the beginning of the final week of our Savior’s time on earth. As we extinguish another candle, we continue towards the darkness of Good Friday.

 (Extinguish third candle)

Silver Coins

Silver coins may not be the first item we think about when we ponder the season of Lent but they did play an important role in the happenings of Holy Week. These coins effected not just one man, but us as well. Listen to the account of Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ disciples as recorded in Matthew 26:14-16:

*Then one of the Twelve — the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.*

How awful that Judas, one of Jesus’ closest friends, was the one who was willing to betray him! Three months’ salary was the approximate value of those thirty silver coins. As still happens today, Judas was consumed by the love of money rather than love for his Lord. Listen to the end of Judas’ account, later, after the betrayal:

*When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That is your responsibility.” So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. (Matthew 27:3-5)*

Peter, who knew something about struggling with sin, wrote: “*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”* (1 Peter 1:18) For all the times we have worried about how we were going to make ends meet instead of placing our needs at our Lord’s feet, Jesus’ journey continues to the cross, because of his great love for us.

 (Extinguish fourth candle)

**HYMN—**Lord Jesus You Are Going Forth vs. 3 & 5-congregation, vs. 4-soloist (CW 126)

Crown of Thorns

Jesus’ betrayal is now complete and he has been taken to be judged and crucified. But the people set on ending Jesus’ life were not going to go about this in a gentle way. The Romans were known for their brutality. The ruling leader, Pilate, wasn’t convinced by the Jews that Jesus was guilty of anything, but out of fear of the Jews, Pilate had Jesus flogged. He then handed him over to be crucified. Roman floggings were so brutal that sometimes the victim would die before being crucified. We hear of Jesus’ treatment at the hands of the Roman soldiers in Mark 15:16-20:

*The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.*

Thorns aren’t something that most people seek out. A man after a woman’s heart doesn’t present her with a bouquet of thorns. Florists remove thorns before sending out roses. You don’t go strolling barefoot through a yard lush with thorns. It hurts when you step on a thorn, yet imagine the agony of having a crown of thorns pressing into your head. Jesus, the Son of God, left his glorious throne in heaven, and was now adorned with an horrific crown. He endured not only the pain of the thorns but also the agony of our sins.

(Extinguish fifth candle)

**HYMN**—*Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted* (CW 127)

Cross and Nails

Crucifixion was a Roman means of execution in which the victim was nailed to a cross. Heavy, wrought-iron nails were driven through the wrists and the feet. Only slaves, the basest of criminals, and those who were not Roman citizens were executed in this agonizing and disgraceful manner. That this was the death that Jesus was to suffer should not have come as a surprise to his Disciples. He had explained it to them in Luke 18:31-34: *Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.*

All things happened as Jesus had said they would, in order to fulfill what the Scriptures had written. Mark writes:

*They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*

(Extinguish sixth candle)

**HYMN –** *Where You There When They Crucified My Lord (CW 119)*

Why the nails and the cross? God reassures us in Colossians:

*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)*

**Please join together with me as we remember the sweet words of John 3:16:**

***“God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”***

**Stone**

In Jesus’ day, it was common to cut tombs out of the rock on the side of a hill. After a body was laid to rest, a large stone would seal the tomb shut. The tomb in which Jesus was laid was that of a man named Joseph of Arimathea. It was with some haste that Jesus was buried, because it was almost the Sabbath. There were rules restricting work on the Sabbath. Mark writes:

*It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid. (Mark 15:42-47)*

(Extinguish seventh candle)

**HYMN** *My Song is Love Unknown*, vs 1 & 6 (CW 110)

The stone is the final Lenten symbol on our journey this evening. Jesus is spoken of as a stone, but not just any stone. 1 Peter 2:6 says, “*For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”*

Jesus is the rock solid foundation of our faith. He promised that he would rise again. With that certain hope, we do not remain in darkness. In the front, we relight one candle to remind us of the promise that the Son of God would rise triumphant on Easter morning! And as you look to the candle at the center of your table, remember to cling to his cross this Lenten season, and eagerly look forward to that first glimpse of light from our risen Easter Son.

(Relight center candle)

**HYMN** – *My Song is Love Unknown* vs. 7

Close with silent prayer, with soft music in the background.