

Lent and Learning What it Means to Follow Christ
The Rev. Dr. Steven H. Shussett '93

“Be astonished! Be astounded! For I am doing something among you that you would not believe if you were told!” - Habakkuk 1:5



The church’s liturgical calendar shapes us, often in ways we don’t recognize. Advent leaves many straining against the reins to sing Christmas carols heard a month before in stores and on television. After Epiphany, life seems full of mundane events, Sunday after Sunday. It is a reminder to the faithful that our everyday lives are to be lived mindful of the presence of God. The church’s calendar gives all of our time new shape and meaning.

Lent is no exception, and its particular emphasis on following Jesus to the cross gives it a unique place in the church’s life, and that of the individual believer. The 40 days after Ash Wednesday have historically been a time of training in the church, particularly for those who are considering joining it. For those whose relationship with Christ and his church has waned, the Lenten season offers an opportunity for renewal.

Above all, Lent provides an opportunity to learn what it means to follow Christ. This makes the season an especially fruitful time for exploring spiritual disciplines, not simply as an intellectual exercise for seven weeks, but a chance to experience what can become practices for a lifetime. It is not just a chance to put something down—chocolate or alcohol—but to take something up in the spirit of Jesus who took up his cross.

The stories of Lent help us to understand what is perhaps the most simple and most important lesson of the spiritual life: “Find God in everyone and in everything.” Pay attention—to God, yourself, and the world around you. In taking time to be grateful for the food we have, we can pray for those who don’t. We can read the newspaper not only for information but *inspiration*, a word which comes from the Latin “to breathe.” We breathe in the Spirit as to what is happening, and breathe out our prayers and our actions to make a difference in the lives of those known and unknown to us. To read the Bible not in haste or out of duty, but as a way to more fully understand this Christ so that we might more faithfully follow him.

May God bless you in this season of Lent. With its reminders of temptations and failure, and promises of forgiveness and new life, may you might find that you are more and more conformed to Christ, and by his grace, transformed more into his likeness.