

The Story: Rebuilding the Wall

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[0 : 00] So good morning, Braymar. Let's talk about Lent this morning. How do you feel about that? There's no really excited faces. Why not? So I've had some conversations with people recently and they say, what have said to me, what is Lent? What does it mean?

What are the different parts of it? Why do we celebrate that? And I've heard people say, isn't that a Catholic thing? But in conversations with Christian friends over the years, I've come across a wide range of understanding of different parts of the year, different time periods in the church calendar. And some have recognized that some of the formal names that are associated with the Christian calendar, hopefully we recognize these, Good Friday, Christmas, Easter, right?

Those are church calendar times. They are days, they are events, and we recognize them. But some folks are also familiar with church calendar time periods like Advent.

That's the season that leads up to Christmas. Or Lent, which began this past Wednesday, if you didn't know. And that leads us into Easter.

[1 : 12] And for people who may come from a more liturgical background, if you come from a liturgical tradition, such as perhaps Anglican or Methodist or Presbyterian or Lutheran, those traditions, people from those traditions may recognize church days such as Shrove Tuesday or Ash Wednesday, which happened this past week.

So Shrove Tuesday, or as some folks consider it, Pancake Tuesday or Pancake Day, lots of people call it that, because many churches have pancake suppers on that day.

It's also known, you may know this term, as Mardi Gras, which is in Louisiana. And Mardi Gras in French translates to Fat Tuesday.

And that's because it's the last day before Ash Wednesday. So that makes it the last day of regular life, the last day of celebration and feasting, before the season of Lent.

So we've got Mardi Gras. So why Ash Wednesday? Well, it marks the first day of the Lent season. It's the beginning of a time of prayer and fasting as we lead up to Easter.

[2 : 32] Ash Wednesday, if you've ever wondered, because I did, it derives its name from the tradition of placing ashes on the foreheads of people who are participating.

So you may have seen photos of a cross on someone's forehead. So that right, that process, I'm struggling for words, which doesn't happen to me that often, as everyone knows, I'm a yacker.

When a priest or a pastor puts those ashes on a person's forehead, it's usually followed by the words, repent and believe in the gospel. Or, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

So if you are familiar with that time of the year, you may be familiar with those words. And in many churches, I found this very interesting, the ashes that are used in this observance in the church on Ash Wednesday are actually often prepared from burning the palm branches that were used for the previous year's Palm Sunday.

Isn't that interesting? So there are churches that are that organized, that are that structured in how they recognize these events. So what is Lent?

[3 : 54] Lent is a 40-day period of fasting and prayer and repentance that begins on Ash Wednesday, which was this past Wednesday, and it continues through the Thursday night that comes before Good Friday.

So why 40 days? I can open that up to questions, but it's not specifically mentioned in Scripture. Why 40 days?

Lent isn't even mentioned in Scripture. But Lent and this 40-day period has become part of the tradition in many Christian churches. And why? Because it mirrors the 40-day period Jesus was tested in the desert.

It also parallels the 40-day period when Moses fasted and prayed after the Israelites made the golden calf that they worshipped.

Does that make sense? Has it been helpful? Blank faces. Well, hopefully it's given you context. Because I was fascinated, you know, as we're in the Lent season now, we are not traditionally a very liturgical church here at Braemar.

[5 : 11] But I think it's important to know some of these traditions that are part of what we believe. Where do they come from? Why do we use these terms? So we use parts of these things, but not all of them.

I'm not suggesting that we begin fasting today necessarily, although, have at it. I could use some fasting. But the reality is, we recognize parts of these things, but not all of them.

So you'll see over time that I will, I'll explore some of these things for us a bit more. Because we have a richness of tradition in the Christian church that I don't think we really recognize. And I think it's important.

We come from a tradition. We come from many, many, many years of believers who came before us. And so to always be looking to new is not necessarily the best choice.

So hopefully you've gotten a bit more context on the season of Lent and what that means to us as Christians. So as I said, Pastor Kent, does that mean I need to start fasting now?

[6 : 13] Should I not, should I put the roast back in the freezer? Well, no. Do I just have to drink water for 40 days from now until I sit down and eat Easter ham?

No, not necessarily. But my answer to you would be ask God what he wants you to do during this season. What does he want to show you?

What does he want to teach you? What does he want you to appreciate? Because I think that's important. So I challenge each of us to begin reflecting on Good Friday, what Good Friday and Easter mean now.

Don't wait until the week of Easter and suddenly remember, oh, it's a long weekend. Let's challenge ourselves to begin thinking about Easter now.

And also, it's important to recognize that fasting is not just about food. We hear fast food. We hear that expression, fasting, and we immediately think, okay, it means eating less or eating a certain diet.

[7 : 19] But it's not just about that. Because fasting can be about taking a break from anything that tends to occupy your time. Or that's something that's a luxury or an indulgence in your life.

Some people even fast from, believe it or not, in these days, screens, smartphones, tablets, TV, Netflix.

