



The Church Year

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- [the Seasons](#)
- [Why Sunday?](#)
- [Feasts and commemorations](#)
- [Lent](#)
- [Living Lent](#)
- [Giving Something Up For Lent](#)
- [Adding Something For Lent](#)
- [Lent links](#)
- [Lent/Easter Devotions \(Sunday, Midweek, and Holy Week\)](#)
- [Easter Sunday](#)
- [What to Do for Easter](#)
- [What Easter Is Not](#)
- [Empty Tomb -- Big Deal.](#)
- [Easter -- Not Just Sunday](#)
- [Easter Links](#)
- [What is Pentecost?](#)
- [How Did the Spirit's Work Change?](#)
- [The Church Gets A Mission](#)
- [the Debabelizer](#)
- [the Spirit Gives Life](#)
- [Where Am I In All Of This?](#)
- [How Can I Celebrate Pentecost?](#)
- [Some Questions, and more stuff on the Spirit](#)

(All dates according to the Western Church calendar. Eastern Orthodox dates for holidays are different because of their own older form of calendar. The Orthodox have a different way of viewing seasons and saints than Roman Catholics and Protestants do; see Orthodox sources as to how and why.)



Seasons of the Story

Why is it that Christians follow a cycle of seasons and holy days?

The main reason is that by following this cycle, called 'the church year' or 'liturgical calendar', we can get into the rhythm and flow of the Christian story, to experience it, to learn it, to relive it through the telling and the doing.

In **Advent**, we prepare for God's coming among us. We get ready for the happy occasion by making our own way straight, hearing John the Baptist's call.

In **Christmas**, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, who is God with us, the ultimate Christmas gift. We remember that by that same Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, God is still with us today, and has not abandoned us in the crush of daily life.

In **Epiphany**, we celebrate Jesus' revealing Himself to the whole world. Like the three magi with the Christ child, and those looking on when Jesus was baptized, we too are amazed at what God has done, and we realize it was not just for us, but for all.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (which in 2004 is on 25 February). In Lent, we take a hard, sober look at our own role in bringing about Jesus' death. We discover our own sin, and realize how weak and two-faced we are in facing it. We turn to God, who is the only One with the power to forgive us and change us. In the **Paschal (or 'Holy') Week** which ends Lent, we relive Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (**'Palm Sunday'**), His last commands and His being seized ('Maundy Thursday'), then abandoned, and executed (**'Good Friday'**), and then the stillness of the tomb. The bleak days of Christ's death are called by the Latin "Triduum" ('three days'). Yet even so we look toward Easter morning and the empty tomb, where even death does not stop God's forgiveness, and in fact helped to put it into effect. (Check here about the practices of Lent and Holy Week)

In **Easter** (or 'Resurrection Day', April 11 2004), we celebrate God's answer : We humans killed Jesus, but He didn't stay dead ! And God has forgiven us! (Check here about the practices of Easter and the Easter Season.)

In the season after **Pentecost** (or for Catholics, 'Ordinary Time'), we follow the life of Jesus through Bible readings (the lectionary) and sermons (homilies) that are usually based on those readings, so we can learn what it is to live as followers of Christ in our own lives. We celebrate the Spirit that Jesus sent in His stead, and use the gifts that this Spirit has given us in order to build up each other, the church as a whole, and the society as a whole.

Each Christian is a part of the Christian story. The seasons help give us a way to experience how this can be so.

Why Sunday?

Christians worship on Sunday mornings. This wasn't done to give us a separate day from the Jews, who worship Friday evenings through Saturday. It was done because Jesus arose from the dead early on a Sunday morning. Sunday was the day of the great victory. So for Christian believers, every Sunday has a touch of that special Sunday. Of course, every day is good for worshipping God. The Catholic/Orthodox tradition (followed also by Anglicans and Lutherans) has special morning (Matin), evening (Vesper or Evensong), and bedtime (Compline) liturgies for use at times other than Sunday morning. In some churches, Wednesday night worship services are a joyous time of special prayer, praise, and fellowship. But Sundays, especially Sunday morning, and extra-specially just after sunrise, are the most important time for worship. It is then that we most remember what Christ has done and it moves us to praise and joy.

Feasts and Commemorations

The church year is not just a matter of Sundays and seasons. It is a daily thing. Over the course of two thousand years, there have been a lot of people who have had an impact on the Christian faith. Yes, they're flawed human beings like us, sometimes in shocking ways. Yet they told the gospel message to people who did not know it. They thought deep thoughts, developed great ideas, dreamed great dreams, did great deeds, and loved with great love. They shaped the way Christians live their faith. Some of them changed history not only for the church, but the world at large. They're often called 'saints' ("ones who became holy"), though all believers are really saints. Through commemorations, we remember these people, and get inspired by their examples. It brings joy -- that's why they're often called 'festivals' or 'feasts'. Just about every day has somebody to commemorate; each one has a story. For my own life of faith, there are several commemorations that are special to me :

- February 23, **Polycarp of Smyrna** (an important early martyr);
- March 29, **Hans Nielsen Hauge** (Norwegian renewal leader);
- April 23, **Toyohiko Kagawa** (social activist and poet).

These people taught me lessons that I cherish. Check them out for yourself. You can find your own special saints, too, as you go through the commemorations and learn about each of them.



What Is Lent?

We don't know much about how the first-century Christians treated the forty days before Resurrection Sunday. But by the second century, the church was starting to use that season as a time for training new believers about how to rightly think, live, and believe as Christians. (The churchly word for this training is 'the catechumenate'.) This was done, in part, by reliving the Scriptural accounts of Christ's final time before He was killed. It was done with the whole church community as they, too, relived it. The end of that period was Holy Week, and Easter would be the day that the new believers would be baptized into the Church. As the Roman world became mostly Christian and more people had already been baptized as children, the season began to take on a different meaning, one that would be of great value for new and long-time Christians alike. It would become a time for looking at the depth of one's own sin, and turning away from them. A time for learning what it means to follow Christ with one's life, and to listen to the Spirit. A time for actually going about changing one's ways to be more like Christ.

Lent is a time when many people turn their gaze toward Good Friday and ask themselves, 'How dare I force someone who loves me this much to go through something this awful?' Perhaps they see the Cross and ask, 'Lord, what can I do to stop doing this to You? How can I love you better?' Many times in the Gospels, Jesus called on people to repent, to turn away from doing evil. So the first impulse is to try to do things that Jesus would want of us.

But then, *we get stuck and gummed up*. We fail, as we always do. One of the things we learn in Lent is how inescapable our sin is, how far we are from being complete, how fell is the nature of our divide from God. When we struggle like mad to give some tiny aspect of our lives over to God, we discover how maddeningly out of reach a whole life of godliness is. We can't do anything to fix our relationship with God. **We're too far gone**. No matter how passionately we might want not to be the cause of Jesus' suffering, we end up driving another nail into Jesus, making Him carry an even bigger burden. (Now, picture us at our less passionate moments....). Even when I'm at my best, I'm still enough by myself to

execute the God who loves me.

But then, that's why He did what He did, something only He could do. All we can do is collapse at Jesus' feet. And trust Him. We can't get there from here, but He can. He will take us, and the Holy Spirit will lead us along that road. Through the Spirit, we *can* love God better. The Bible tells us much of what we and other believers (also led by the Spirit) can also help. Christ gives us His body and His blood, His presence among us and with us and in us. Knowing that, we can stand ready for Holy Week.

