

February 2010



## **MERRIMON MEANDERINGS**

### **Monthly Newsletter of the Merrimon United Methodist Church**

#### **From Your Pastor:**

Not quite 2 1/2 years ago, I answered a request from District Superintendent Dennis Godwin and a call from God – and came to be your Pastor. Unfortunately, some did not think it was the work of God and left the fold. For them, I regret that they did not give all of us an opportunity to be in ministry together.

For almost a year, I have realized that I am having some difficulties with my stamina and becoming concerned about some other things. I feel that I have let some things “slide” and have not been fully engaged as a Pastor should be. For that, I offer you my apologies.

After much prayerful thought, I have decided that it is time for me to retire “again” – to give me time to take care of myself – and to have opportunities to spend more time with my children. I am fortunate to be able to visit fairly often with my daughter Larissa in Durham. However, I usually see my son Brian only 3 times a year since he lives in Charlotte and working hours do not allow him and his wife Rachel to travel.

I have been in conversation with our DS for several months. He will be in touch with Carol Smith, our PPR Chair, in the near future. Unfortunately, Dennis does not have a long list from which to draw for appointments this year. So, I ask that you be much in prayer for him and whomever God has decided needs to come here.

It seems odd that shortly after my retirement, I sat in my yard, looked across the river and said, “Lord, I know that you are not through with me. What is it you want me to do?” Little did I know that I was looking at the area where God intended me to come.

My time with you has been most special for me – and I hope it has been good for you as I have attempted to preach sermons that would cause you to think and ask questions about your relationship with God – and allow that relationship become deeper and more meaningful.

It is my prayer that in the months we have remaining to be together, that I might continue challenging you and you keep me “on my toes” as your Pastor. I will be with you until the latter part of June.

I thank you for the opportunities in which you have allowed me to be your Pastor and I thank you for the many ways each of you have touched my life. I give God thanksgiving for this time of serving the Risen Christ with you.

Let us be in prayer for our DS, our Bishop & Cabinet, for our church, and for the one whom God will send to you.

Peace & love –  
Peg

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## **Vacation Bible School for 2010!**

This year we will walk in the footsteps of Paul all around the Mediterranean Sea - from Greece to Rome! VBS will be Tuesday through Saturday's 4th of July parade. That's June 29-July 3!! We begin at 9am and finish up at noon. Save the dates!!

I'm looking for good Greek and Italian snacks too!!

## **Merrimon Meanderings**

Published on the first of the month by the  
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part of the second major grouping of Christian festivals and sacred time that includes Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost.

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some churches today still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food. Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities. Most Christian churches that observe Lent at all focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God's grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.

## ***Mardi Gras or Carnival***

**Carnival**, which comes from a Latin phrase meaning "removal of meat," is the three day period preceding the beginning of Lent, the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday immediately before **Ash Wednesday**, which is the first day of the Lenten Season (some traditions count Carnival as the entire period of time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday). The three days before Ash Wednesday are also known as **Shrovetide** ("shrove" is an Old English word meaning "to repent"). The Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday is called **Shrove Tuesday**, or is more popularly known by the French term **Mardi Gras**, meaning "Fat Tuesday," contrasting to the fasting during Lent. The entire three day period has now come to be known in many areas as Mardi Gras.

Carnival or Mardi Gras is usually a period of celebration, originally a festival before the fasting during the season of Lent. Now it is celebrated in many places with parades, costumes, dancing, and music. Many Christians' discomfort with Lent originates with a distaste for Mardi Gras. In some cultures, especially the Portuguese culture of Brazil, the French culture of Louisiana, and some of the Caribbean cultures such as Trinidad, it has tended to take on the excesses of wild and drunken revelry. There has been some attempt in recent years to change this aspect of the season, such as using Brazilian Carnival parades to focus on national and cultural history. Many churches now observe Mardi Gras with a church pancake breakfast or other church meal, eating together as a community before the symbolic fasting of Lent begins.

## ***Ash Wednesday***

**Ash Wednesday**, the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the Season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. (See Reflections on Ash Wednesday). Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian.

In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday. Ashes became symbolic of that attitude of penitence reflected in the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, NRSV).

## ***Colors and Symbols of Lent***

The color used in the sanctuary for most of Lent is purple, red violet, or dark violet (see Colors of the Church Year). These colors symbolize both the pain and suffering leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus as well as the suffering of humanity and the world under sin. But purple is also the color of royalty, and so anticipates through the suffering and

death of Jesus the coming resurrection and hope of newness that will be celebrated in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Some churches use grey for Ash Wednesday or for the entire season of Lent, or for special days of fasting and prayer. Gray is the color of ashes, and therefore a biblical symbol of mourning and repentance. The decorations for the sanctuary during Lent should reflect this mood of penitence and reflection. Some Anglican churches use unbleached muslin, which can range from white to beige, with accents in red or black for Lent to symbolize this same spirit of penitence.

