



LITURGICAL SEASONS

LENT

Season of Transformation

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** allow this book to become the basis for a day or a half-day of reflection. Provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she has learned.

This volume on the topic of Lent is one of several volumes that explore **Liturgical Seasons**. Our church accents seasons within each year to help us enter into the story of salvation. This is commonly referred to as the liturgical calendar. Its purpose is not to mark the passage of time but to understand the overall mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, from his incarnation and birth through his ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit. By meditating on the themes of these various seasons in the church year, we are more fully able to live the mystery of Christ in our own lives.

Prologue

The celebration of the season of Lent is an ancient Christian practice. For forty days leading up to the Paschal Triduum, we strive to free ourselves from all kinds of clutter—material and spiritual—in order to focus on God and turn back to him with our whole hearts.

If this “turning back” is genuine, it will be a reorientation, a transformation. It will bring about a real change in our lives. God has never wanted our empty devotions or blind rule-following. He desires and requires so much more. God wants our very hearts to be turned with love toward him and toward one another.

To help us enter into this Lenten season of transformation, we will reflect together upon three key moments in the life and ministry of Jesus. We will explore two passages from the Gospel of Mark (which was probably the first gospel written) and one from the Gospel of John (which was probably the last gospel written). Reflecting together on Jesus’ words and example, we will gain a better understanding of God’s most earnest desire that each of us embrace an authentic transformation, that as individuals and as a community we learn to live God’s own outward-looking, self-emptying, laying-down-one’s-life kind of love.

Transformed by Repentance



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Mark 1:14-20, one account of Jesus proclaiming the kingdom and calling his followers.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ¹⁵“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” ¹⁶As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. ¹⁷Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ¹⁸Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. ¹⁹He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. ²⁰Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

After a few moments of quiet reflection on Mark 1:14-20, consider the background information offered in “Setting the Scene.” Occasional questions in this section and the following may be used for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.

Setting the Scene

When reading familiar passages of Scripture, we face a common challenge. *How can we hear God’s Word anew? Can it still confront us in new and surprising ways?* This challenge is especially true when it comes to the gospels. We know Jesus well. We have read his stories and heard his words so many times that we may feel we already know what he is asking of us. But this sense of familiarity can prevent us from discovering the incredible surprises and the potentially life-altering challenges offered to us within the pages of the gospels, unless we intentionally open our minds to this always-living Word and its power to transform us.

The Gospel of Mark, for example, should fill us with a sense of great urgency. There is no place for complacency in this fast-paced account of an itinerant preacher and wonder-worker who hands himself over to death as the ultimate servant of all. This charismatic preacher was known for his high expectations and his transformative call to “follow me.” As we follow Jesus closely through this gospel, a difficult truth seeps into our hearts—to follow this Jesus of Nazareth is both a privilege and a sacrifice. It is how we lose and gain everything. It requires a total transformation.

The gospel begins with a brief, one-verse introduction: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ [the Son of God].” Mark then immediately recounts the ministry of John the Baptist, a prophet who is paving the way for someone mightier than himself, one who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

This mighty one, this “Son of God,” promptly enters the scene. Jesus of Nazareth comes to John and is baptized by him in the Jordan River, an event that serves as a divine endorsement of Jesus and his mission. Mark then writes that the Spirit “drove [Jesus] into the desert” (1:12). For forty days in this lonely and dangerous place, Jesus is tempted by Satan and endures a test of strength, obedience, and fidelity.

It is after this period of testing that Jesus begins his ministry with tremendous energy and focus, wielding a powerful message and calling ordinary people like you and me to follow him, to watch and listen, to be transformed by his words and example.

Note: The number forty is used throughout Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. We may recall that the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years until God brought them to the Promised Land (Deut 8:2) and that Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights waiting for God’s law (Exod 34:28). And here, of course, we are told that Jesus experienced temptation (and other gospels indicate fasting) in the desert for forty days. All of these events are part of the rich biblical tradition behind our forty-day Lenten fast as a time of prayer, self-examination, and transformation.

Jesus endured forty days of temptation and fasting before beginning his ministry. Why do you think God allowed—or even sent—him to experience this?

Understanding the Scene Itself

The entire passage from Mark 1 will now be considered a few verses at a time.

