

There are three traditional ways to observe Lent, all inspired by today's gospel: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If you're looking for something to do this Lent, it's a good idea to choose something from each category.

For prayer, many people do something every day at home, whether at meal time, upon waking up, or before going to bed. Read from the bible. Say a rosary. Use a prayer book. Many others come to church for daily mass throughout the season. At a bare minimum, if your commitment to Sunday mass has faltered, your Lenten resolution is a no-brainer. Come to Sunday mass. Some people take a special day of prayer at a location such as Conception Abbey, where they can experience the presence of God in a deeper way. Prayer is making time for God. If you think you don't have time, you probably do. Prayer will refresh you and help you be more focused on your other tasks during the day.

For fasting, many people do without some food they shouldn't be eating anyway – like processed foods, soda pop or candy – or they give up something else that hurts them, such as tobacco products. They may eat more raw fruits and vegetables and drink more water. Again, if you think you can't revise your diet, you probably can. You may find that eating more healthy foods and exercising more regularly brings its own reward.

For almsgiving, many people give to charity. The rice bowls we provide for Catholic Relief Services are very popular. They collect your change and provide a nice donation at the end of the season. You may discover that your habits of fasting are actually saving you money, and you may contribute that money to church so that others can benefit as well.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving throughout their lives. We focus on these three areas during Lent. He also said we should do them with the right attitude – not boasting about it, but practicing the life of discipleship in a way that God knows about it. That's all. The right attitude for Lent is not gloomy; it is entering the peaceful presence of God.

We do all this because we acknowledge that we are sinners, and that we need God's help to overcome our weaknesses. We mark ourselves with ashes today as a sign to God that we rely on the support and prayer of the entire community during these next six weeks.

Plan now to attend our penance service on Monday, April 6, and bring your sin formally before God for forgiveness. Plan to attend the Easter Vigil on Saturday night, April 11. We will greet the risen Christ present in our midst. We will renew the promises of our baptism, turning away from sin and turning back toward God. If we have made a good Lent, we can make a good Easter, celebrating the forgiveness that is ours, and the God who sustains our spiritual life through the resurrection of Christ and the promise that we too can share it.

The way of Lent is difficult, but we can support one another on this journey through prayer, fasting and almsgiving.