

I welcome you all to Lent! Lent is a forty-day period before Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday, which we just recognized this past week. Therefore, we have now entered the Lenten Season.

Lent is a time of reflection on what God has done to redeem us and how we can live a whole and full life as a child of God. It is about restoring *shalom* in life.

*Shalom* means wholeness or completeness. An important extended meaning is "peace," which is also the meaning people generally attribute to the word. But the cognate adjective, *shalem*, is used of whole, uncut stones used for building an altar (Joshua 8:31). It is also used to describe the correct size's commercial stone weights, not reduced to cheat customers (in Deuteronomy 25:15). A *shalem* heart refers to an undivided attitude of wholeheartedness (2 Kings 20:3).

This sense of wholeness throws light on that daunting command Jesus gave in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect as God is perfect," which is of great concern for many of us as we try to reconcile our lives with this vital counsel. Yet, the teachings of Jesus Christ are for those of us who are imperfect. To the Pharisees' question about why Jesus ate with publicans and sinners, Christ replied: "They that be *whole [shalom]* need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Matthew 9:12, ERV). What a blessing to know that the focus of Jesus' work is with imperfect people!

Those seeking the easy path may say, "I want to be perfect someday, but not now. Maybe I'll be ready when I am older." This kind of reasoning allows them to avoid getting out of their comfort zones today or tomorrow, or the next day. But the attainment of perfection [*shalom*] requires more than merely thinking about it or wishing for it. We must act.

Though each of us has different abilities and talents, we are given the agency to decide what and how much we are willing to do to develop them and improve our weaknesses. This agency is best applied through a simple, prayerfully thought-out decision to work on our weaknesses *before* they are tested rather than waiting to decide daily between good and bad influences in our paths. Such a decision fortifies our resolve to act wisely in the face of temptation.

The Season of Lent is all about bringing our *shalem* heart—an undivided attitude of wholeheartedness—to God through our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the process of restoring *shalom* in life, we need our Savior, who can glue our brokenness and imperfection and make us whole again.

I would say that Jesus is the "Crazy Glue" from God. I say "crazy" because Jesus knew He would suffer and die for the gluing job He had to do for us, but He came to us anyway. With our common senses, it is hard for us to understand the actions He took for us.

Have you ever found yourself asking what the cross of the Christian faith means? Or what exactly did Jesus do on the cross? And why was it necessary? And what does it mean for us today?

Today's scripture says, "We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Simply, it is saying we are imperfect. We are broken. And yet, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood (3:25). In place of us, Jesus died. Jesus glued us back with His blood.

Many of us, including some Christians, believe that behavior determines one's eternal destination, and by being "good enough," we can earn our heavenly home. Just accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior would not be good enough, they feel like. So, some of us think that we need to do something good enough to earn our heavenly home.

Now, let me make some radical statements here. Hear me. Attending church is good. I even encourage all people to do so. But, it would not save you. Having a Bible study is good, but it would not save you also. Being nice to people is good, but it would not save you. Helping the needy, feeding the homeless...all these are good, but they would not save you. Doing all kinds of nice things would not save you. Jesus is the only substitute. And, He is the only way of salvation.

If you are one of those who think that your good deeds will restore the wholeness of your life, please know this. You have not understood the essential nature of Christ's death on the cross yet.

Jesus came to end our frustrated and inadequate self-efforts, and offer us not only a better way but the best. Bible says a lot about the cross and the death of Jesus. Next five weeks, we will consider how the Bible describes Jesus' death and how it brings

reconciliation between sinful humankind and a holy God. The Bible uses several metaphors. Each week, we will explore the pros and cons of the images portrayed in the Bible while developing a greater awareness of our sin and an appreciation of God's faithful love.

It sounds like we are studying these biblical ways of speaking about Jesus' death intellectually. The fact is that understanding Jesus' death intellectually is not possible. But we will use our reasoning mind while deepening our love for God and other people. Thinking and feeling we will use both in our Lenten Journey. By doing so, we will strengthen our commitment to follow Jesus.

I hope that as we understand more about Jesus' substitutionary death on our behalf, our hearts will be filled with gratitude and the recognition of His abundant blessings. Ultimately, my prayer is that God's love for us will inspire us, revealed by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. So, I invite you all to journey with me for this holy season of Lent by bringing your undivided heart. *Shalom aleichem!* Peace be with you! Peace be upon you! Amen.