¹⁴After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ¹⁵“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”



Mark’s note that “John had been arrested” should put the reader on notice—just fourteen verses into the gospel, an arrest has been made (and indeed, by Mark 6, John will be dead). The forerunner of Jesus, the one who precedes him and prepares for him, is facing great danger. A foreshadowing of Jesus’ own fate is clear. These warnings will continue throughout the gospel narrative, from the plot against Jesus’ life (Mark 3:6) to Jesus’ own warnings that he will suffer and die (e.g., Mark 8:31).

In the shadow of John’s arrest, Jesus comes to Galilee and begins his ministry with a bold proclamation about the Gospel (or *good news*) of God. What do Mark and Jesus mean here by *Gospel*? What is this good news?

Long before the word “gospel” was associated with written accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the term “good news” was

used in the Old Testament to describe glad tidings extended from God to his people. The prophet Isaiah, for example, uses a Hebrew term (*bāšar*) meaning “good news” to describe the nearness of God (40:9), his firm intent to save his people (52:7), and the comfort promised to those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, and imprisoned (61:1). In other words, the “Gospel” is a declaration of the saving presence of God among his people, a presence that is dynamic and life-giving, comforting and healing.

This saving presence of God which brings about actual change for his people can also be called the “kingdom of God,” another key term used by Jesus in this passage. The word “kingdom” is best understood as God’s “reign” rather than as a physical place where God is. The kingdom of God simply means God’s presence with his people. When God is present, he reigns, he brings about change, and he effects transformation in the hearts of his people. Jesus declares this dynamic and transforming kingdom to be “at hand”! We will see powerful signs of this reign of transformation in the ministry of Jesus as he heals the lame and gives sight to the blind.

But the transformative nature of the Gospel and God’s kingdom is perhaps most clearly verbalized by Jesus in one powerful word: “repent.” We often think of the word “repentance” as simple regret or feeling sorry for our sins, but the biblical sense of “repentance” is much more. True repentance is conversion, a turn or a change, a new way of life. Indeed, in the New Testament, the word we translate as “repent” is

The word *gospel*, meaning the good news of God’s salvation, came to be associated with Jesus himself. In Mark 1:1 we read that this story is a *gospel*, or good news as it has come in the person of Jesus. How is Jesus’ life a *gospel*, a saving word of God to his people?

The kingdom (or reign) of God in our world is not always obvious. Where and how do you recognize God’s kingdom? How can you call others to live within its embrace?

While repentance is much more than sorrow for sin, it does require an honest self-examination and recognition of our sins. Why is this a necessary part of our relationship with God? How can it be a joyful exercise rather than a guilt-laden one?

We often make promises to God to make certain sacrifices or do extra things as part of our Lenten practice. When choosing these spiritual offerings this Lent, how can you choose something that is totally other-focused, something that will benefit not just yourself but others as well?

the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means to change one's mind. Repentance is not just a feeling; it is an actual transformation.

When Jesus calls out that God's kingdom is at hand, that God's reign is in effect, he immediately calls for this kind of repentance. Jesus is telling us that when God draws near, when God turns toward us, our natural response should be to turn ourselves toward *God*, entering into the joys and demands of his reign. Just as God's reign embraces all creation, so all creation—first and foremost human beings—should embrace God's ways. And what are God's ways? Jesus' ministry will make that clear—God's ways are defined by love.

To repent and believe in the Gospel is therefore to embrace Jesus' message in its totality. The time is fulfilled: God has drawn near to his people in the person of Jesus Christ, in his words and actions. Jesus is the message of salvation from God to his people, the presence of God with his people. In response, we are to listen and believe. We are to turn away from ourselves and our own self-centered preoccupations in order to embrace God's own way of existing—turned toward the other, self-emptying, self-giving. As difficult as this change of life may be, it is not something to be put off for another day or another Lent. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand.

¹⁶As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. ¹⁷Jesus said to

them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ¹⁸Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.

Immediately after declaring the central message of his ministry, Jesus begins to call followers. Notice what Jesus does *not* do. He does not gather a list of the rich and powerful. He does not determine who is the most intelligent or eloquent or who has the loudest megaphone. He does not choose established leaders or persons with academic credentials. Rather, Jesus walks along the road, and, passing by a sea, he calls two fishermen. These fishermen are brothers—Simon and Andrew. Simon, of course, will later be called Peter, a name given to him by Jesus that means “Rock.”



