

Introduction

Lent has historically been the most significant season of the church year. However, many modern church members understand little about the true meaning of the Lenten season. Today, largely because of the holiday emphasis in secular society, we tend to celebrate Advent and Christmas with substantially more enthusiasm and dedication than Lent and Easter.

Sandwiched between the often hectic holiday activities of Christmas and Easter, Lent is seen by many as a dreary period of half-hearted sacrifice symbolized by our penchant of “giving up something for Lent.” Although our intentions may be sincere, our abstinence more often than not goes the way of our New Year’s resolutions. The truth of the matter is that without the events recalled in Lent when Jesus set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem and his Passion, the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem may well have been just another peasant child.

The “I am” Resources

This **Lenten Planning Packet** has been designed for the purpose of bringing a fresh vitality into the Lenten season for the entire community of faith. Intentional reflection upon the meaning of our Christianity in light of our everyday existence is emphasized. The resources on the CD Rom focus upon Lent as a time of Christian renewal and growth. By examining our lives as we live out our faith, we are brought into a deeper, more personal understanding of the resurrection as a community experience — an experience that is a reality to us in this time and in this place.

Included in the materials are churchwide program planning ideas, preaching suggestions, liturgical aids, children’s sermons, and Lenten devotional activities for

families. The resources are structured around the “I am” themes from the Gospel According to John.

This thematic approach makes it possible to plan and carry through a coordinated Lent-Easter season. By planning most of the local church events around the basic themes, they enhance one another and strengthen both the themes and the overall experience of Lent for the participants. Through the use of coordinated resources in virtually every facet of the church’s life during Lent, the faith community has the exciting opportunity of examining the texts from different points of view and broadening its understanding of the scope of biblical truths.

The worship service, the preaching, music, children’s sermon, liturgy, and scripture all reflect the week’s theme, one of the “I am” passages. The theme is illustrated on the front of the worship bulletin while colorful posters reflect the theme in halls. At home, families explore the theme through creative devotional activities also built around the basic themes. Sunday and Wednesday evening services and programs carry out the theme as do church school classes. Each activity becomes more significant because of its interrelationship with the others.

The Season of Lent

In the church year, Lent is the season of preparation for Easter. Liturgically, it is a period of preparation for celebration. Personally, it is a time of intentional reflection upon our spiritual lives. The traditional abstinence marking Lent is not enough, nor is it an end in itself. The purpose of Lent, instead, is to foster Christian service and spiritual growth.

The name, Lent, comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning Spring. It refers to the gradual lengthening of the days after the long winter. The adoption of the 40-day period for Lent is mentioned as early as the Council of Nicea (325) and traditionally was observed with periods of fasting, abstinence from rich foods, and decreased social activities. Lent is thought to have grown out of the pre-Easter fast during the required period of preparation for baptism and confirmation which originally took place at one annual ceremony on Easter Sunday.

Forty days were chosen for Lent because of the holiness associated with that number. Forty is found throughout the scriptures, representing significant events in both the Old and New Testaments: Moses’ fast on Mt. Sinai (*Exodus 24.18, Deuteronomy 9.9*), the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (*Numbers 14.33*), Elijah’s fast on his journey to Mt. Horeb (*1 Kings 19.8*), the forty days grace given to Nineveh in the story of Jonah (*Jonah 3.4*), Jesus’ fast when he began his ministry (*Matthew 4.2, Luke 4.2*), and the early church tradition that Jesus spent exactly forty hours in the tomb between his death and

resurrection.

Sundays are not considered in counting the forty days before Easter. Therefore, they are “in Lent,” but not a part “of Lent.” The days immediately preceding Lent have historically been carnival days, devoted to eating, drinking, dancing, parades, and parties. During the centuries when Lent was observed with austerity and abstinence by devout Christians, these pre-Lenten days were a farewell to merrymaking and feasting. In fact, the word carnival is derived from the Latin, *carne vale*, meaning “farewell to meat.”

The most well-known of the carnival days, the day before the beginning of Lent, is known as Shrove Tuesday in Northern European Protestant countries and as Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) in Latin countries. This day is devoted to confession and absolution, after which the people join in public celebrations and special commemorative foods.

