

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 18, 2026 – ASH WEDNESDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Spiritual Housecleaning*”

Old Testament	Joel 2:1-2, 12-17	(Return to God with repentance and fasting)
Psalter	Psalms 103:8-14	(Bless the Lord for His mercy)
Epistle	2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10	(Now is the Day of Salvation!)
Gospel	St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21	(Pray, fast, and give—in secret, with humility)

The word “Lent” comes from an old English word “lencten,” meaning “springtime,” so it reminds us of spring cleaning and the new life in nature during spring. This season of Lent is a time of special grace for us in which God calls us to do some spring cleaning in our lives and enjoy new life in Christ, as a result. Therefore, we have come here this evening to acknowledge that we are sinners. Sinners in need of forgiveness, healing, and wholeness. We *want* to clean up our lives during Lent because we know they need it. We want to leave sin behind and grow closer to the Lord. We *need* a change of heart.

In our Old Testament lesson, the words of the Lord through the prophet Joel have special significance for us as we begin this season of Lent; they are words that we can easily see the Lord speaking to us personally:

“Yet even now . . . return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment” (Joel 2:12-13).

The words of St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:20-21) are also relevant for us as we begin this season of Lent: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

In the Scriptures, when people left sin behind and turned over a new leaf, they used ashes to symbolize their repentance. Job said (42:6), “I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.” Daniel (9:3) “turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.” Jesus said, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes” (Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13). Therefore, in a spirit of repentance we will take ashes upon our foreheads this evening.

Sometimes people ask, “What are you giving up for Lent?” In the past I tried giving up cursing (that worked permanently); wearing makeup; spending money on myself; complaining; eating chocolate. But there is only one thing God cares about our giving up during Lent—*sin*.

This season of Lent is a preparation for renewing our baptismal promises at Easter. Paul says, when writing to the Romans (6:3-6), that when we were baptized, we died to our old way of life to live a new way of life. That is, if we were baptized as adults, we died to our old sinful ways, leaving godlessness behind. Therefore, Paul says that when we were baptized, we went into the tomb with Jesus and rose out of the grave with Him to a new life. The season of Lent gives us time once again to die to our old sinful ways and rise out of the tomb with Christ to a new way of life so that by Easter Day, when we renew our baptismal vows, we will also have renewed our lives.¹

That is why the second Eucharistic preface used during Lent says: “You bid your faithful people cleanse their hearts, and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast; that, fervent in prayer and in works of mercy, and renewed by your Word and Sacraments, they may come to the fullness of grace which you have prepared for those who love you.”

In our second reading, St. Paul urged the Corinthians (6:1) not to receive the grace of God in vain. During Lent, we, too, do not want to receive God's grace in vain. To show that we are serious about overcoming sin, we do various penitential acts such as prayer, fasting, and sacrificial giving. Our penance during Lent, as well as being a small attempt at reparation for our sins, is a symbol of the change of heart we wish to achieve.

In this evening's Gospel (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus indeed speaks about prayer, fasting, and giving alms. Since the early centuries, these have been three practices the Church has encouraged us to undertake during Lent as a form of penance. If you don't know how to increase your prayer life, try reading the Psalms. Those are the prayers of God's people in ancient Israel and are surprisingly contemporary. Also, there are many prayers in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

As for fasting, traditionally, Christians have fasted on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as well as abstained from meat on Fridays in Lent. Although we are not *required* to do this in The Episcopal Church it is not uncommon for Anglicans to fast in this way—as well as to give up a favorite food such as candy, to show the Lord that we love Him more than food ... or our sins.

As we know here at St. John's, there are many ways of giving alms, or donating charitably. In helping needy people we show them God's love, and show God that we love Him.

I hope Lent may also be a time for all of us to grow closer to the Lord by setting aside purposeful moments to spend with Him—either quiet time in the morning, or during a daily walk, or in the silence of the night. Also, reading the Bible daily—you can use one of the devotions we provide to guide you—is a huge help in drawing closer to God.

May the Lord grant us a holy Lent, and a joyful Lent, a time in which we grow closer to God and forsake our sins and selves. May the grace that God gives us during this season of Lent not be in vain.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, may these weeks leading up to the heartbreak of Good Friday and the glory of Resurrection Sunday remind us of who You are, how You love us, and who You have created us to be as those who follow Your Son, Jesus Christ.

May we journey through this season intentionally, removing distractions that divert our gaze from Your glory. May we quiet the noise that pulls us from adoration of You and places our attention on lesser things. May we eliminate causes of undue stress; may we surrender what has been burdensome; and may we repent of where we have been sinful.

May we see Your goodness and mercy in new ways throughout this season of Lent. May we know the depths of Your love for us more fully. May we feel the pain that You, in Christ, endured for our sake, and may we rejoice that Jesus conquered every evil when He rose to life again.

O God, draw us closer to Your heart, so that we might know You better and trust You more. We pray that not only would we give things up for Lent but also that we would give more to others, even as we give You glory, praise and honor throughout Lent. May our daily words and actions reflect our changed hearts, and may we worship and honor You through all that we think, say, and do, in these coming weeks.² We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. Tommy Lane, "Giving up Sin for Lent," 2007, [FrTommyLane.com](https://www.frTommyLane.com/homilies/daily/lent/0-ash_wednesday.htm) <https://www.frTommyLane.com/homilies/daily/lent/0-ash_wednesday.htm> 9 February 2026.

² Adapt. Rachel Dawson, "20 Lent Prayers to Say During the Lenten Season," 26 January 2026, [CrossWalk.com](https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/a-prayer-for-lent.html) <<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/a-prayer-for-lent.html>> 10 February 2026.