

This Lent we have several resources and opportunities meant to enrich your Lenten disciplines – to help us think and act more deeply regarding our relationship with God, our walk as a Jesus follower, our call to be the abundantly compassionate and welcoming neighbor.

We will enjoy, I am sure, a five-part Readers Theater on Wednesday evenings beginning next week. You are welcome to partake in the prayer stations that will pop up around here soon. Some space and time will be set aside on Thursday nights for prayer, meditation, reading, knitting, one-on-one time with me if you would like.

And there is a Lenten Devotional available to you as well. It is called Vincent van Gogh and the Beauty of Lent. Here's just a taste of what this devotional offers us:

*Vincent van Gogh devoted his life to light. The light of creation, the light of painting, the light of God's grace -- and the light in humanity, mind, body, and soul. The son of a Christian pastor, Vincent fervently set out to be a preacher and missionary himself, but his ministry eventually took the form of brush strokes and canvases. (In) just 10 years of his short life, from age 27 to 37, he created more than 2,000 luminous works of art -- including nearly 900 paintings - - shimmering with vitality, with passion, and above all, with light.*

*The word "Lent" refers to the "lengthening" light, the growing days that, in time, will coax the sunflowers to open, the wheat fields to rise again, and the irises to bloom. What better companion on this 40-day pilgrimage, than this apostle of light?*

My prayer for all of us is that these practices, this slowing down Lent gives us, feeds us well and helps us feel closer to God and more calibrated to Jesus, as we walk with Jesus to the cross, the agony of Holy Week and the glorious and triumphant light of the Risen Christ on

Easter.

Today, Ash Wednesday, the beginning of this Lenten Season of reflection and growth, our readings set us up perfectly to begin Lenten devotions such as these or any other Lenten practices we are contemplating this year.

Perhaps you're feeling strongly about giving up something that is harming you or others or holding you back in some way. Maybe like me, you are looking to add more consistent prayer time to your daily life and to learn how to see your physical body as the amazing gift of God it truly is and then grow in your care of that gift. Sometimes Lent can help us reshape or reset our attitude toward something in life that is challenging us or is downright knocking the wind out of us emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Our Ash Wednesday readings remind us that we start all this practice and devotion with a spirit of penitence, just as King David did in Psalm 51. We will hear this Psalm read, carefully, prayerfully, as we receive the ashes today.

You may remember what led King David to use this psalm, or perhaps even write it himself – it was the Bathsheba/Uriah incident. As the story goes in 2 Samuel, King David's human heart and desire for Bathsheba led him to put quite a bit of distance between himself and God.

His pursuit of Bathsheba was the sin of abuse of power. What was she supposed to do? Her choices were to submit or disobey the King, an impossible situation for her. And then to cover that sin, King David caused Uriah, Bathsheba's husband and one of his loyal military leaders, to be killed by enemy troops. In the process, others he had sent off to battle in his name

were also killed in this attempt to cover sin.

Then into the picture came his trusted advisor, Nathan.

“The Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, ‘There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.’ Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’

“Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! ... (and) David, who comes back to himself in that moment said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’

And then Nathan said something incredible to David. He said, ‘Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.’” (2 Sam 12:1-7, 13)

It was only then, with his heart shattered and changed, that King David was able to experience God's forgiveness as deeply as God desires us to experience it ... it was only then God was able to re-purpose King David's changed heart from adultery and murder and deceit to sing out the redemption of this Psalm: “Save me, bring back my joy, support me, strengthen my will. Then I will teach your way and sinners will turn to you. Help me, stop my tears, and I will

sing your goodness. Lord, give me words and I will shout your praise.” (Ps 51)

Nathan held a mirror up to King David like Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent holds a mirror up to us, so we too can catch an honest reflection of our sinful natures, so we too can move beyond that brokenness, so that we may make our way through this season with our own hearts shattered to the ways of the world, changed and fully open to experience what it means to love God and God’s law with all our heart, soul and might.

This can be hard work, let’s not sugar coat it – it can make us feel naked and vulnerable before God at times. But we do this self-reflection and adopt this spirit of penitence with confidence knowing we are always naked and vulnerable before God and God insists on loving us anyway. We move into this season that must come in order for there to be an Easter morning, confident that even stripped of all our possessions and identity, even confronted by our screw-ups and self-importance, we are received, forgiven, and endlessly re-imagined in the eyes and actions of our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.