The first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday, derives its name from the penitential sackcloth and ashes mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. The name also refers to the service in some denominations in which ashes (made from burning the previous year’s Palm Sunday fronds) are placed upon the foreheads of persons kneeling at the altar, with the reminder, “Remember, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. Its name refers to the spreading of palms in Jesus’ path as he entered Jerusalem (*Matthew 21.8*). Palms symbolized victory (*Leviticus 23.40, Revelation 7.9*) and the spreading of garments was an act of homage (*2 Kings 9.13*) in ancient times.

Maundy Thursday is significant because of the institution of the Lord’s Supper and the occasion of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. The name, Maundy, comes from the Latin word, *mandatum*, meaning “command.” Its basis is John 13.34. The foot washing service found in several denominations is derived from this event. The service emphasizes humility and teaches the equality of all persons in the sight of God.

The Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus during the Passover Feast which he was celebrating with his disciples on the Thursday evening of Holy Week in Jerusalem. The Passover Feast was the annual celebration commemorating the protection the Hebrew people received on the night that God “passed over” Egypt and claimed the firstborn of every family except those who had marked their door lintels with lamb’s blood. The unleavened bread, roasted lamb, and bitter herbs eaten during the Passover meal recalled both that night of protection and the haste with which they began the Exodus, their journey to freedom. Today, many Christian churches continue to use unleavened bread in Holy Communion because the Passover bread which Jesus used when he instituted the sacrament would have been unleavened.

Further, the symbolism of Christ’s sacrificial death is related, especially in the Gospel of

John, to the unblemished Pascal Lamb which was ceremonially slaughtered in the Temple, ritually roasted, and eaten in its entirety by each group of people gathered together for the Passover Feast.

Good Friday is the most solemn of all Christian holidays, recalling the crucifixion of Jesus. Traditional services are held from noon until 3:00 p.m., symbolizing the time Jesus suffered upon the cross. Many churches extinguish the candles and drape the altar with black on Good Friday as a sign of mourning.

The “I am” Themes

On the second page of this document is the lectionary around which the themes for this Lenten Planning Guide have been developed. It includes scripture from the Old Testament (The Tradition), Gospels (The Encounter), and Epistles (The Witness). Also included is an additional New Testament text for most of the themes. These texts may be used effectively either as a substitute for the main text or as an expansion of the text.

The Gospel of John is recognized for its interpretation of the significance of the person and work of Christ. It depicts Jesus as the Son of God, stressing faith in the risen Christ throughout. In contrast to the more human Jesus of the other three gospels, we discover John’s Jesus to be a God-man who is often more God than man. Written to nourish the faith, John interprets the Christ as the Word becoming flesh to dwell among us, and even though the Christ of John’s gospel experiences hunger, thirst, weariness, and suffering, he remains more majestic, more aloof, more mysterious, and more divine than the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In part because of its high view of the Christ, John is often the favorite gospel of people of faith. And, because it was written to all peoples rather than being of an essentially Jewish background, John has often been called the “universal gospel.” Particularly appropriate during the Lenten emphasis on renewal, John brings the teachings of Christ into an intimate involvement in our lives, speaking directly to our need for Christ’s strength in overcoming our brokenness and separation from God. Also significant to this season is the focus upon the kingdom of God as belonging to the here and now, rather than to a far off age. Throughout John, it is clear that we are both members and builders of the kingdom – a worthy Lenten theme.

The “I am” passages in the Gospel of John are unique scriptural expressions packed with substantially more meaning than appears on the surface. In the Old Testament, when Moses asked God who he was, God answered “I am that I am” and, later, God told Moses to go down the mountain and tell the people that he was being sent by “I am.” (*Exodus 13.14*) The ancient Hebrews believed the name of God, Yahweh, was so sacred that it could not be spoken. Instead, they used a number of alternatives such as “I am,” for use

in scripture, in worship, and in devotional practice. Clearly, in the Old Testament, the phrase “I am” meant “I am God!”

Most biblical scholars believe that, in John’s gospel, Jesus used the phrase “I am” in the same way as it was used in the Old Testament and that his listeners who were steeped in Old Testament language would have understood him to be saying “I am God.” Several times in John, Jesus said, “I am” without an object (although most modern English translations add “he” as an object so the phrase reads “I am he.” (*John 8.28*) The “I am” sayings which have been selected for this Lenten emphasis are all ones which have objects and, in these statements, Jesus was usually defining something of his (God’s) nature. So, when Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he was saying something like, “Because I am God, I am the light of the world.”