Lent is the season for this experience of giving your life over -- in each moment, bodily, deliberately, to Christ and to what the Spirit is showing you. God wants you to surrender yourself, and let the Spirit work in you. In Lent, we take responsibility for our sinful acts and thoughts, and treat them as the killers they are. Lent is self-discovery of the parts of ourselves we don't want to discover, through prayer, fasting, and other disciplines. It is the opening up, the turning over to God, the repenting of our sins, the turning away from that which does not please God. Yet there is just a glimpse of Easter through the heavy clouds of Good Friday -- that Christ has taken the burden, and you don't have to carry it anymore. Don't you want to follow that kind of a God?

So How Do We Live Lent?

Most of what is done and learned in Lent is true for the rest of the year, too, but with a different feel. Most people couldn't even dream of keeping their intense focus all year on what Jesus did and what we're to do with that. Forty days is long enough not to be short-term, but too short to be thought of as a substitute for year-round Christian living. A short burst, such as forty days, can go a long way. But only for those who make some hard decisions.

Lent starts on **Ash Wednesday** (in 2005, that's **February 9**). The tone of worship and church life changes starting with the worship services of that day, all the way to Palm Sunday, and then again to Easter. Gone are exuberant praise, loud music, and sermons about joy, pride, politics, authority, evangelism, fund-raising, building programs, or church teachings. The feeling is subdued, with a pensive hush, in awe of God, in sharp awareness of how each of us -- and all of us together -- are not as God calls us to be, and because of that, will eventually die. We are not masters of our lives but are instead subject to the tides of life and are thus much less than God. It's good practice to wear simple clothing in subdued colors and grays, without frills or jewelry (though perhaps we should resist going over-the-top, such as going to Sunday services wearing the real clothing of Lent : ash-covered sackcloth). In liturgical churches, and more of other churches each year, Ash Wednesday is marked by the ancient rite of the imposition of **ashes** (dating back at least 1000 to 1200 years). At the start of the Ash Wednesday service, the believers are asked to come forward to the altar. The minister dips his/her thumb into a small tin of ashes, and with it marks onto each person's forehead the sign of the cross, saying the words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (from Ecclesiastes 3:20). The ashes are often made from burning some of the palms blessed on the previous year's Palm Sunday. Roman Catholics have an elaborate rite of blessing the ashes, including prayers and holy water. To everything there is a season. Lent is not the season for talk of victorious living. It is the season to be focused on turning from wrong-doing and dedicating anew to the kind of life Jesus taught us to live.

There are some commemorations which normally take place during Lent. These include **John Wesley** (the founder of Methodism, March 2), **Perpetua** and her companions (martyrs in ancient Carthage, March 7), **Gregory the Great** (a key bishop of Rome, March 12), **Patrick** (missionary to Ireland, March 17), **Jonathan Edwards** (great awakener, March 22), and **Hans Nielsen Hauge** (Norwegian pietist leader, March 29, which in 2005 is after Easter). A major festival in Catholic circles is **the Annunciation** (March 25), which is the traditional day that the angel Gabriel tells Mary of God's great plan that would come through the child of her womb. (It marks nine months to Christmas. Shoppers were not the first to count the days till Christmas!). In 2005 it fell on Good Friday, so parts of the

church celebrated on Easter Monday, which, however, is its own holiday.

Giving Something Up For Lent

In Lent, it's traditional to **give up** something(s) that we do a lot of and that we find pleasure in. This 'giving up' is done :

- as a discipline for learning self-control, to free our minds from the chase after material things,
- as a reminder of Christ's sufferings and what our true pleasures are as followers of Christ,
- as an act of sorrow over our sin.

Sometimes we don't notice how certain things we do have gained power over us and dictate our actions. In Lent, we discover these things and give them up so that God can be in charge. Franciscans use the term 'detachment' : the less that 'stuff' preoccupies your life, the more room there is for God.

The most common thing is to fast for Lent. To Catholics, this means giving up meats for the season (or just on Fridays) or to fast entirely for one day a week. For me, fasting is tough, because I enjoy eating. For diabetics, it can be dangerous if not designed with blood sugar levels in mind. You might try giving up pizza pie or fast food or snacks (betcha you can't do it...).

If giving up food isn't much of a task for you, choose something else that you have to make an effort to give up. For many people, that means 40 days without :

- television
- gambling
- impulse shopping
- catalog shopping
- dance clubbing

--- anything that most relates to **a sin that's especially sticky for you**. Whatever that is, it is where your Lenten discipline must be centered. For instance, this year my detachment discipline will be about my finances.

Many people use Lent for taking the complexity out of parts of their lives. They pare down their schedules, and concentrate on activities that matter most. If you work overtime, what are you working overtime for? For a real human need, or in order to buy more stuff? Others look for a specific area of their life in which they use power or authority over others, and then try to find ways to use less power in doing it. If you're a control freak, then change the way you approach what you most freak out in controlling. A fast is a reflection of your awareness of sin, and your sorrow over it. It's best to choose one thing at a time. Then as that takes hold, give up another different thing, as the Spirit leads you. Or, maybe, give of your time and money to charitable activities that help those who suffer. (Need funds? Use the money that you would have spent on the food or activities you're giving up.)

Jesus is not looking for self-torture, self-hatred, woe-is-me thinking, 40-day starvation and oceans of tears. (Many great saints and plain fools have thought that's what He wanted.) Lent is for soberly looking into yourself and getting down to what's real. Self-hatred is not being real; how could it be right to look down upon someone who God loves and treasures? The Sundays aren't counted in the 40 days of Lent, because every Sunday carries with it a part of the glow of Easter Sunday. So it's not all gloom and doom. But even on the Sundays, the theme of repentance (turning from our ungodly ways) holds true. When you repent, you please God whether you fast or not, and that is what most counts for Lent.

Lent's sadness and sternness doesn't mean you can't cozy up to the one you love, or discover new love.

It doesn't mean you can't dance a St. Patrick's Day jig, or enjoy a good game of college basketball, or get a belly laugh from a funny moment, or have a flash of ecstasy during worship or prayer. Rather, in Lent we put a stop to our *fevered pursuit* of pleasure, and we instead let it seek us. Then, when the moments of joy come, they can be seen for what they are : a gift from a loving God.

Adding Something For Lent

Lent is not all about giving things up. It's also about **adding** good things to our lives or to others' lives -- the kind of good things that follow on what Jesus asks of us.

- Reconcile yourself to someone you don't like, or even hate or did something bad to, or just intentionally stayed away from.
- Do **acts of kindness** for people, just because they're there; give them little tastes of God's love.
- If you haven't taken the time lately to be in a refreshing, natural spot, do so. I live on Long Island, which has wonderful beaches and bayside spots to enjoy some peace and rest. You have places where you live, too. Even if it's a brief stay, even a half-hour or so, try it.
- Study, meditate, and pray over one or two Scripture passages for each day, through a daily lectionary (assigned Bible readings for each day), the Daily Office (Scripture-based devotions for set times of day), or devotional booklets or email lists.
- Think upon something ordinary that you do every day, and think about God while doing it, in a way that ties into what you're doing. Or think of a place you come to regularly, and each time think where Christ might be in this place, what Christ might do there, or what you might be led to do for Christ.
- Attend special worship services. Perhaps it's a liturgical church's daily morning or evening prayer service (Matins and Vespers). Perhaps it's a Wednesday Lenten service. Or maybe it's time you started going to the Sunday morning services every Sunday.
- Try to find a new way every day to bring to mind Jesus' death on the cross, and why it happened.