Note the simplicity of Jesus’ call. He says only one sentence, one command, to Simon and Andrew: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” He does not promise them job security or future happiness. He promises only a new path and fascinating but difficult work. The path is the way of Jesus (“come after me”) and the work is to help Jesus usher others into the embrace of God’s reign.

The response of these fishermen is equally simple: “they abandoned their nets and followed

If repentance is *metanoia*, or changing one's mind, in what way might Jesus be asking you to change your mind?

him.” This is a *metanoia* indeed. Simon and Andrew are leaving their old lives behind. They have embraced something new and unknown, but something they obviously believe holds great promise. With little information and no assurances, Simon and Andrew are open to the transformation Jesus will ask of them, not only in the months to come but for the rest of their lives. This simple call and response offer us a classic example of the repentance and belief in the Gospel required by Jesus as he proclaims the nearness of God's kingdom.

¹⁹He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. ²⁰Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

Another call story immediately follows the call of Simon and Andrew, cementing in our minds the simplicity of Jesus' call and the total response, the total change of mind and life, required of those who would follow him. Mark writes that Jesus “walked along a little farther” and there he sees two more fishermen—James and John, the sons of Zebedee (these two brothers, along with Simon Peter, will ultimately form Jesus' closest circle of disciples). James and John are busily mending their nets, working alongside their father.

No dialogue is provided; we are simply told that “he called them.” And their response, like

that of Simon and Andrew, is absolute. James and John leave behind not only their nets but *their father*. This may seem unfeeling or even wrong. Would Jesus call anyone to abandon their family members? But here and elsewhere the gospels are clear: Jesus' call requires total devotion. The bond between disciple and master takes priority even over the bond among family members.

These two call stories encapsulate the radical nature of living fully in God's reign. This is not a realm of theory and intellectual assent. This is a hard-hitting story about a dusty path in a real town in the real world, where ordinary human beings have to make critical decisions about how they will spend their time, who they will spend it with, and what kind of lives they will lead. This Lent, when Jesus calls, will we abandon our own nets? Will we strike off on a new path that requires ongoing repentance and transformation, or will we be satisfied with the way we are now? Clearly these call stories are not only about Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They are about each of us and our own relationships with Jesus and the kingdom he proclaims.

What distractions may be preventing you from hearing Jesus' call this Lent? How can you remove or minimize these distractions so you can hear his voice more clearly?

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

There are many gospel stories about Jesus calling people to follow him, and we know that he calls us too. Imagine your own call story. What are you doing as Jesus passes by? What does Jesus say to you? How do you respond? What is holding you back? What propels you forward?

Offer this prayer to Jesus who calls you, or pray to him in your own words:

Jesus, when you call, I want to answer.

Where you go, I want to follow.

What you ask, I want to do.

Forgive my hesitations, my doubts and questions,
my habits of self-defense and self-protection,
my seeking after comforts, my negligence of
my brothers and sisters.

Open my heart to the sound of your call.

Open my mind to the possibility of being
changed.

Open my path to walk in your ways.

Liberate me from my own self-entanglements
so I may be free to repent, to change my life,
to follow you, and to be transformed,
to live fully in your kingdom, a life for others.

Living the Word

In the Old Testament, prophets proclaim that true repentance is demonstrated by care for the poor. The connection is clear: when we truly repent, we turn from our own ways to God's ways. We turn from an inward gaze to an outward one, learning to look away from ourselves and toward God and his people.

Reflect on the passage below from the prophet Isaiah. How will your Lenten repentance, your Lenten turning, bear fruit in action? Why do you think God's presence is assured to those who live this fast of true repentance?

⁵Is this the manner of fasting I would choose,
a day to afflict oneself?
To bow one's head like a reed,
and lie upon sackcloth and ashes?
Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
⁶Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking off every yoke?
⁷Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry,
bringing the afflicted and the homeless into
your house;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own
flesh?
⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear
guard.
⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer,
you shall cry for help, and he will say:
"Here I am!"
—Isaiah 58:5-9

*Create a short list of practical ways you might
"fast" as recommended in verses 6-7 above.*