I Am the Bread of Life *(First Sunday in Lent)*

Food is a primary necessity of life. By calling himself the bread of life, Jesus drew the parallel between the bread which sustains mortal life and himself as the bread which sustains eternal life. Just as bread provides energy and strength to meet the needs of our bodies, Jesus provides the spiritual energy and strength needed to live triumphantly.

The life outlined by Jesus for his followers is a challenging one, requiring a significant personal investment. Those who accept the lifestyle exemplified by Jesus must have power through him to accomplish it. In Christ there is peace, not anxiety; fullness, not famine.

Today, we find much of our time is occupied with food — or the symbol for food, bread — in one form or another. Our family traditions of togetherness center on meals, family reunions, and holiday foods. Recreation often includes a hot dog or popcorn and a soft drink. Friends are welcomed to dinner parties, invited in for coffee, and feted at open houses.

Our charity sometimes takes the form of food baskets for the needy, and when we are ridden with anxiety, many of us seek solace through food. Even in the holy celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we use the symbolic bread. Just as food is intimately interwoven with our daily existence and interaction with others, so must Jesus be if we are to appropriate the abundant life.

But, the symbol of bread takes on another meaning as well. All around us are the signs, of deprivation — millions of starving people at home and abroad — a stark contrast when a major health problem in our country is obesity. When Christ said, “I am the living bread,” he was speaking clearly to the people of today. He is still the staff of life, our strength,

Section Two

Preaching Material

There is not enough space in a document of this kind for a complete exegetical study of seven large segments of scripture. In fact, even one whole book dedicated to a detailed look at the Johannine “I am” passages would be insufficient because of both the depth of meaning and the richness of the complexities.

Consequently, what follows is not an attempt at exegetical thoroughness. Rather, it is one preacher’s attempt at zeroing in on the most “preachable” concepts in the seven passages. In addition to the material in this chapter, you will find more preaching helps in the Introduction of this booklet, where the seven themes have been outlined.

First, it is important for us to reflect on the “I am” themes in general. As themes for Lent and Easter, these sayings are rich with both Christological meaning and mystical expression. They are, in many ways, perfect examples of Johannine style, especially when they are studied along with their corresponding action events. As you know, the teaching style of Jesus is very different in John than it is in the Synoptic gospels. There are no parables in John. Instead, there are action events frequently followed by long discourses. Several of these lengthy discourses evolve around “I am” themes.

In addition, the language of John tends to be more theological and mystical than the language of the Synoptics. The nature and detail of John’s writing shows he was much more interested in the meaning of the events and discourses than he was in historical, geographical, or biographical detail. That doesn't mean these details are inaccurate. But, it does explain their absence in many cases. John wanted the First Century Greeks to

understand what the meaning of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was, not just that they happened.

Because of John's emphasis on the meaning of the Christ events, his gospel record is more meaningful to many modern Christians who hunger for mystery and transcendence on one side and for meaning and purpose on the other. Preaching from the "I am" passages in John can help us to avoid just telling the story of Christ's Passion without lifting up the all-important meaning of the events.

Unless we lift up their theological meaning, the death and resurrection of Jesus are nothing more than the execution of an unpopular religious hothead, followed by a miracle of questionable verification. Through the "I am" passages of John, hopefully, we can preach a series of interlocked events through which we have been given a once-and-for-all-time expression of God, of God's unyielding love, of God's power over death, and of God's expectation for humankind.

The "I Am" Passages

The "I am" passages are unique biblical expressions. In addition to the "I am" passages with object endings, such as "I am the bread of life," we also find the Greek *ego eimi* (I am) standing alone – without an object – in several places. For the most part, our English Bible translations have added "he" as an object to these phrases, such as in John 8.28, "Then you will realize that I am he." Most scholars believe John used *ego eimi* in these cases in the same way as it was used in rabbinic Judaism — as a substitute divine word for the unspeakable "Yahweh." If this is true, then the use of "I am" by Jesus would be parallel to a revelatory announcement, "I am God!"

The various visual theme resources (bulletins, posters, etc.) for this Lent-Easter emphasis reflect the important role of the "I am" statements to the degree that, in each bulletin and poster, the words "I am" are virtually set apart as individual visual elements.