This year, my add-in will be to spend an average of a half-hour a day more each week in face-to-face activities with other people than I have been doing. That means less time with the 70,000+ of you who use Spirithome.com each month, but it is what I need to do if I am to grow toward Jesus.

Some other helpful Lent links :

- <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/easterpage.html> (Kir-Shalom's huge Lent/Easter site)
- <http://www.worship.ca/easter.html> (Worship.ca's Lent Resources)
- Roman Catholic Lent information on <http://www.catholic.org/> (Catholic.org), <http://www.americancatholic.org/> (American Catholic) and the <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09152a.htm> (Catholic Encyclopedia at New Advent)
- <http://come.to/thepassion> (Born for This, a modern, dramatic Stations Of the Cross).
- Creighton University's <http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/lent> (Collaborative Ministry) site
- an Orthodox <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/triodion/triodion.html> (Lenten Triodion).
- http://www.smlc-elca.org/Shepherd's_Crook/FEB_02/SC_FEB_02-1.html (Shepherd Of the Mountains Lutheran Church, Estes Park CO)
- **Marva Dawn** on Lenten Heroes (<http://www.thelutheran.org/0103/page6.html>)
- <http://www.valpo.edu/lutheran/passion/Contents.html> Walter Wangerin's Reliving the Passion Study Guide.

Ash Wednesday Lenten Devotional

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Ash Wednesday

Scriptures :

Amos 5:6-15

Psalms 51:1-17

Hebrews 12:1-14

Luke 18:9-14;

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

On Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent, it's time to take stock of truths about ourselves that don't sit well in our stomachs. There's one truth in particular that leaves us of today's world most uneasy : **the universe does not revolve around you.** Psalm 51 says that we've become botched up. Amos writes about the two-faced trickery of his generation. Our self-obsessed era is no different. We're not good. We were made very good, but we keep mucking it up. Because you're not all that good, God demands that you be truthful about it. God says 'deal with it'. (After all, God did; look at that cross.) Many of us turn to religious behavior in order to deal with it, but alas. There's no magical solution. Even by doing good things, you can't 'do' your way around it.

- not by wearing your forehead ashes for an extra-long time like a badge of holiness;
- not by doing a Lenten [fast](#) so that others see how holy you are;
- not by being seen attending Matins and Vespers every day;
- not by taking the role of Simon the Cyrene in the stations of the Cross, so others can see you bearing a holy weight;
- not by 'going Celtic' like it was the latest thing;
- not by writing devotionals for the Web, where thousands can ooh and aaah over your supposed 'wisdom';
- not by copying Francis of Assisi's dress code;
- not by name-dropping the Desert Fathers;
- not by blog-journaling throughout Lent;
- not by proving how long you can wear sackcloth without scratching;
- not by showing off the wear holes in your prayer shawl;
- not by being the first on your block to go through the entire Easter Vigil in worship at the altar.

(I really see *a lot* of this around me, and I get many e-mails from folks with this frame of mind.)

The God who sees all isn't fooled for a second. What does He say? 'You've got your reward now -- the attention, the 15 minutes of fame. But that's all. Those who seek to be treated highly will be brought down. Those who get real about their humble place before God and others will be treated highly.' A simple, helpful rule : if you love the Jesus of the cross and of the empty tomb, then don't draw attention to yourself or boast about how good you are - draw it to Jesus.

It would be a clear witness to others if we were that way. So what are you waiting for?

Father, please help me to remember who I am. And please help burn into me the fact that I will die and Your Son already has -- and that is not the end of it. Amen.

Devotional for the first Sunday in Lent

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

First Sunday in Lent

Scriptures :

Daniel 9:3-10

Psalm 103

Hebrews 2:10-18

Luke 4:1-13;
Matthew 6:1-6

Psalm 103 is an example of how the Spirit uses Scripture to teach us about God's character. It sings about a God who is compassionate, slow to anger and quick to let anger pass. A God who won't give us our just deserts or punish us at payback time. A God who won't zap us into roboture or homogenize us into the Divine Essence like some sort of cosmic blender.

Instead, to bring us closer, God became like us, suffering temptation, suffering death. The long word is 'solidarity', but the more familiar, Christmas-y word is Immanuel, 'God is with us'. God is with us to help us spurn the Devil's empty promises. God is with us to take away the fear of death that enslaves us. God is with us to walk us through this life through death and into a new life. Jesus is God with us. And when we look at Jesus, especially Jesus on the cross, we can see the very heart of the unfathomable God. And that heart is turned toward us, Jesus' executioners. That is the kind of God who rules the universe.

Father, help me look only to Christ to see who you are, especially when I want to see some other version of you. Amen.

Mother Hen

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Second Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:31-35

One of the most striking images in the New Testament is the one Jesus uses here. Jesus is warned that he might be killed by Herod if he keeps doing what he's doing. Jesus then notes that he is not in Jerusalem yet, so it is not the place for him to die. Jerusalem is the Big Shot place, the home of the Temple and headquarters of the authorities, the ones who usually do such killings. (Keep in mind : that

is where he ended up dying. But that is yet to come.)

Then, Jesus lets his emotions out. "How I'd love to gather you under My wings", He says, "but you would not be gathered." This is God the Mother Hen, trying to hide the chicks from the fox (the Herods of the world). Most sermons nowadays make so much of the feminine imagery, though God is treated as Jerusalem's mother in Isaiah 66 -- or the image of God as a bird, though in Ezekiel 10, God's far from being as puny as a chicken.

Important as that is, the main thrust of Jesus' saying is not in the image of God he uses, it's in what the little chicks do. They refuse to be guarded. They won't stay under the wing! The result is that they will be left "desolate". Maybe the fox will have little chicken nuggets for lunch; or, they'll just get lost in the cold world and freeze or starve. Their survival depends on the mother hen, but these bird-brains want nothing of it !

Who scurries out from under the wing?

- Is it today's person, master builder of her/his own personal world by way of modern technology?
- is it the force-full, cocky macho street tough? Or perhaps those who love to fantasize about being one as they lay on the couch swilling beer and watching TV sports?
- is is the agenda feminist who treats all talk of being protected or being under someone else as a dangerous leftover of a domineering male culture -- no matter how true or real it is for everyone of both genders?
- is it the one who has the business cable channel on their TV at all times, in order not to miss the market move or inside tip that will make him/her a multi-millionaire?
- is it the church activist, bitter at the very idea of being tucked under the same wing as those they take to be their enemy, trying to push or pull them out from under the warmth of Christ's body?
- is it you and I when we want to keep power over our lives all to ourselves, not giving it over to God, and not really letting the other chicks of the flock snuggle up close to us under God's wings?

Lord, teach me to trust you and your love for me. Tuck me under your wings. Keep me safe from the foxes prowling in my life. Amen.

Bob Longman

Jesus Christ, Son of God

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Second Midweek in Lent

John 5:17-47

We see his face portrayed on a magazine cover. The name is spoken, and large numbers of people perk up their ears, all over the world. One of the most web-searched names on the Internet is his. There is no lack of interest in Jesus today, two thousand years after His death.

But they wonder : who is this Jesus? Some called him a prophet, some a healer, some a social reformer, some a teacher. Many people think of Jesus as a good man whose words were twisted by his followers. Others see him as a great leader crushed by authorities.