Some churches avoid the use of any flowers in the sanctuary during Lent, using various dried arrangements. This can be especially effective if a flowering cross is used for Easter. Other churches use arrangements of rocks or symbols associated with the Gospel readings for the six Sundays in Lent.

Some church traditions change the sanctuary colors to red for Maundy Thursday, a symbol of the disciples and through them the community of the church. Since Eucharist or communion is often observed on Maundy Thursday in the context of Passover, the emphasis is on the gathered community in the presence of Jesus the Christ.

Traditionally, the sanctuary colors of Good Friday and Holy Saturday are black, the only days of the Church Year that black is used. It symbolizes the darkness brought into the world by sin. It also symbolizes death, not only the death of Jesus but the death of the whole world under the burden of sin. In this sense, it also represents the hopelessness and the endings that come as human beings try to make their own way in the world without God (see The Days of Holy Week). Black is always replaced by white before sunrise of Easter Sunday.

## ***The Journey of Lent***

There are many ways for a congregation to mark the journey of Lent. Of course, beginning with a service of worship for Ash Wednesday is always appropriate (see Ash Wednesday: A Service of Worship). During Lent, one of the most effective visual reminders of the season that can be expanded in many variations is to use a rough wooden cross as a focal point in the sanctuary. The type of cross and how it is constructed will depend on exactly how it will be used. The cross is usually erected in the Sanctuary on Ash Wednesday as a visible symbol of the beginning of Lent. It is usually draped in black on Good Friday. The same cross can also become a part of the congregation's Easter celebration as it is then draped in white or gold, or covered with flowers (see The Flowering Cross).

One effective way to make use of the cross is to use it as a Prayer Cross during Lent. A hammer, square nails, and small pieces of paper are made available near the cross. At a designated time of prayer during the Sundays in Lent, or beginning with Ash Wednesday, people are invited to write their prayer requests on the paper, and then nail them to the cross. The quiet time of prayer with only the sounds of the hammer striking the nails can be a moving time for reflection on the meaning of Lent, and a powerful call to prayer. The prayer requests can be removed and burned as part of a Tenebrae or Stations of the Cross service during Holy Week to symbolize releasing the needs to God.

Some churches have a special time of prayer or meditation one night of each week during Lent. Often Catholic and high church traditions pray the Stations of the Cross (see The Fourteen Stations of the Cross). Some Protestant churches have a special series of weekly Bible studies followed by a time of meditation and prayer. Often, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, the prayer time is followed by a simple meal of soup and bread to symbolize the penitence of the Season.

## ***Reflections on Lent***

We enjoy celebrating Palm Sunday. The children get to make paper palm branches and for many it is one of the few times they get to take an active role in "big church." We wave the palm branches and celebrate. And we all love Easter Sunday! It is a happy time, with flowers, new clothes, and the expectation of Spring in the air.

But it is too easy and promotes too cheap a grace to focus only on the high points of Palm Sunday and Easter without walking with Jesus through the darkness of Good Friday, a journey that begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent is a way to place ourselves before God humbled, bringing in our hands no price whereby we can ourselves purchase our salvation. It is a way to confess our total inadequacy before God, to strip ourselves bare of all pretenses to righteousness, to come before God in dust and ashes. It is a way to empty ourselves of our false pride, of our rationalizations that prevent us from seeing ourselves as needy creatures, of our "perfectionist" tendencies that blind us to the beam in our own eyes.

Through prayer that gives up self, we seek to open ourselves up before God, and to hear anew the call "Come unto me!" We seek to recognize and respond afresh to God's presence in our lives and in our world. We seek to place our needs, our fears, our failures, our hopes, our very lives in God's hands, again. And we seek by abandoning ourselves in Jesus' death to recognize again who God is, to allow His transforming grace to work in us once more, and to come to worship Him on Easter Sunday with a fresh victory and hope that goes beyond the new clothes, the Spring flowers, the happy music.

But it begins in ashes. And it journeys through darkness. It is a spiritual pilgrimage that I am convinced we must make one way or the other for genuine spiritual renewal to come. I have heard the passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14 quoted a lot: ". . .if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This usually is quoted in the context of wanting revival or renewal in the church, and the prayer is interpreted as intercessory prayer for others. But a careful reading of the passage will reveal that the prayer that is called for here is not intercessory prayer for *others*; it is penitential prayer for the faith community, for **us**. It is not to call for others to repent; it is a call for **us**, God's people, to repent. It is **our** land that needs healed, it is **our** wicked ways from which we need to turn, **we** are the ones who need to seek God's face.

