Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Thays Orrico)

by John Shea

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 1, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Last Lent, my wife and I decided to get ashes at noon. There were only a few people in the church. At the front was a man and woman holding bowls of ashes. We walked

down the long center aisle to arrive at the practice of Ash Wednesday.

The man said to me, "What do you want from Lent?" I was not prepared for this. "Ashes," I muttered. What else would I be doing here?

He smiled slightly, put ashes on my head, and said, "Repent, and be faithful to the Gospel."

Back outside, I asked my wife, "What did you say when the woman asked you, "What do you want from Lent?"

"Peace."

"Better than me," I said.

But it got me thinking. Is that the right question? Maybe the question is not what we want from Lent, but what Lent wants from us.

The Lenten "ask" is in the ritual. Ashes created from burning the palms of the previous Holy Week are used to mark the sign of the cross on our foreheads. Words clarify the sign: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

The Greek word for "repent" is *metanoia*. It means change your mind, or go beyond the way you think right now. This change opens us to "believe in the Gospel."

The implication is that the Gospel thinks differently than we do. We need to let go of some of the ways we are thinking ("repent") in order to align with a deeper call to "believe in [how] the Gospel [thinks]."

What has to change ("repent") includes ways we think about ourselves. We are used to holding on to narrow, habitual identities; hardened features of our mental, physical and social selves.

For example, we think we are a certain type of personality, have certain skills and shortcomings, are male or female with bodies that are attractive or not. We think we have certain strengths and weaknesses, belong to this or that or ethnic group, have past negative or positive experiences that have shaped us, etc. There is no end to these profiles and how we put them together.

Advertisement

That's us. Really?

Of course there is more — an important, subtle, expansive and empowering more. The Gospel tells us we are spiritual beings. Jesus gave us "power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

Our spiritual being — born of God — is not a separate entity. It suffuses and empowers all that we are: our mental, physical and social selves.

But how does Lent bring Spirit into all we are?

There is no shortage of prescribed practices: daily prayer, spiritual reading, church attendance, Gospel meditations, homilies, rosaries, fasting, faith group conversations, social action, stations of the cross, spiritual direction, silence, making visits and more.

In all these Lenten options, something likely has our name on it. Something of Spirit will come our way. No matter how it comes, we must not let it go by. The Gospel asks us to take it inside. Dialogue with it. Make it part of ourself.

When we let Spirit flow, it becomes a gift to our mind, enabling us to see our neighbors and situations in ways we had not seen them before.

When we let Spirit flow, it becomes fruit to our will, inspiring us to act in ways we know we should, but never have the nerve to.

When we let Spirit flow, it becomes a blessing to our heart, settling down into the real truth about ourselves and finding the peace that moves us toward action.

This Ash Wednesday will bring burnt palms in the sign of the cross on my forehead and "repent and believe in the Gospel" in my ears; a journey will be afoot. No matter the difficulties, the stalls, the questions, the backsliding, it is what Lent asks of us, awakening both fullness and seriousness. That is the way it is with Spirit.

Once Spirit moves through our mind, will and heart, there is more Spirit than before. Spirit, once engaged, is never less. It is always more. And so are we.

During Lent we are called to become who and what we already are. Easter is not the end of Lent. It is the committed beginning of discipleship, formed by 40 days of

individual repentance and Gospel embrace. Isn't this what Lent wants from us?

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. View the full series.