John tells us that Jesus was aware of who he is. Jesus says he does nothing on his own accord, but only what God, his Father, wills him to do. Jesus says what he does bears witness to who he is. But these deeds are miracles, acts of authority, of compassion, of knowledge beyond that of a mere teacher. And what do they bear witness about? Jesus as the Son of God. More than a figure to be curious about or to make theories about -- a person, indeed, to belong to, to trust, to follow.

Lord, let us bear witness of You as the God you really are, no matter what anyone else says about You. Amen.

Bob Longman

Lent 3 : The Great Escape

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Third Sunday in Lent

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Paul is not one to mince words. You see, he sees the great events of Hebrew history as signs for what's happening in his day. More than signs, actually; what was true then was still true as he wrote, just in a new way.

Here, it's Moses and the escape from Egypt. He knows noone he's writing to was alive then. He knows many of them aren't Jews, so their forefathers weren't party to it. So why is he calling the Exodus a baptism? And why is he saying they all went through it? And why is he writing about spiritual food (like the stuff the Israelites called 'what-is-it?') and spiritual drink (like that which came from the stones)?

Because to Paul, these events gave us a foretaste of the same grace which God would show us in its fullest in Jesus, the Messiah. Something that's most brought to mind when we share bread and wine, as Jesus did in his last supper.

So why does Paul bring up the underside of what happened in the exodus? The idolatry of the golden calf, the lack of trust they showed at Meribah, the constant grumbling and whining?

Paul says that the ancients wrote those things so that we would know better. Israel's shining moments were also moments of shame. They thought they could stand proud, until God showed them how low they had gone. Paul's warning to God's people of his own time was the truth about the people of the Exodus. It is as true of us today as it ever was. God will give us a way out of temptation, but we won't take it if we think ourselves so good that we stand on our own.

Lord, make us end our whining. Feed us your spiritual food and drink to sustain us in our material world, and lead us away from the lies of the tempter, that we may love you as we ought. Amen.

Bob Longman

Repent Ye : a Lent devotional

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Third Week in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

Jesus was not just a 'preacher'. He also took questions from the crowd. And they were not easy. Some of the questions were meant to trick him; most apparently were honest. Jesus interacted with both. Here, they are telling him about a serious matter, and wondering why it happened. Apparently some thought it happened because the victims had done something wrong. Jesus then takes a larger view of it by bringing up another tragic incident.

This is not a calm picture here. A Roman act of brutality, meant to strike fear into a conquered people. The collapse of a well-known structure -- maybe weakened by ground tremors and age? One is intentional; the other accidental. Jesus went against the usual thinking of his day when he said that these awful deaths were not caused by the victims' sinfulness, and were not a punishment from God. They just happened -- two more brutal happenings in a brutal world.

Then Jesus gives us a harsh warning that we dare not blunt. If we do not turn from our ways and start living as God bids us, then God's time will someday run out on us. When it does, it will be as hard and humiliating on those who do not change their ways as it was for the Galileans that Rome slew, as hard as a tower falling right on you (quite literally like a ton of bricks). This coming day, as Jesus makes clear in the Gospels, is the end of time, when God will separate us, will drive away, will embrace. Since we do not know when our end comes, his warning is for **right now**.

Repentance isn't easy. It doesn't usually happen in one sitting. It's hard work. It often feels like you're on a torture device. But it's child's play compared to what happens if you don't. God gives second chances and time to change. Use it.

Lord, may we take the time to refuse to do evil, to turn away from it when we discover we have done evil, and to be like fig trees that bear fruit. Amen.

Bob Longman

The Father's Love

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:11-32

The parable (or novella, in this case) of the Lost Son is one of the most familiar stories of the New Testament, even to those with no churching in their background. So it's easy to pass over its many parts. The one that most touches me is the character of the father.

The younger son wants to go off on his own, with the inheritance that would be his on his father's death. Not an easy thing to do : you work hard to build wealth, hoping to enjoy a long life using it *with* your children. There's a bit of a snub in it too : the son has to take it all now, as if he has no intention of coming back. So there's an element of goodbye to it.

But the father longs to be with his son. He longs to have the relationship restored, to do fun things together, to perhaps even see grandchildren. And he watches the horizon down the road. Day after day.

Longing. Hoping. False alarms : no, that wasn't him this time. His servants must've been ready to go many times, with stoles and goodies and stuff to give the son. Because when the son does show, this old man is flying down the road, and the servants are left in the dust. The celebration is well under way when they reach the pair. I'm picturing the father babbling all over the place, overcome, passing greetings, family news, ordering the feast, and all those other things that say "Welcome Back".

Father, thank you for being the kind of father who doesn't begrudge the losses, but gives hearty welcome for our return to You. Amen.

Bob Longman

Being Free from Worry : Lent 4

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Fourth Week in Lent

Luke 12:22-33

In reading books by the masters of spiritual discipline, there's one quality they write about that we of this era find nearly impossible to really grasp. It's called 'detachment'. But what does that have to do with living? We worry about having more stuff. We fret about getting ourselves enough power so that we can fend off any enemy, or at least cover our backside when needed. What will I eat? What will I wear (and how do I accessorize it)? Where will I live? Will I live?

Jesus asks us to stop pushing long enough to start looking around. "Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes", Jesus says. He should know; he owned no land, grew no food, wore only the simplest of clothing, and his shelter was provided by people in the area of his ministry. His life was a daily experience of trusting that God would provide whatever material and bodily needs that would arise.

There is a reason behind this 'detachment', this independence from the stuff of this world, freedom from worry, and even from fear of losing your life. It puts all trust into the hands of the real provider of all that is - God. "Look around", Jesus is saying. The birds benefit from what God gives, and so do the lilies. You can't get enough power to relieve you of fear, nor can the fact of having goods spare you of the biological need to eat or be clothed. But if you know and trust that God amply provides, worry and endless striving make no sense. Jesus calls on us to seek after the right thing -- the Kingdom. The Father knows about the rest, and will see to it that you get it.

Lord, thank you for not abandoning me like so many others have. Now help me to be true to you and to your kingdom. Amen.

Lazarus

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 11:1-46

"This wouldn't have happened if you'd been here!"

Martha said it. Mary said it. Some of the mourners were saying it. Lazarus had taken ill. Surely if Jesus were there, He would have healed him. After all, He had healed all sorts of strangers -- many of them were the strangest of strangers. Now, the brother of two of his most devoted followers gets deathly ill, and what does Jesus do?

He waits.

And waits.

And waits until Lazarus dies. He lets him die !

It would seem unseemly to talk about a purpose behind the act of not acting to heal Lazarus. But Jesus Himself raises the issue. He says, "It's good that I wasn't there." Huh?? Jesus had something bigger in mind than just a run-of-the-mill miracle healing. It was time to show that His power extended beyond the grave.

But even knowing that, even with so strong a purpose behind it, it still was not a matter of Jesus' just going there and popping Lazarus out of a tomb. He still had to face a large number of mourners. Lazarus was far from being a loner; his death brought much grief to many, and especially to Martha and Mary. Jesus had to come face-to-face with their anguish, anguish that wouldn't have happened if He came when He was told about the illness. The delay had such a mighty price that He was moved and troubled, so much that He wept, even though He already knew what He was about to do. There was only one thing He could do to make it worth that price. He had to call Lazarus out of the tomb.

Death is no small thing, even to God. (Think of Jesus at Gethsemane.) But that just makes victory over death that much more essential. Jesus' victory over Lazarus' death. Jesus' victory over His own death. Jesus' victory over **your** death.