Perhaps during the Lenten season we should stop praying for others as if we were virtuous enough to do so. Perhaps we should take off our righteous robes just long enough during these 40 days to put ashes on our own heads, to come before God with a new humility that is willing to confess, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Maybe we should be willing to prostrate ourselves before God and plead, "Lord, in my hand no price I bring; simply to the cross I cling." That might put us in a position to hear God in ways that we have not heard Him in a long time. And it may be the beginning of a healing for which we have so longed.

O Lord, begin with me. Here. Now.

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## **Why some churches don't observe Lent?**

**Lent began in the apostolic era and was universal in the ancient church. For this reason, Lent is observed by the various Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican denominations, by Roman Catholics, and by Eastern Orthodox Churches.**

**It is much easier to explain who stopped observing it and why.**

**In the 16th century, many Calvinists and Anabaptists discarded all Christian holy days, on the theory that they were Roman innovations. That was their best information at the time, but today we know that they were wrong. In the late 19th century, ancient Christian documents came to light. The *Didache* from the first century, the *Apostolic Constitutions* from the third century, and the diaries of Egeria of the fourth century; all which give evidence of the Christian calendar and holy days. The *Didache* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* were written in the east, which denies it ever recognized the institution of the papacy. Egeria was a Spanish nun, but her writings also describe practices in the east. All of**

these documents came to light 300 years after it was too late for the groups who had already discarded Christian holy days.

In many cases, Rome was the *last* place to observe the holy days. For example, the idea of moving All Saints Day to November 1 did not reach Rome until 700 years after it originated in England, and the idea of celebrating Holy Week as Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, was quite elaborate in Jerusalem before the early fourth century but did not spread to Rome until the 11th century. Advent began in medieval Gaul and spread to Rome from there. Lent, on the other hand, appears to have originated in the apostolic age. The *Apostolic Constitutions* attribute the observance of Lent to an apostolic commandment. We can't verify that, but we also can't disprove it.

The Anabaptists gave rise to or influenced the Amish, the Mennonites, the Baptists, and the Plymouth Brethren. The Puritans, who were Calvinists, had similar views on worship, which is why they made Christmas illegal in Massachusetts at one time. (Some Mennonites, however, never rejected the Christian holy days.)

In the United States in the 19th century, the established denominations were slow to spread west of the Appalachians, which was the frontier at the time. The area was thinly populated and there were very few seminary-trained clergy. The lay people had been converted at camp meetings without any church background. They were influenced by the groups that had rejected Christian holy days, but frontier conditions were not conducive to structured liturgical worship anyway. They weren't aware of the Christian holy days, and they didn't have the equipment, the facilities, the education, the authorization, or the training to conduct liturgical worship. Therefore most of the religious groups that were formed in the United States in the 19th century do not have a custom of observing Lent. This environment had some influence on individual congregations in denominations that have historically observed the Christian holy days—so you will occasionally find a Methodist church that does not observe Lent.

Gradually, the holy days have returned to the churches that had lost them. The restoration quickly began with Easter. Christmas followed in the 19th century, and Advent and Holy Week became widespread among them in the 20th century. Lent is mounting a come-back in the 21st century.

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A voyaging ship was wrecked during a storm at sea! Only two of the men on it were able to swim to a small, deserted like island. The two survivors, not knowing what else to do, agreed that they had no other recourse but to pray to God. However, to find out whose prayer was more powerful, they agreed to divide the territory between them and stay on opposite sides of the island.

The first thing the first man prayed for was food. The next morning, the first man saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the land, and he was able to eat its fruit.

The other man's parcel of land remained barren.

After a week, the first man was lonely and he decided to pray for a wife. The next day, another ship was wrecked, and the only survivor was a woman who swam to his side of the land.

On the other side of the island, there was nothing. Soon the first man prayed for a house, clothes, more food. The next day, like magic, all of these were given to him.

However, the second man still had nothing.



he gave some to the dog.

When they were satisfied, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree.

'What do you call this place?' the traveler asked..

'This is Heaven,' he answered.

'Well, that's confusing,' the traveler said. 'The man down the road said that was Heaven, too.'

'Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell.'

'Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?

'No, we're just happy that they screen out the folks who would leave their best friends behind.' Soooo.....

Sometimes, we wonder why friends keep sending or forwarding jokes to us without writing a word. Maybe this will explain.

When you are very busy, but still want to keep in touch, guess what you do? You tell or forward jokes.

When you have nothing to say, but still want to keep contact, you forward jokes.

When you have something to say, but don't know what, and don't know how, you forward jokes.

Also to let you know that you are still remembered, you are still important, you are still cared for, guess what you get? A joke.

So, next time if you get a joke, don't think that you've been sent just another forwarded joke, but that you've been thought of today and your friend on the other end wanted to send you a smile.

You are welcome at my water bowl any time.

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