People fast from that. Some people fast from drinking caffeine. If your routine is to go to Starbucks and spend a couple hours and, I don't know, \$15 for a Starbucks coffee nowadays, if that's your habit, challenge your habit.

See if you can create a different habit for this time of your life, this season. Some people fast from eating chocolate. I know. I know.

Some people do it, though. Even consider giving away something that you don't need every day for 40 days. That could have a huge effect on your life.

[8 : 26] Decluttering your mind, decluttering your spirit, those kinds of things. Some people stop snacking after supper. You know, if you're a TV snacker, maybe don't do that for the Lent season.

I'm sure there is something in your life that you recognize that you could let go. So the point is that you're fasting from, you're denying yourself of, something that takes up space in your life.

And instead of filling up that time, I'm not saying create time to cram it with something else. No. Just go without it. And I'm not saying forever until Easter.

And you know what you may find? You may find that you didn't miss it that much after all. It may give you a new perspective. It'll create time and space in your life to reflect on what God has done for you.

That God made a way for you to come back into relationship with him. that through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, through his sacrifice for you on the cross, the event that we recognize on Good Friday, that your sins could be forgiven, not just once, but for all time.

[9 : 47] Friends, Jesus gave us a gift. Hopefully, you've accepted that gift in an intentional way. So I encourage you during this season of Lent, the Lenten season, as it's called, to reflect on that.

Be intentional about reflecting on that. But I also want to recognize that some of you may hear me talking about all this and you're left wondering what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Maybe you've been a Christian a long time and you've thought, I've never heard that phrase before. I've never considered that that Jesus that I read about, that Jesus that I sing about, I could know him personally.

So maybe you've never made that connection. So ask me about it. And if none of this makes any sense to you, ask me about that too. Because I'd be happy to talk about it.

And I'd love to share more with you about how what we've talked about so far this morning could change your life in a very real way. So this morning, believe it or not, we've come to the end of the Old Testament portion of our sermon series on the story.

[11:03] Congratulations, everyone. You made it. So we made it through the Old Testament. Now, obviously, we have not gone chapter by chapter, verse by verse, book by book.

But we've, in a very real, very intentional, very thorough way, explored a chronological view of many of the high points, many of the key events, many of the things that God was doing and has been doing throughout human history so far in the Bible.

So remember during our sermon about two weeks ago, Pastor Kent, I can't remember what you said five minutes ago. Okay, fair enough.

Fair enough. So two weeks ago, we learned about Cyrus, the Persian king. And we learned how God used him to release the Jewish people to allow them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Do you remember that? The Jewish people who had been exiled to various nations over many generations were now beginning to return to their homeland.

[12:14] That first group of 50,000 exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon under the leadership of a man named, I have to say it fast, Zerubbabel.

Anyone have that as a middle name? Mine is Philip, thankfully. So the second group of exiles returned under the leadership of Ezra, the priest.

There's a book named after him in the Bible. That final group of exiles returned under the leadership of a man named Nehemiah, who also has a book named after him.

And the goal at that point was to rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem. And that's why our sermon this morning is titled Rebuilding the Wall.

And we're transitioning, as I said, from the Old Testament to the New Testament in our series. And we're going to see how God really brings his people back together.

[13:18] together. We're going to begin to look at the book of Nehemiah chapter 8. So you can flip there. I'm going to give us the high points because we don't have that much time.

So as we learn in Nehemiah 8, people are returning to Jerusalem. The people had already rebuilt the temple, but the city wall that surrounded Jerusalem, it had been destroyed by invaders, and it was still in ruins.

And it's important to recognize that at this point in the story, the exiled people are gathered together. And it's interesting to note what is the first thing they do.

They gather together and they hear the word of God read for them. They get that first meal back together.

Nehemiah 8, 1-12 recounts this event in great detail, so I encourage you to read it yourselves. But we get in this section the five W's.

[14:27] We get who was there, a detailed description, who was there. We get what was read. We get when and where it was read. We learn who read it.

It's a very detailed description of Ezra reading the book of the law. And as we know it, that's Genesis through Deuteronomy.

The five books of the Old Testament, the first five. But why was this significant? Surely many people who were there would have known this already. Well, to begin with, 140 years had passed since God's people had united as a nation in one place.

They were separated for 140 years. And this was their story. I've talked about this before in sermons.

Sometimes we read the Bible and I believe we look at it as we're reading someone else's mail. This is not our story. This is not our history. We don't belong to this.

[15:36] Wrong. This is your story. This was the story of those people. It was their story, the lower human story, but also the story of their God and his wondrous, grand, upper story.

And so, here in Nehemiah, they were taking time to recognize their traditions. They came together to recognize their common heritage, their unity as a people under God.

They're planting their flag together again. And Ezra read the scriptures. And we read in Nehemiah that the Levites, who were the priests at the time, they had to interpret the scriptures for the people. And I found this fascinating because the reason for that was because during their time in exile, Israel, the Israelite people had forgotten their language.

