



Northern Illinois Conference

OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Lenten Greeting 2022
Bishop John L. Hopkins

Instructions for Lent

As we begin a forty-day journey into Lent on Ash Wednesday, I give thanks for the seasons of the Christian calendar that draw us into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. During Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, we focus on the anticipation and birth of the Christ child for the whole world. Now, it is time to focus on Jesus as the one who suffers and dies to conquer sin and death.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday, we slow down on our journey to Easter in order to appreciate the extent of God's love for us. We shed all that keeps us from knowing, loving, and serving God. We take on relationships that need to be mended and service that needs to be rendered.

As we look toward the cross of Christ and reflect on our lives, I offer some instructions for Lent. In short, Lent is a time to slow down, breathe in, let go, and look up.

Slow Down

Slowing down is not easy to do in a fast-paced, internet-connected world. Just watch how people stare at their "smart" phones or tablets during meals, meetings, and conversations. Multi-tasking takes its toll on our ability to focus on what is important to a quality life. Amidst all the external and self-imposed distractions, find time to savor relationships.

Lent is a time to re-boot and realize that we are not in charge of running the world. We are not going to be left behind because we don't see the latest tweet or Instagram photo. Put it away, turn it off, make it wait, and slow it down. Pay attention to what you have been missing.

Breathe In

Breathe in here and now rather than past and gone or the someday when. Be mindful of what is going on around you and value relationships that matter. Get out into nature and soak up the sights and sounds that are lost in modern living. Be refreshed by the wonder of the stars and a God that is so far away and so very close at the same time.

Don't miss the miracles. Claim the joy of worship with others. Sing the songs, receive the ashes, break the bread, and share the cup. Search the scriptures and meditate on their meaning. Listen for the still, small voice of God.

Let Go

Through prayer, fasting and self-denial, repent from living in self-centered, destructive ways. Seek forgiveness from a God that loves us rather than condemns us. Let go of pretenses and self-righteousness and with the psalmist, pray:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:1-3, 10-12)

Receive the good news of lent that we don't have to keep going in the same old ways. With support from a community of faith, we can change direction and get back on a path that leads to an abundant life. Whatever is weighing you down, just let it go!

Look Up

Get on your knees and look up to God. Jesus did not come to tackle our mundane inconveniences. He came to overcome the forces of sin and death that shake the very foundations of our lives. Everyone is hurt by the sin of others and shamed by his or her own sin. Everyone is forced to confront mortality with the death of a loved one.

Acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves. Look to Jesus who demonstrates the depth of God's love and mercy. Join the psalmist and proclaim,

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1)*

Although Lent is a time for self-reflection and honesty before God, we should not become self-absorbed during this season. Love and service to others are required for true repentance. The closer we get to God, the closer we want to be part of a community of faith. And the closer we get to a community of faith, the more we want to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Slow down, breathe in, let go and look up. Keep turning to God, dying to self and rising with Christ. And, have a good journey. I will look for you at the empty tomb.