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## I Am Crucified with Christ: A Worship Theme for Lent

by A. Merrill Smoak, Jr. on Thursday, February 21, 2013

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# 40

With a lack of understanding, some people have poked fun at Lent by saying, "I am giving up chocolate for Lent." Robert Webber clarifies the purpose of Lent and worship during the season of Lent.

Lenten worship is a season for personal and corporate spiritual renewal. It is a time for intense study of God's Word, for meditation, for prayer, and for self-examination.(1)

The theme of Lent is spiritual preparation for Easter symbolized by the three spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.(2)

Yes, the season of Lent is spiritual preparation for the celebration of Easter. The need for preparation is well understood by worship leaders. The successful presentation of a choral anthem or a new worship song is in direct proportion to the amount of preparation or rehearsal time put into that song. We have accepted Advent as a time of preparation to understand the incarnation. Why not examine Lent as a time to grasp fully the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and the glorious power of His resurrection? After all, the reality of Easter is the single most important event in the Christ story. For us as believers, this reality is the source of our spiritual life. With Paul we exclaim: "I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:19-20).

### The season of Lent

According to the Christian calendar, the season of Lent encompasses the 40 days plus six Sundays prior to Easter Sunday. Yes, there is a Christian calendar. Most of us center our lives around the school calendar (yeah, summer vacation!), the sports calendar (Go, Giants!), and our civil calendar (Yes, I did remember to get a Mother's Day card). But the Christian calendar,

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often referred to as the church year, can be an inspiring journey into the life of Christ.

Biblically, 40 is an important number: in the story of Noah, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights; God's chosen people wandered in the Sinai for 40 years; and Jesus fasted in the desert for 40 days before He began His public ministry. Historically, the early church developed a 40-day period of examination and study prior to one's baptism. This time of pre-baptism examination coupled with a desire each year to walk with Christ to the cross led the early church to develop Lent as a season of preparation prior to resurrection Sunday.

Traditionally Lent begins each year on Ash Wednesday. If you count backwards, Ash Wednesday is actually 46 days prior to Easter Sunday; thus the explanation above that Lent is actually 40 days plus six Sundays. Please do not let the math or the term Ash Wednesday distract you from considering Lent as a time of meaningful worship. We must lead our congregations to understand what it means to be crucified with Christ. This will involve careful preparation prior to Easter Sunday. Worship leaders may consider three possibilities for Ash Wednesday.

1. Schedule an evening gathering on Ash Wednesday to explain the meaning and purpose of the season of Lent.
2. Simply do not mention Ash Wednesday and begin your season of Lenten worship on the first of the six Sundays (remember the math above).
3. Explore the meaning of the ashes imposed on the forehead in the sign of the cross and see if this might be a meaningful worship experience for your congregation. Consider these Scripture verses: Genesis 3:19; Joel 2:1-2, 12-13.

A worship focus on Lent may be totally new to your congregation. Some in your congregation may remember Lent as a yearly ritual. It may be best for your congregation not to use the word Lent. Simply focus on the themes of Lent and preparation for Easter.

The beginning of Lent "is intended to be a bold confrontation with death."<sup>(3)</sup> Without Christ's death there would be no resurrection, no need for an Easter Sunday. Without our spiritual death there would not be a new life in Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Are you getting the picture? Do you see the possibilities? We must lead our people to prepare for Easter. We must walk with Jesus on His path to the cross to understand fully the true meaning of Easter. We must crucify our sins to enjoy the new life in Christ.

## Spiritual preparation for Easter

The season of Lent should be a time of intense discipline and devotion. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, Webber characterizes Lent with three spiritual disciplines. Obviously the word discipline is close to the word disciple. We are disciples or followers of Christ. After establishing that initial relationship with Jesus, we begin a journey of becoming like Him. We become like Christ through disciplines such as Bible Study, prayer, and ministry. These disciplines are intensified during Lent.

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Bible study and prayer are essential to the life of every Christian. During Lent we would simply say that more is better. Intentionally read the Gospels and relive Christ's life on earth as a human being. Walk with Jesus on that final journey to Jerusalem. Listen to His words. Fill your mind and soul with His stories and His truths. Spend more time in prayer. Learn to pray on your knees or prostrate on the floor. Confess your sins. Ask God to reveal to you areas of your life that need His transformation. Commit 40 days to deeper Bible study and longer times of prayer. The resurrection is coming!

From Acts 13:3 and 14:23 we learn that prayer coupled with fasting was a discipline of the disciples in the first century. During Lent, fasting is encouraged to provide more time for Bible study and prayer. Almsgiving is the biblical term for helping those in need. During Lent we intentionally seek out those who have social, material, and physical needs. We learn to be better servants. Jesus is our example: "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life - a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

As we focus on these disciplines, we walk with Christ on His journey to the cross.

The spiritual preparation of Lent has a special aim - entering into the death of Jesus so that the resurrection to new life may be a truly physical experience, not just an intellectual meditation.(4)

Planning worship services with Lenten themes will help our congregations enter into the death of Jesus and prepare them to shout, "Hallelujah! He is risen!" with new meaning on Easter Sunday.

## Giving up chocolate

It is sad that some Christians think that Lent is just about giving up something sweet to eat for a few weeks before Easter. If properly planned, corporate worship and personal worship during the season of Lent should be a time of revival, personal renewal, and a deep spiritual experience. Lent is all about preparation to understand and experience Christ's resurrection from the dead. Now is the time to begin the preparation for your congregation's journey into the season of Lent. Study the suggested Scriptures and themes. Sing through the suggested songs. Read further about Lent. Get ready. Prepare. Easter Sunday is coming! Worship during the season of Lent will prepare the way for a joyous Easter Celebration.

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1. Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 225.
2. Robert E. Webber, *Rediscovering the Christian Feasts: A Study in the Services of the Christian Year* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 34.
3. Laurence H. Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 85.
4. Webber, *Rediscovering the Christian Feasts*, 34.