So, whether they couldn't read it, they couldn't speak it, that's how far from their tradition, far from their original origin, they had gone, they had drifted.

[16:55] And so, do you see the common theme from the story here? People need to hear God's words. words. We need to hear his word through the scriptures.

And through that, we begin to understand what God is calling us to do. And then, we're called to do it.

We're called to obey. Did you know that you can communicate the whole story of the Bible to someone in three minutes or less? Time me.

God, the community of the Trinity, wants to be in community with, in relationship with human beings. Sin entered into the world, entered into the human spiritual DNA, and destroyed the community people could otherwise have had with God and with one another.

The rest of the Bible is a story about God winning us back to himself, beginning with Abraham and a new nation, and continuing with Jesus Christ and the church.

[18:09] There's the gospel. Can I have an amen? Just one? That's the gospel. So, the reunion celebration continues in Nehemiah 8, 13 to 17.

And we read that the people reenact the Feast of Tabernacles, it's called. also known in Hebrew as Sukkot. And it was a week-long festival that commemorated that 40-year journey of the Israelites in the wilderness, 40 years again.

They were celebrating God's deliverance at that time. They were celebrating his protection, his provision, his faithfulness to them.

And during that time, the people recognized again God's word calling them to obey. The Bible says in James 1, 22, let's read this together.

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. In our story this morning, God called his people back to himself.

[19:23] He called his people back to read his word, the Bible. And he called them to obey. Friends, God's word calls us to align with God's will.

He calls us to do the same today that he did in our story this morning. He calls us to return to him, to give our focus and priority back to him, to follow him, and to do what he is asking of us.

God called his people back to Jerusalem. He called them to rebuild not just their walls, but their identity as a people, their identity as his people.

And God is calling his people back to him today, just as he has done throughout the story of the Old Testament. The question is, are we hearing him?

Will we obey him? Will we seek him? we began this morning talking about Lent, and then we reflected on God's ultimate plan for our lives, one of restored relationship and forgiveness for our selfish and sinful choices that pull us away from God.

[21:05] So it's fitting and not coincidental to me that this morning we're celebrating communion together. because through that act, we reflect on that sacrifice that Jesus Christ made, the restored relationship that is possible and available to us, the act that fulfilled God's plan to redeem humanity.

This morning we approach this table, as I always say, not as a Braemar Baptist church table, but as the Lord's table to which he calls us to freely come.

The Bible tells us that we need to take a good long look at what's going on in our hearts when we partake in the Lord's supper. If you don't know Jesus, if you don't have a relationship with him, this is something that you should probably sit out.

that's a hard thing for me to say, but it's true. And that's not about being exclusive. It's about you recognizing an opportunity to start with that relationship.

Start with recognizing Jesus before you come to this table. In 1 Corinthians 11, 28, the apostle Paul wrote, In Corinth, this intended act of communion with the Lord had become a thoughtless and even

selfish church ritual.

[22 : 52] Their minds had shifted clearly from Christ's substitutionary, there's a big word for you, sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf.

The reality of that, and it had wandered elsewhere because we are wanderers. Folks, we must never let that happen to us.

We need to stay mentally engaged when we partake of these elements. It's not a box that we check off once a month. 1 Peter 1, 18, and 19 reminds us that these elements have been ordained to soberly remind us of the high cost of God's forgiveness.

Yes, it's juice and crackers, but it means so much more than that. Eating and drinking of them vividly depicts our union and solidarity with Jesus Christ as our Savior, Savior, as our Lord, and as our source of spiritual life.

We also need to take the time to examine ourselves, as I said a moment ago, to ensure that our relationship with Jesus is authentic and it's genuine.

[24 : 13] Not only recalling the beginning of our relationship with Jesus, whether that was a year ago or 50 years ago, but seeking to discover that if there's any unconfessed sin, I talked about Lent and giving things up.

It's just as important that we recognize unconfessed sin in our lives. God knows already. You're not hiding him successfully.

You're not hiding your actions, I should say, successfully from him. He knows it, but he asks you to confess it, to seek forgiveness for it. And unconfessed sin, my friends, will get in the way.

I guarantee it. And lastly, it would be wrong for us to eat the bread and drink the cup of Christ without a heart that is purposely thankful.

The Lord's Supper is not only a reminder of his brutal death, but also a celebration of the incredibly gracious, generous God that we serve.

[25 : 21] The invaluable privilege of being forgiven by him. So as you take the bread and the cup this morning, do it with a grateful heart that can say along with generations of Christians, thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift.

I'll be serving communion this morning and I'll invite you to come when you're ready as the music plays. And if you're sitting with someone who's not able to come forward, I would ask that you take the cup and the bread for them as well.

And please wait to eat and drink and we will do that together. Come when you're ready. do it again. Thank you. Thank you. My order with Madrid,