Lord, I do fear death. I will fear death. Please help me to trust you through the fear, so that I might confidently live according to Your will. Amen.

Bob Longman

Dry Bones : Lent 5

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Fifth Midweek in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14

No horror movie can quite catch this scene. A field of dry bones. Dry *human* bones. All over the place, as far as the eye can see. As if the Israel-Palestinian conflict had finally come to its insane conclusion, and you return a decade later to see the untouched remains. Dead people. People who had jobs and families and lives. Dead from the madness of being a people who spurned God and went their own way, a way which dried the love, the passion, the life-ness out of their lives.

Ezekiel is afraid to answer God's question. He knows he doesn't know. Ezekiel knows the Asker already knows the answer, but he fears the answer. Then God tells the prophet to speak God's words

(that is what a prophet does, after all). First, the words turn the bones into skeletons, then skeletons into bodies. But they are still *dead* bodies. Then Ezekiel must speak again the command of God, and this time, the bodies receive spirit from God, and once again come to life!

God knows this vision is stunning, so God tells Ezekiel (and us) what this means. (God sounds here a lot like Jesus does when He tells the disciples what the parable of the sower and the seed means.) God loves His people, and wants them to be alive. But their own deceit, and the resulting conquest by Babylon, have rendered them dead as a nation. The covenant appears to be finished. But God will have none of that. God will do what it takes to breathe new life into the dead bones of His people. God wants the nation to live. But it can only live if they give themselves over to the God who restores them, and choose to be God's people instead of their own or that of some other pretender.

Look ahead to Good Friday. Catch its dread : the God who loves us pays the price. We're too dry to restore ourselves. But Jesus took the dryness into himself. On Easter, Christ came back, restored to life. Since He left, the Spirit's sent out to God's followers everywhere, to bring new life to a spiritually-dry world.

Lord, I'm sick of this desiccation. Undry me, Father, and let your Spirit be breathed into me repeatedly like the air I breath. Let your Word go forth among us, in power. Amen.

Bob Longman

Betrayed !

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Wednesday of Holy Week

John 13:21-30

Few things do as much damage as treason. In war, thousands of lives can be lost, and perhaps even the whole course of the war can be changed, by the act of one well-placed traitor. In romance, a lover's treachery can bring great sadness, depression, ruin, and even suicide. In business, someone sells a secret formula and the company can be destroyed.

The friend is in the best position to bring about someone's downfall. The friend has a stake in that person, but a shift of loyalty happens and now the stake is in that person's downfall. The friend has the knowledge, the experience, and the trust to accomplish what massive assaults by outsiders often can't. A stranger has less to gain.

Jesus was heading into the stretch run. The world would dump all sorts of evils on Him, piled on really thick and heavy. Torture; accusations; sudden rises and falls in popularity; being at the mercy of an enemy who has no mercy; and in the end, a barbarous execution. But it started with a kiss from a friend and follower, from the one entrusted with their money. It started, as it had to, with one most emotionally brutal thing : Jesus was betrayed.

For all the inner (and outer) destruction that betrayal can bring about, there was one thing it could not do. **It could not stop Jesus.** Jesus' way could not be blocked by being betrayed, or tortured, or even killed. Indeed, the deepest evils on earth would only be a road, a pathway Jesus would take to get to the most ultimate victory of all. But more about that on Easter. For now, just feel some part of the bitterness Jesus got, and know that we *each* did our part to bring it about.

Father, teach us not to be traitors to You. Show us how to work good things for others instead of backstabbing them. Thank You for being worthy of trust in a way that we are not. Amen.

Bob Longman

the Cross

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Good Friday

John 19:17-42

The soldiers at the scene of the cross were dividing up the spoils, as was their way. But this time, the pickings were slim. Some small wrappings. A pretty good seamless robe. No money.

Jesus had lost even the clothes on His back, exchanging them for some wood and some nails. He had no home of His own. His only visible means of support had been His network of friends - but now they were mostly scattered or hid. No power. No last will, nothing to probate. His short burst of fame had now run out. He'd given over the care of His mother to someone else. He had no children -- no legacy, as this culture saw it. And now, He was being stripped even of life itself.

Nothing left but a corpse, in a grave, the stony end.

Nothing. The perfect place to start for someone whose task it is to renew everything. The end. Of the beginning.

And what of us, who live our lives in a world stuffed with stuff, putting our treasures in the retirement account of earthly life, some of us with families, some with friends, some with at least 15 minutes of fame? What of our life of blessings and curses, and dreams fulfilled and broken? Why would we want a new beginning?

Because it all comes to the same stony end. And all that's left then is what had been there all along, hidden beneath all the stuff of life. A loving God who is always with us and for us. A God who had nothing, who went into the tomb, but didn't stay there. Nothing became everything. And we can share in that now, while we still live, whatever we might have.

Lord, You are at the end of everything. You are at each new beginning. You make something worthwhile out of nothing. Help us be the part of the Kingdom for which You have set us apart. Amen.

Bob Longman

As I Have Loved You : Thursday of the Mandate

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Maundy Thursday : the Day of Christ's Commands

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Whether we're Christian or not, we've all been taught the Golden Rule : "**do unto others as you would have others do to you**". Jesus said it, in a positive restatement of something found in the Jewish oral tradition. It makes life's decisions a lot clearer by putting you in your own harm's way. Think like that, and you won't be so eager to do in your main rival at work or to stomp on someone to get what you want. We might pull up short if we felt in our own back the knife that we just started to twist into someone else's. This is a good place to start : there actually is something for us to measure up to. Yet there are some things missing in the Golden Rule. There is, of course, the sado-masochist twist -- someone doing unto others the torture he so craves from them. A more important problem, though, is that the Golden Rule keeps **you** in the center of it. No matter how many lessons you learn from doing unto others, they're still *your* lessons, and it all still depends on *your* human capacity to love. That capacity is more like a dinner plate than a deep well, far too shallow when compared with the task at hand of living a different, loving kind of life.

Jesus takes us **beyond the Golden Rule**. The first step past it is in Luke 10:25-28 when Jesus commends Deuteronomy 6:5's Great Commandment about loving God, and the second like unto it, originally from Leviticus 19:18 (you know, Leviticus? The book everyone loves to avoid), to "**love your neighbor as yourself**". Jesus then looks at this not through one's own love, but through what is meant by 'neighbor' (Luke 10:29-37). Jesus calls on us to *be* a neighbor, moving the focus from ourselves to others, especially another who is in need.

But one more step is needed. For while this approach redirects our capacity to love, it is still *our* human capacity to love that is being given out. In John 13:34, Jesus makes the final step to setting this right, by giving a "new commandment" : "**that you love one another, just as I have loved you**". This isn't a plea, but a final charge to the believing few -- a command (Latin *mandatum*, Middle English *maundy*). There is a new measure : to love as Jesus loved. Right after He said that, He went on His way to setting a standard of love beyond our wildest imaginings : to the cross and the tomb. And there's also a new power to love in a manner like that : He emptied that tomb, and went back to God's Beyond, sending the Holy Spirit to us in His place. What the Spirit puts into us is *Christ's* love. That's the bottomless well of boundless love. No longer do we have to dish out our own love in saucer portions, we can now drench everybody with love from beyond ourselves. We can now dare to live the life of holy love, trusting that in the end there is no loss where that kind of love is found.

Father, you told us to love. But we are weak. We do not love as Jesus did, or anything like it. Send us your Spirit to change us and to make us love like the Crucified and Risen One, that we may carry out your mandate. Amen.