In the several "I am" statements which have objects, Jesus is usually defining something of his nature, particularly in relationship to humankind. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the (real) vine. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the (true) gate. Each of these carries strong revelatory implications and must also be regarded as saying "I am God" to some degree.

Taken as a group, the "I am" passages in John represent a strong statement of Christological identity and possibly the most forward statement of divinity and messianic awareness in the New Testament. Jesus is calling attention to himself, in certain and understandable terms, as an extraordinary personality. His audience understood because he was using symbols known to them. Our goal in representing the gospel today is to

Section Three

Liturgical Material

The following liturgical aids have been prepared to focus upon each week's theme. Included are a greeting, a prayer of confession, a prayer of assurance, and a departure for each week. They are written to encourage active participation on the part of the faith community. Each one is carefully constructed to recall important points in the day's theme, relating these points to the lives of the congregation. Many of the liturgical devices use adaptations of scripture, especially from the Psalms, calling upon the rich heritage of Judeo-Christian tradition.

These liturgical segments are offered as suggestions for use during the Lenten season. However, if they are only used to spark additional ideas from your congregation, the result will still be a unique worship celebration which reflects the originality and personality of your community of faith. Clearly, these liturgical devices can either be used as written or as models from which your worship committee can plan each Sunday's worship service.

I Am the Bread of Life *(First Sunday in Lent)*

The Greeting

Everyone who thirsts, come to the water; and everyone who is hungry, come and eat!

Why do we spend our money for that which is not bread and our labor for that

which does not satisfy?

Harken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in being filled. Incline your ear and come to me; hear that your soul may live!

The Prayer of Confession

O God, we come to you weary from our daily toil. We confess that we labor in vain for food that perishes, seeking the abundant life through our own efforts and criteria for success. With humility we recognize that in our earthly struggles we lose sight of your eternal truths. Too often we hoard our bread only to find it spoiled and rotten, when we could have shared it whole and fresh with those in need.

O God, come to us in the wilderness of our own making. Forgive us, and teach us to labor instead for the food which gives eternal life. Through the Bread of Life, grant that we may find strength unending to be about the task of building your kingdom. With hope and joy we thank you, O God, for your son, Jesus, the manna of the New Covenant. In his name we seek your blessing. Amen.

Prayer of Assurance

O God, it is your promise to us that you shall be our God and we shall be your people. Your steadfast love reaches out to us in the wilderness we have created and lifts us from our despair.

We find peace in your promise that we will not be faced with situations beyond our endurance. Through your son, Jesus, we have the strength to meet each day with hope. Through the Bread of Life, broken for us, we have the assurance of communion with you. Bless us we pray, O God, that we may live triumphantly as Christians through the strength you provide against the needs of the day. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

The Departure

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life; anyone who comes to me shall not hunger;

"And anyone who believes in me shall never thirst."

Trusting in God's steadfast love, dare to live the abundant life in the here and now.

Finding sustenance through God, we will dare to live the life God taught.

Go now in peace, and give the Bread of Life to others as Jesus commanded.

Section Four

Music

The following is a sampling of available Lenten and Easter anthems. Musicians sometimes think of this season as the time to bring out all the slow, minor key, sad (or dreary) anthems. Contrary to this line of thought, there are a good number of anthems which portray more of the true meaning of Lent: the awareness and preparation for the Good Friday and Easter events through which we celebrate God's revelation and action on our behalf in Jesus Christ.

Musically, the following anthems are all within the learning range of the average church choir, with many of them leaning toward the "easy" side. The texts for the most part follow the biblical texts for the day. Suggestions have been given for performance, and instrumental parts are noted. This is by no means a complete listing of pieces available, but rather a suggestion of ways to use various pieces, and ways to look for suitable pieces.

Most denominational hymnals contain a section of Lenten hymns, many of which are not often used. These could be good anthem material by varying the verses — solo, men on melody, SA, unison choir with organ, SATB unaccompanied, and so on. A good way to teach the congregation a new Lenten hymn. is to present the hymn as an anthem and have the congregation join on the last verse.

Following is a list of sources for anthems with addresses and web sites:

Abingdon Press, 201 Eighth Ave., S., Nashville, TN 37202. www.AbingdonPress.com.

Augsburg Publishing House, 426 S. Fifth St., Minneapolis, MN 55415.

www.AugsburgFortress.org.

Choristers Guild, P. O. Box 38188, Dallas, TX 75238. www.ChoristersGuild.org.

