



The United Methodist Church

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Dear friends in the Northern Illinois Conference! I want to bring you a Lenten Greeting as we begin a season of preparation for the Celebration of the Resurrection on Easter. Today, I have some “Good News” for you! You are invited to have an abundant life in Jesus Christ! This season of Lent is a time of repentance:

of turning around and taking another path;
of changing direction;
of paying attention to where we are going, and where we will end up;
of setting our direction according to God’s plan and not our own.

Isaiah 55: 6-9 says,

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;*

*let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;*

*let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

This is “Good News”! You do not need to keep going in those ways that lead to despair, hopelessness, self-destruction, brokenness, fear, anger, and loneliness. God has a different path for us, and Lent is when we get on that path!

What I am saying is repentance is not a punishment for our sin. It is an “Invitation to an Abundant Life”. And that is “Good News”!

Many people do not like Lent because it focuses on “sin” and we like to think of ourselves as “good” people. We think we need to build “self-esteem” and not focus on what is not working.

However, we can deceive ourselves into thinking that what we have is the best God has in store for us. Our relationship with God and our neighbor needs to be monitored to counter our tendency to hold on to things even when they are coming apart!

In this season, we begin with Ashes placed in the form of a cross on our forehead... and the Pastor says, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” or “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Mortality is real, Life is short... and it can be hard at times. We cannot hide the harsh realities we face. . . and we cannot hide our sins of commission and omission that have done more harm than good.

Paying attention to our sin and selfishness is not easy. It requires slowing down, silence, humility, honesty, and time with God. For God comes to us when we are not so full of ourselves, but empty ourselves and let God fill us with new life.

The disciplines of Lent are prayer and fasting, almsgiving and self-denial, self-examination and confession of sin, and perhaps most importantly, repentance. We can change our direction, not out of fear of punishment but out of wanting the new life God gives us.

Lent is a solemn season, although it can seem somber for a newcomer to the faith. In reality, Lent is a spiritual journey that leads to joy!

I want to be very clear here. Lent is not a 40-day self-help challenge to make you better so you will be acceptable to God and others. God will make you better when you remember how much Jesus loves you, and you give all of your life to him again.

We will end the Lenten Season on the threshold of Easter anticipating the joy and hope of the Resurrection of Christ, and the new life of forgiveness and reconciliation he brings us.

Today, I simply want you to receive the “Invitation to an Abundant Life” that has been offered through Jesus Christ in this season.

In closing, I would like to leave you with some advice from another bishop of the church, Pope Francis of Rome. If you choose to fast this Lent.

- Fast from hurting words... and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness... and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger... and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism... and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries... and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints... and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures... and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness... and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness... and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges... and be reconciled.
- Fast from words... and be silent so you can listen.

And now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John L. Hopkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J'.

Bishop John L. Hopkins