Voices of Sisters

Spirituality



Left: The prophet Joel, depicted in a painting from circa 1481-87 by Martín Bernat y Miguel Ximénez. Right: Christ Salvator Mundi, depicted in a 1505 painting by Quinten Metsys. (Wikimedia Commons images)



by Sr. Carol Regan

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Here comes Ash Wednesday, the harbinger of Lent. For many years, I dreaded the approach of Lent. I remembered well the candy-less Lents of my childhood, and my Catholic school classmates and I marching to the interminable Stations of the Cross on Friday afternoons, after the school week should have ended!

As my faith and I matured, the arrival of Lent continued to make me uneasy. Lent seemed like a long retreat and I wanted to listen to the voice of God, but what would I hear? What might God ask of me?

In more recent years, I have noticed that the readings we hear at Eucharist on Ash Wednesday send mixed messages about the observance of the holy season of Lent. The prophet Joel, in the first reading, calls us to weep and lament, fast and mourn, and renounce sensual pleasure. But in the Gospel, Jesus tells us to be quietly and generously caring toward others, to pray in a simple, hidden fashion, even to anoint ourselves and take care to look our best! To whom do we listen? Joel or Jesus?

I once worked in a sabbatical program for seasoned church ministers, women and men who had spent years in ministry as vowed religious, lay ministers, ordained priests. They were now in a season of sabbath rest and refreshment. The program staff wondered: How does one celebrate Lent in such a season?

One Lent, we chose to follow the church's ritual of blessing and distributing ashes and then celebrating the Eucharist, hearing both Joel's and Jesus' messages. But after the reception of holy Communion, the staff gave everyone damp cloths and encouraged them to wipe the ashes off their foreheads. This caused real consternation; we don't easily give up what we have "always done." Eventually everyone complied. Then small bowls filled with fragrant oil were brought out, and each one came forward in turn to be anointed and we entered the holy season of Lent.

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I've reflected often on that experience, and it has come to inform my Lenten observance. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the traditional Lenten practices. I'd like to invite you to join me in following both Joel's and Jesus' admonitions as we embrace these practices this Lent.

Like Joel, let's pray in lamentation for our personal sinfulness, for the sin of the world and for our country, and beseech God's mercy. With Jesus, let us pray simply and quietly in praise of God, in gratitude for the mystery and blessing of our lives, and with joy for all the good people who surround and support us.

Let us fast from some pleasure and embrace the asceticism and discipline of our daily lives, rising to meet our many responsibilities. But let's also consciously welcome and indulge in the pleasures that come our way: time with family, friends and loved ones; a wonderful meal, perhaps enhanced by good wine, even in Lent's deepest days. Let's look actively for whatever gives us joy.

Our world is filled with people and worthy causes that make legitimate demands on us. Let's respond to them generously and at a real cost to ourselves this Lent. But let's also recognize our own neediness and accept joyfully, even seek out, the gifts that come to us: reading a new poem daily, perhaps; contemplating the sunrise or sunset; welcoming each day's serendipity.

In short, let's deepen our engagement with Lent's traditional practices this year, as Joel and Jesus suggest to us on Ash Wednesday.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.