Concordia Publishing House, 3558 South Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118.

www.CPH.org.

Carl Fischer, 56-62 Cooper Square, New York, NY 10003. www.CarlFischer.com.

Shawnee Press, 1221 17th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212 www.ShawneePress.com.

Oxford University Press, 200 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10019. www.OUP.com/us

Theodore Presser, Presser Place, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010. www.Presser.com.

In addition to these specific publishers, many Church Anthems can be found by going to www.Google.com and entering “Church Anthems,” “Church Music,” “Sacred Music,” etc.

I Am the Bread of Life *(First Sunday in Lent)*

Hymns

The Bread of Life, For All Men Broken

Bread of The World in Mercy Broken

Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts

Very Bread, Good Shepherd, Tend Us

Anthems

The Bread of Life, arr. Canton R. Young. (APM-877, ABINGDON) Two-part mixed voices, organ, finger cymbal. Based on hymn by Su Yin-Lan, and text by Timothy Tingfang Lew, translated by W. R. O. Taylor. First verse unison voices; second verse women or solo; third verse unison with two parts at end. Melody is pentatonic and has irregular meter. Suggestions for organ registration. 5 pp.

Bread of The World, Palestrina, arr. Richard D. Row. (R6133, FISCHER) Three-part SSA/SAB/TTB. Useful for any combination of three voices. If used with a mixed choir, try men on the second voice (medium) with altos on the third voice (low). Communion text; slow and expressive. Primarily vertical writing, with short, imitative sections. 3 pp.

Shared Bread, Ortmayer and Summerlin, arr. Canton R. Young. (AG7146, AGAPE) SATB, organ or piano, opt. drum and bass. Nice arrangement of a piece from “Sourdough and Sweetbread.” Text discusses the realities and symbolism of bread. To be sung in a “slow three ballad style.” First and third verses voices in unison. Second verse alternates between unison and four-part voices. Very effective for youth or adult choir. 5 pp.

Section Five

Children's Sermons

The following suggestions for children's sermons have been prepared as guidelines upon which you can build your own sermons. When working with children, it is important to remain flexible and to expect the unexpected. The fresh, honest approach of children to the various themes will undoubtedly be thought provoking for the entire faith community. If the children's insights follow a slightly different line of reasoning than you had prepared, don't be reluctant to pursue their observations. A new approach to an old truth will often be the result.

I Am the Bread of Life *(First Sunday in Lent)*

Have the children gather with you in the chancel area of the sanctuary. Have a loaf of unsliced bread, preferably very fresh so that its texture and aroma are at their peak, hidden near where you will be sitting. Ask the children what they think is the most important thing in keeping them alive. Expect various answers such as the air they breathe, their parents, etc. and respond to each one affirmatively. Seek answers such as it gives them energy, etc. Then ask what happens when people don't have food. As the children respond, take the loaf of bread from its hiding place and show it to the children. Have them each break a piece of bread from the loaf, listening to the sound of it tearing, smelling the aroma of the bread, feeling the rough texture of the crust and the softness of the inside, and then tasting the pieces of bread.

Tell them that Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Explain that Jesus gives us strength

Section Six

Program Suggestions

Lent is an ideal time for involving the faith community in experiences which add new insights into what it means to be the church. Worship is essentially a celebration of God's action in the world. It is a retelling of who we are and whose we are.

Each event which takes place in the local church should actively involve the congregation. As many persons as possible should help plan the events so that the happenings reflect the uniqueness that is your faith community. Include adults, young people, children, families, singles, and older adults. Draw upon the talents and experiences of the members of the congregation — artists, photographers, media persons, poets, writers, cooks, dancers, musicians, and creative thinkers. Perhaps some of these persons will be professionals, while others are hobbyists — the result can be the same. The people of God will be glorifying God together, using their talents and abilities and interests.

The program suggestions listed in the following section are divided into both general and theme areas. The general suggestions are adaptable for use with all themes. They have been listed together to avoid the tedium of repeating them under each theme heading. The theme suggestions contain additional ideas particularly relevant to that theme.

The program suggestions which follow are just that – suggestions. To them you must add your own creativity, your own insights, your own ideas. Flexibility is the key to an effective, rewarding season of Lenten renewal. Adapt these ideas for your own use. Add ideas of your own. If you know of resources which would be suitable for use with a