Bob Longman

Rescue

Spirithome.com Lenten Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-17

This was a strange procession. A guy on a donkey. (Scoffers undoubtedly likened him to that poor animal.) Tagging along with him were a bunch of fishermen, rural herdsmen, and even (shudder) a taxman. A crowd, mostly of just plain folks, got into it. They'd apparently heard about this Jesus of

Galilee (v. 11), and had a high regard for him. Maybe this was the man who'd save them from the hands of the Roman conquerors. Maybe this was the man who'd save them from the effects of a vast chasm that set the keepers of the religious system Temple apart from the ordinary Jew. Maybe this was the man who'd save them from their own frustration and loss of hope in the God who chose them.

So they laid palm branches before him as he went in, and cried out to their (potential) hero, "Save us!"

And His first deeds took him along that course just fine, too. He goes to the Temple grounds, to the money changers and the salesmen. It was a real need, to have animals available to those whose city life let them have none of their own. But what happened is the same thing that always happens when the customer is powerless to argue : not only does the price go up, but a system is created to extract much more through the exchange of currency. Jesus struck at this about as directly as he could.

Then, Jesus did what He had always done : He went around the Temple area preaching and healing the sick. (They must've gathered there desperately in the belief that the God who lived in the Temple might heal them.) And children came out, continuing to call on the heroic descendant of David, "Save us!" They all had been without hope so long.

If they only knew just how big a task it would be to save them. Or how far God would go to make it happen. The cries of praise would give way to the call for blood, and it would be shed. But not just yet. It was time to celebrate what could be.

Father, you have indeed heard the cries of your people, and answered them in an unexpected way. Help us to bear witness to what you have done. Amen.

Bob Longman



What Is Easter?

Easter is the most important holy day of the Christian faith. The name in the English language (not the religious celebration itself) comes from pagan celebrations of the spring equinox (when day and night balance out). The sun rising in the east was its symbol, hence the name : OE. *eostor*. The Christian holiday itself is quite different. Its roots are tied to the Jewish Passover, which was the season in which Jesus was executed. Passover (Heb. *pesach*) is when Jews remember how God liberated them from Egypt. For Christians, Easter marks the discovery of the empty tomb and the return of Jesus from death; it is the liberation of all humans from the consequences of our stubborn refusal and inability to follow God. It's also called Resurrection Sunday.

What Christians Do on Easter

The Easter Service is not some sort of a stand-alone thing. It is part of a series of events that the early Church treated as one worship service. It starts at the Thursday of the Commands (also 'Holy Thursday' or 'Maundy Thursday'), which marks Jesus' commands to serve, to take Holy Communion, and to love as He loved. On that day Jesus was betrayed and arrested. At the end of the Thursday service, the altar (sometimes the whole sanctuary, the halls and entryways) is stripped bare and treated as if preparing for

a funeral. That's because it **is** for a funeral -- Good Friday is the day of Jesus' execution, the first day of Jesus' death. Today, Good Friday services are usually in the early evening, but tradition puts it at mid-afternoon, when the gospels say Christ died. The Catholic tradition has a lengthy Easter Vigil of believers awaiting Christ's return by acts of worship, for Saturday or the early morning hours of Sunday. The empty tomb was discovered at sunrise on Sunday morning, so Christians start celebrating with worship at sunrise, with more worship services throughout the morning. Traditionally, the church uses the Easter services to baptize new adult believers, after using the Lent period for teaching them about the faith.

What Easter is not

Easter is not the celebration of the Easter Bunny, a character who seems to have multiplied like, well, a rabbit, in today's era when some folks would rather worship inclusiveness than the real God. Easter is not the US celebration of the end of income tax season, as much as that is a great reason to celebrate (most years it doesn't time together as well as it did in 2001). Easter is not just a good excuse for a spring break from school, nor is it just a good time to start the baseball season. Easter is not about the Easter Egg, though the Egg is a cherished Christian tradition, especially in Eastern Europe. The egg is a symbol of new life that awaits its time to burst its shell and come out.

Easter is not the celebration of the spring equinox, even though that's where the name came from. It is, however, common in Christian circles to use the coming of spring as an analogy to the resurrection of Christ. In winter, most plants die off and many animals go into hibernation or reduce their activity levels; it seems like death has taken over. When spring comes, the plants turn green and give leaves and bloom flowers, the insects return, and the animals arouse, as if new life has sprung from the dead. (That's why white lilies are a popular Easter gift.) Christianity started in the northern hemisphere, so the timing of Passover/Easter matched the coming of spring, making a powerfully visible analogy.

But it is just that : an analogy, saying that one thing is like another. Analogies can only be pushed so far before they become untrue, because the two things are alike but not the same. For those in the southern hemisphere, like Australia, southern Africa, Chile, or Argentina, it is **fall**, and autumn's march toward winter has begun. Autumn makes for an analogy that is well-suited to the introspection and awareness of death found in Lent and Holy Week, which come before Easter.

There's also an untruth in the very nature of the spring analogy. It infers that resurrection from death is part of some vast natural cyclical system -- nature's recycling. You live, you die, you live again. (And you die again, and this world keeps circling through life and death.) Christians believe that death is real, and that it's hell to have to go through it even once. The 'natural' thing is that death is final. Your body's atoms get recycled, but that which made you 'you' is ended. Worse, what you learn during Lent is that this is just and right and necessary. The reason you die is that you're not good enough or whole enough to live forever. If not for death, there would be no end to the wrongs you have done or the lies you have lived.

If death is our just and 'natural' end, then what is Resurrection Sunday about? Simply this : the One who made it all loves us so much that losing us is a divine challenge. God hates losing us *so much* that God the Son had to be with us, even to die as we die, so that God and us can once again live in love toward each other. *So much* that God had to make a way for us to be alive forever, with God, in a new beginning in a new Kingdom, without the wrongs and the lies and the fears. When Jesus was killed He couldn't stay dead, for if He did, so did we. Thank God for loving us that much!

Empty Tomb. Big Deal...

Thus, an empty tomb. By doing that, God's not saying, "See? I did it, now you try". God's also not saying, "Now you'll live and not suffer and die". God is saying, "You'll decay and die. But I've made it so that's not the last word. Death can't stop you from being with me and from living as I meant you to be. Please accept my invitation to the Kingdom." This RSVP does you no good if you put it in the trash can (though God keeps sending it to you, even more stubbornly than a direct-mail marketer). It does noone any good if you go around telling people that the banquet's actually being held at the house of the goddess of Self, or of the god of Technology, or at the Power and Control Room, or at the Cuddly Bear School of Fuzzy Spirituality. They'll go there and miss the party at God's mansion complex.

The big deal is not that God could overcome and transcend death. It figures that the Almighty could do that if such a being would think it was worth bothering to do. The big deal is that :

- the Almighty actually did do that, and did it so we could live on;
- Jesus did it while treating death full-on for what it really is;
- after death we are being led by God into something much better, much more life-full than what we now have; and
- hints and glimpses of this grand new life can be seen and lived in our current world.

This really is a big deal! That is what the empty tomb means, and why it's cause for such joy.

