

Lenten Series: Spring Cleaning Your Spiritual Life

This series follows the Hebrew Scripture readings for the first five Sundays of Lent, and then the Gospel reading for Palm Sunday.

Lent comes from the Latin meaning “to lengthen” and refers to the lengthening of days in the springtime. In this Lenten series, one examines their own life for “spring cleaning” and spiritual practice.

1. Never Again
2. Renewed Trust
3. Ordering Your Life
4. Giving Over To God
5. Written On Your Heart
6. Take Up Your Cross

For this series, I like to include a bulletin insert, or simply pass out note cards and pens, and give space during the sermon time to reflect and journal (there is a journaling exercise for each one). Congregants can collect the inserts or notecards for a Lenten journal.

I also like to do a candle-lighting during Lent, as we do for Advent, this time preparing us for Easter. I usually buy six white pillar candles and light one each Sunday, then use it in the Tenebrae service on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday (each candle can represent two of the disciples). I have other sample readings for Lenten candle lighting liturgies, but for this one, you can simply light the candle during the Scripture reading, as a reminder of the light of God’s covenant, a light that continuously shines.

Week One: Never Again

Genesis 9:8-17

God promises through the sign of the rainbow to “never again” destroy the earth by flood. When God sets the bow in sky, God is setting down the weapon of destruction, putting it to rest. What is it in your life that is destructive and needs to be put to rest? What is harmful in your life that you need to say “never again” to?

Practice: Journal about the stuff that is harmful in your life. Maybe there is more than one thing, and at this time, you can’t put it all to rest, but what is one thing you want to say never again to. Possible suggestions: negative thinking, biting one’s nails or another habit, or maybe it’s something greater, such as fear of commitment, fear of rejection, etc.

As you pray this week, remember the rainbow. Remember God’s covenant. Remember God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Week Two: Renewed Trust

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, after they have grown old, far beyond the years of having children. God had promised them a child a long time ago, and continued to make this promise, but it took a long time to fulfill. They struggled along the way, and while they waited they grew impatient. God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah was that they would be the ancestors of a multitude of nations. But they only had one son. They didn't see the true fulfillment of the covenant in their lifetime—they saw only a glimpse, in the birth of their son. Sometimes our own trust in God fails, as we wait for fulfillment or satisfaction—or even simply rest from the weariness at times. Where do you see hope? Where do you still find courage to trust? Where is God calling you to have renewed trust?

Practice: Journal about your own struggles with trust. Where is trusting God difficult in your life? What do you need from God to help you renew your trust?

As you pray this week, pray for God to renew your trust. Pray for the courage to take the leap of faith, and to put your trust in God.

Week Three: Ordering Your Life

Exodus 20:1-17

God gave Moses and the people the Ten Commandments, a new way to live as a community wandering in the desert. Remember, these people had never been a nation before; they had simply been a large family. Now things had changed, and they were no longer under the oppressive rule of Egypt, but had no way of knowing how to live in the world without conforming to others around them. God gave the commandments as a way of knowing the best ways to live, a way of ordering their life. We place high priority on these ten, but there are other commandments in the scriptures, other ordinances and statutes. But these ten are about living with God, and living with others. What is important in your life? What do you prioritize? What is in order in your life, and where does your life need order?

Practice: Journal about your priorities in your life. They may be goals that you have personally, or they may be related to what is important, such as family and friends. How do you order your life?

As you pray this week, ask God to keep your order of life on your heart, so that you might prioritize the people and things that have value and meaning for you, and let go of things that aren't as important.

Week Four: Giving Over to God

Numbers 24:1-9

The people were complaining and bitter about where they were and what had happened to them, forgetting about what God had done for them. Their gaze was to the ground, and snakes appeared that were poisonous and bit them. But when they lifted their gaze to the serpent on the staff, they were saved. What are the "snakes" that cause us to look down, that keep us bitter in our own life? What are the things that might cause us to bite others? What kind of poison spreads in us when we only look down?

Practice: Journal about something that maybe you can't change—something you are bitter about? Maybe it's a broken relationship, or something that happened to you in the past, or the way you were treated at a job. What is it that acts like poison in your life, that you need to give over to God? As you pray this week, ask God for healing from the bitterness. Ask God to help you lift your gaze, to see the world around you and how much bigger the universe is. Ask God to help you give over your bitterness.

Week Five: Written On Your Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34

God has written a new covenant on the hearts of the people. God has written a new covenant in us, one that we cannot break, and that is God's love. As Christians, we know this love through Jesus Christ, in his willingness to die for us, and in his rising to eternal life and love. What is it that God is writing on your heart? What is it that God wants you to know? How do you know God's love? How do you know God's presence?

Practice: Write a love letter to yourself from God. Open your heart in prayer, and ask God for the words that you need to read. Write down what comes to your heart. Write what God is speaking to you. As you pray this week, remember that God loves you madly. God knows you and loves you, and nothing can ever take that away.

Week Six: Take Up Your Cross

Mark 14:1-15:47 (or Mark 14:27-31, 66-72)

Peter declared that even if it meant death, he would go with Jesus; and yet, only a short while later, he denied he ever knew him. We make bold resolutions and promises to change our lives, but often slip back into our old ways without even realizing it. What does it take for us to change our lives? What do we need to put to death in our lives that holds us back? How do we take up the cross and follow Jesus?

Practice: Draw a shape of a cross in your journal. This week, when you notice something holding you back—fear, disillusionment, hopelessness, despair, envy—add it to your cross. Know that Christ knows the pain you feel, the places of despair and suffering. Know that Christ knows it all, and still, loves you deeply.

As you pray this week, remember God's great love through Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus' love for all, including his love for Peter, who just couldn't follow through, and even Judas, who betrayed him. Still, Christ loved him, and welcomed him to the table, and Christ's love can transform and change us. Christ never gives up hope in us.