The Season Isn't Just Easter Sunday

The Easter Season isn't just Easter Sunday. It's 50 days long, and the last of those days is Pentecost, marking the birth of the Church and the coming of the Holy Spirit with power. In that time there are some special times to mark. In most years, the commemoration of certain saints falls in the Easter season : Anselm (April 21), Toyohiko Kagawa (April 23), Catherine of Siena (April 29), and the gospel author, St. Mark (April 25). In some places, Easter Monday is celebrated with dinners and parties and mirth. (Indeed, the *whole season* is supposed to be one big feast and celebration because of the overflowing of Easter joy. But over the years, the institutional church, in the manner of all institutions, has been really good at putting a damper on such things.) As the last weeks of the season come, the attitude gets a bit more nervous : What's God going to do next? What are we to do next? Just before Pentecost, Christians mark Ascension Day, when Christ left us after His return, telling us to make disciples, and promising to return again to bring His Kingdom to full fruition. But there's still the nervous questions -- we don't have what it takes, even to know what all this means.

The last day of the season is Day 50, or Pentecost (Greek for 'fiftieth'). In older English traditions, it's called 'Whitsunday' because the traditional color for church clothing and decor on Pentecost is white. On that day the Holy Spirit arrives to be with us, and that Spirit sends a fresh wave of joy. On that day, the question of 'what next?' is answered with power -- prophesy, tell the gospel, heal, teach, serve, love. The Holy Spirit will bring the results. And they went and did it. If they didn't, I wouldn't have anything to tell you about.

Some other primo sites :

- Walter Wangerin's [Reliving the Passion](#).
- Guy Marquardt's [interactive Passion History](#).
- Answers In Action's [Lent and Easter site](#).
- An [Easter art](#) links site to top-notch real art.

And, since there's always someone who asks : "Maundy" (in Maundy Thursday) is an old term from Latin *mandatum*, or 'command', referring to Jesus' commands to his disciples at His last meal. I've never seen or heard anyone use 'maundy' as a noun or adjective, yet when I was a child I myself did so sometimes, thinking of it as if it were a normal word that everyone knew.

Pentecost Sunday

What Is Pentecost?

The word 'Pentecost' comes from the Greek; it simply means 'fiftieth'. Pentecost Sunday ends the season of Easter; it is the sabbath day after a week's worth of weeks ($7 \times 7 = 49$).

Pentecost grew from what was originally a festival marking the first grain harvest of the Middle Eastern year, marked by a sacrifice to the gods from the first part of that first harvest. In very ancient Palestine, this first-fruit sacrifice was tightly tied into the religions of the gods of power and fertility (both in farming and in sex). As the Jews grew to understand themselves as followers of the one and only true God, they created ways to be thankful to God for the first harvest, without the pagan trappings. The celebration became a mini-pilgrimage, or *chag*, where they would stay at their region's shrine, bringing with them grain loaves and young livestock for sacrifices. As the Jewish kings started to centralize religious activity into Jerusalem (a process that took several centuries), this pilgrimage and sacrifice was brought there, with all the songs, processions, liturgies and pageantry that Jerusalem did so well. To them, the 50-day period was the week's worth of weeks after the Unleavened Bread of Passover (Exodus 24:22). Passover recalled hard times and rescue by God, hence the unleavened bread; Pentecost (Shavu'ot) was the celebration of a blessing of harvest, and its joy was symbolized by leavening the bread. The festival began to take on another religious role around the time of the Exile. Because Exodus 19:1 describes the arrival of the Jewish people at Sinai as being at about that time of year, Pentecost was used to mark the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Over time, the Torah became more prominent in Feast of Weeks celebrations.

Now, fast-forward to Jesus' time. As Luke reports it (Acts 2:1-47), the believers had gathered together after Jesus returned to the Father. Not just the 12 disciples, but about 120 of them. They were talking, remembering, praying, wondering what was next. (They had just been through several of the strangest months there ever were.) On the morning of Pentecost, they came out of the room, and started telling the people they met about Jesus, lit up by the Holy Spirit. The streets were full of people from many places, mostly there for the holy day, some still hanging around from Passover. When each of them heard the witnesses speak, they heard it in their own language! (That is, if they were allowing themselves to listen; otherwise, they heard babbling, as shown by the remarks about drunkenness.) What was being told, for the first time in full form, was the good news of Jesus and what it means for all people. But more than words : the words were being carried with power and authority by the Holy Spirit into the ears and the hearts of those who are listening. About 3000 new people join their ranks. This is the first fruits of a new kind of harvest, and the giving of a new covenant of grace that fulfils the covenant of the Torah.

How Is the Spirit's Presence Different Now?

Pentecost was not the first time the Spirit was active. The Spirit had been working all along in humans who listened, giving them guidance, teaching, shedding light on the mysteries of life, and causing prophecies. The Spirit struck home powerfully in John the Baptist's message, and came in full force upon Jesus at the baptism which began Jesus' public ministry. Jesus was a man who was filled with the Spirit, and it showed in whatever He did -- the teaching, the healings, the suffering and the death, the return and the leaving. John's Gospel even mentions that Jesus had blown the Spirit onto each of His disciples before leaving (John 20:19-23). But Pentecost was the first day that the Spirit took hold of the

followers of Christ as a group or "body", and came to stay. It was the first time the Spirit's raw power was there in anyone who followed Christ, not just the Twelve.

The Church Gets A Mission

Pentecost was not the first time Jesus' believers had acted together. They did so during His ministry, and did so by gathering in the house just before Pentecost. But it was the first time they had a complete message, an empowered mission or purpose, and a unity that came from beyond themselves. Before, they were just another small circle of people following a leader around; now, they had become the church, an entity that would eventually be measured in billions. The difference : the arrival of the Holy Spirit in force, to join them together into a unity.

The Debabelizer

One of the images that Acts leaves us with is that of all these people from all sorts of places, hearing and understanding the message in their own language. This is a reversal of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), where a single language became a wide variety of languages and the 'message' of human hubris (excess pride) called 'the Tower of Babel' could no longer be heard or understood. In today's world, people of different languages communicate with each other all the time. But how much of it is meaningless babble disguised as words, images, and newsbites?? How much of it still bears a message of human hubris? Does anyone have anything worth telling about anymore? Perhaps, but only if it's the message God wants us to know, the message of God's love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. God wants us to know Jesus. But most folks prefer to babble on.

Only The Spirit Gives Life

Another striking image of the Spirit and the Spirit's work comes from the prophet Ezekiel (37:1-14). Ezekiel is a Jew in exile after Babylon has conquered and scattered his people, away from the land of God's promise. Earlier (33:10), Ezekiel had asked, 'how then can we live'? If their evil deeds had caused them to be forever cut off from God, the answer is that they **can't**. Thankfully, God has a different vision of it, and shared it with Ezekiel. First, God tells Ezekiel to proclaim to a field of dead bones. He does, and something really weird happens : the bones come together, then muscles, joints, skin, eyes, even nose hairs. Real, whole bodies form from the Word. But they are still dead. Then, Ezekiel speaks again at God's command, calling on the wind for the breath to go into the dead bodies, to make them alive. The breath (that is, 'spirit') of God is what makes all life live. And it is what will bring God's people back home, to once again live as a people. And so it was; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are accounts of a dead nation at the moment it came back to life. The message of the Christian Pentecost is that the Breath that makes life live has been let loose among us by Jesus the Messiah. Through this Jesus and the Spirit He sent, not only is death ultimately dead, but **life becomes more fully alive**.

So Where Am I in This?

When I'm writing about the church here, I'm not speaking of a hierarchy or a structure. I'm talking about people who are called to be together in order to share Jesus' love. If you believe in Jesus and are baptized, then you're a part of that called-together group, something much bigger than you are. Being a part of it means **you** have the Holy Spirit at work in you. And, that means **you** have tasks that the Lord wants you to do, and **you** have been given what it takes to do them. **You** are to listen for the Spirit's leading, through the Scriptures God gave for **you**. The liberating, ear-popping spiritual event of Pentecost was the first fruit of something that continues to this day, and beyond.

Some of you are just wondering about this faith; you find it weird, intriguing, or perhaps just puzzling. God meant for you to be in this, too. But you are not like the 120 from the upper room; you are more like the people who were in the crowd that day. Some 3000 of those in the crowd changed course and became believers. A few griped. Some debated it among themselves. But most people in Jerusalem didn't even notice, or saw it and went on with their daily grind. No new power hit their lives. There was no new purpose giving them new direction. And many people, even devout ones, still could not sense the presence and power of God in their lives. Pentecost holds the promise that God has something new in store. The believers from that first Pentecost day kept having faith, and kept telling about Jesus, and kept living His way. And many more would find the promise fulfilled in their lives; many more would be lit.

How Is Pentecost Celebrated?

In the English tradition, the day is sometimes known as **Whitsunday**. This refers to the white robes of those baptized on this day. Perhaps your congregation is **baptizing** on Pentecost, just like on the first Christian Pentecost. Celebrate the baptisms, and those that happened during the Easter season, perhaps with a party. In liturgical churches, confirmation of youths marks the fulfillment of the promises about faith made by parents and parish at infant baptism. Exodus 19, the Jewish Feast of Weeks reading, is a passage used by Christians and Jews in their confirmation rites. Thus, many parishes hold confirmation ceremonies on Pentecost or during that week. Pentecost is not just a day for baptism, but also for **evangelism**, for spreading the Word boldly in person to other people, just like on the first Christian Pentecost.

The church used to celebrate Pentecost all week, right through to the next Sunday worship services. Today, it's usually only marked for Pentecost Sunday itself, and in some places also on Monday. The rest of the Church year, until Advent, is named by Protestants as the Sundays *after* Pentecost. Technically, the entire history of the Church is 'after Pentecost', or at least after the first one. (Catholics call it 'Ordinary Time', and the Sundays are numbered in order until the next season comes.) During that period, Christians follow the life of Jesus through Bible readings (the lectionary) and sermons (homilies), in order to learn what it means to live as followers of Christ. Christians celebrate the Spirit that Jesus sent in His stead, and use the gifts that this Spirit has given us in order to build up each other, the church as a whole, and the society as a whole.

Pentecost is not a solemn occasion. It's a time for vigor, excitement, energy, movement, birth, fresh air and fresh commitment. If Pentecost has a sleepy feel to it in your life, wake up! Indeed, one of the best ways to celebrate it is to do just that : wake up early. If your household is committed to the faith, and you're in your own house (or if your landlord or tenants want to do it with you), it's a time to sing! I'd be singing mostly hymns, but you might like praise-and-worship or gospel songs or campground songs of faith, stuff the kids can sing along with. Have each person read some relevant passage of the Bible, such as Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2; Psalm 104:1-35; 1 Corinthians 12; Joel 2:28-29; Numbers 11:24-30; Isaiah 32:15-17; 1 John 4:1-4; or Genesis 11:1-9. And pray that the Holy Spirit moves among each and all who are there, and in the neighborhood you live in.

Worship in a church with others who are worshipping Christ that Sunday (if you don't have a church, pick one and go). If you regularly go to church, **invite someone to go with you** for Pentecost Sunday. The Spirit birthed the fellowship of Jesus' followers (the church) on that first Pentecost, so to try to worship Christ by yourself on Pentecost Sunday is even more of a rejection of the Spirit than it usually is.

Afterwards, take some time to think about the gifts the Spirit has given you : 'Is there a way I can use these to build up or help bring healing to others, to the credit of God alone?' The thanks that the Spirit wants for giving gifts is in your using them instead of sitting back and frittering away the opportunities.

There are other ways to mark the occasion. Pentecost is a time of **red** -- a color of fire and zeal and

passion and heat. The Spirit is incendiary within us. Thus, **wear red or flame-orange** clothes or accessories, bring out the red potted flowers, and make flame decorations. Serve **red and zingy foods**. My favorites are Italian pasta dishes with hot sausage and tomato sauce, but you might want to try Mexican food with red peppers and chilies and tomatoes. Eat that red supper together with family, friends, and perhaps a new acquaintance, **lighting a candle** on the table for each person who's there, as well as perhaps ones for other loved ones who are especially missed. (Please use a stable candle, with wide-based holders, or those wide-cup candles.) You can use that time to say something brief about where the Spirit's flame burns in your life. Red could also be the theme of the refreshments made available at church after worship. Fruit punch, anyone? At Pentecost, the theme is not the kind of fire that consumes and destroys; the theme is the kind of fire that warms, energizes, excites, powers.

Doves are another symbol of the Spirit, since the Spirit came to Jesus' baptism in the form of a dove. Your house or apartment or main window could be tastefully decorated with dove decorations. Humans have always envied the blessing birds have been given. Even today, we wistfully dream of flying freely among the winds without a contraption around us. The dove is also a symbol of peace, one of Jesus's profoundest hopes for the human race. So, wise sayings and symbols of peace can be used with the doves. In the context of Pentecost, abilities, peace, and community are cherished as gifts of God rather than as the work of humans. (Please avoid the kitschy dovey stuff -- it can get really tacky. If you use any real doves, remember that they're pigeons, and can make an awful mess. And, like any bird, they're easily harmed.)

The **wind** is another symbol of the Spirit, since the Hebrew word means 'wind' or 'breath'. In some places, the weather's warm enough to open the windows all the way and let the wind **blow fresh air** into the house. One couple I know puts their collection of **weather vanes and windmills** in the front yard and on the roof, so that it's easy to see the effect of wind. **Wind socks** can do likewise. Like the wind, the Spirit is not seen except by how the surrounding world is affected.

The most important thing is to learn what the Spirit does, and to trust that Spirit to lead you.

Some questions :

- We spoke of fire, dove, and wind. Can you think of other symbols of the Spirit? Other ways to symbolize what the Spirit did at Pentecost?
- Have you ever caught yourself just babbling, speaking words but with no meaning in them? But then, what is the value of the things you say in the course of each day?
- **A challenge** : Try picturing the scene in Ezekiel with the field of dry bones, and take yourself through each step, as if it were a movie.

Also, there's things to say about the Christian church, both as an overall entity that spans time, culture and place, and as a local entity that prays together, worships together, sings together, and just does things together. When the Church talks about itself, it's called 'ecclesiology'. But the Church is very much like a person : she spends some of her time too frightened to dare to do the amazing wonders it is in her to do, and spends much of the rest of her time looking in the mirror and fawning over her appearance. It's a self-esteem problem. She's been told how wonder-full she is by her Beau, but she doesn't really believe it, and makes up for her self-doubt by constantly telling herself how important she is and how beautiful she looks (according to some standard other than her Beau's), even when she's in her ugly moods, and even in places where she is quite gawky and not yet fully grown. I'd much rather see the church put her mirror away and get to working her wonders. If she does that she'll do just fine.

Links to :

Richard Jensen's useful article on the Spirit in the June 2004 issue of The Lutheran,
<http://www.thelutheran.com/0406/page12.html>

Dennis Bratcher's article for Christian Resource Institute,

<http://www.cresourcei.org/cypentecost.html>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15614b.htm>The Catholic Encyclopedia, on Pentecost.

Email me, rlongman1@aol.com

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