

The Service Of Diminishing Lights
A Worship Ceremony For Sundays In Lent
by Alexander H. Wales

Author's Preface

Here's something that might be useful in making your congregation's preparation for Lent more meaningful. The Service of Diminishing Lights can be used at the beginning or end of a worship service to put an emphasis on the weeks that rapidly move from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday morning. Like the Advent Wreath, the circle of gathering darkness created by the candles and the crown of thorns serves as a constant reminder of the role of human sin in bringing about the crucifixion and the need for Resurrection.

By participating in a weekly rite as a part of the worship experience, individuals can use the silent time available surrounding this service to contemplate their role in the Lenten story. Families, individuals, young and old can be used as participants in this service, as well as acolytes, church officers, and other worship leaders.

My thanks to the Worship Committee of First Presbyterian Church, Warrensburg, for suggesting the development of such a service and its involvement in creating the setting for the Good Friday service as well.

May your Lenten season lead you to an empty tomb and a chorus of Hallelujahs.

Peace,

Alexander H. Wales

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How To Use The Service

The Preparation

To use the material included in this service you will need:

A crown of thorns created from a handicrafts person in your church or purchased from a variety of sources, including flea markets and craft shows.

Seven candles and holders these may fit within or around the crown of thorns or may even be seven-tiered candelabra. Candle color is at your discretion. Perhaps that box of assorted leftover Advent candles might be used, or white tapers would be just as suitable. One large candle, the Christ Candle, should be designated to be the last candle extinguished. We have traditionally used the white candle from our Advent wreath.

A candle extinguisher either a snuffer that many homes have for general use or an acolyte staff. Blowing out a candle at the appropriate moment may not seem as worshipful, unless done with great care and dignity.

Candles should be lighted before or at the beginning of the worship service. When originally used, this service occurred just prior to the benediction at the conclusion of worship. Each week, the candle extinguished the week prior was covered and not lighted again, though it remained in the crown of thorns as a reminder of the passing weeks of Lent. This service could also be used at the beginning of worship to set a more somber, contemplative tone, or during a time of offering as a meditative setting for the giving and receiving of gifts.

On Good Friday, the crown of thorns with the Christ Candle in the center of the crown becomes the focal point of the worship experience. All candles except the Christ Candle are removed. As the service concludes, the Christ Candle is extinguished and the worshipers are left in total darkness for prayer and contemplation.

Using The Service Of Diminishing Lights

As noted above, the service may be placed at any time during a worship experience, although it may fit better at the beginning or end of worship. The printed material that follows is blocked so that more than one participant may be involved each week. Participants may read one block, the entire page, or several paragraphs, depending upon the manner you choose to use.

Ceremony For The First Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events that led Jesus to his crucifixion. He had come into the world to bring hope and light, but at every turn there were those who sought to extinguish that light. He offered healing and wisdom, yet his gifts were often rejected by those filled with hatred and fear.

We read in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke: Jesus went to his hometown, Nazareth, and on the Sabbath, he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim

liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed upon him, as he said to them, "This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read."

When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of town and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff but he walked through the middle of the crowd and went on his way.

Jesus had said, "A prophet is never welcomed in his hometown. " A little of the light which had come into the world was snuffed out by the people who watched Jesus grow up.

(Extinguish one of the candles in the circle of the crown of thorns.)

Ceremony For The Second Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events that led up to the crucifixion. Jesus had come to bring hope and light to the world, but at every step there were those who willingly tried to put out that light. He brought grace and forgiveness, but these gifts were often rejected by those filled with hatred and fear.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew in the twelfth chapter: It was the Sabbath, and Jesus went to a synagogue, where there was a man with a paralyzed hand. Some people were there who wanted to accuse Jesus of doing wrong, so they asked him, "Is it against our **law to heal on the Sabbath?**" Jesus answered, "What if one of you has a sheep and it falls into a deep hole on the Sabbath? Will you not take hold of it and lift it out? And a man is worth so much more than a sheep! So then, our Law does allow us to help someone on the Sabbath." Then Jesus said to the man with the paralyzed hand, "Stretch out your hand."

The man stretched out his hand, and it became well again, just like the other one. Then the Pharisees left and made plans to kill Jesus.

Even when Jesus was healing, there were those who could not accept the power and mercy of God. As the Pharisees left to make plans to kill Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, a little of the light which had come into the world was snuffed out by people Jesus had come to save.

(Extinguish one of the remaining candles in the crown of thorns.)

Ceremony For The Third Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events that led up to the crucifixion. Jesus had come to bring hope and light to the world, but at every step there were those who could not accept the power of that light. He brought grace and forgiveness, but these gifts were often rejected by those filled with great love for other things.

We read in the Gospel of Mark: As Jesus was going on his way, a man ran up, knelt before him and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked him. "No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: do not commit murder, do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; do not cheat; respect your father and mother."

"Teacher," said the man, "ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments."

Jesus looked straight at the man with love and said, "You need only one thing more. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then, come and follow me." When the man heard this, gloom spread over his face, and he went away sad, because he was very rich.

When Jesus spoke the truth, there were those who could not face its light, and they turned away. Every time one of these turned away, a little of the light that had come into the world was put out.

(Extinguish one of the remaining candles in the crown of thorns.)

Ceremony For The Fourth Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events that led up to the crucifixion. Jesus had come to bring hope and light to the world, but at every step there were those who could not accept the power of the light. He came to meet the people's needs, but there were those who misunderstood the kind of needs that Jesus meant to fill. Because he would not do what they wanted, they rejected him.

According to John, Jesus was teaching a large crowd who had followed him because they had seen his miracles of healing the sick. Jesus saw the large crowd of more than 5,000 men, and asked Philip, "Where can we buy enough food to feed all these people?"

Philip knew that they didn't have enough money to buy even a small amount for everyone. But Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "There is a small boy who has five loaves of barley bread and two fish, but they will certainly not be enough to feed all these people."

Jesus had the people sit, and then took the bread, gave thanks to God, and distributed it to the people. He did the same with the fish. Everyone had as much as they wanted, and when the disciples gathered what was left, they filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the barley loaves.

Seeing this miracle that Jesus had performed, the people there said, "Surely this is the Prophet who was to come into the world! " Jesus could sense that they were about to make him king by force, so he went off again to the hills to be by himself.

Jesus came into the world to change it, not to be made to fit into some mold that others felt was right. When Jesus refused to be what others wanted, they turned their backs on him, and a little of the light that had come into the world was put out.

(Extinguish one of the remaining candles in the crown of thorns.)

Ceremony For The Fifth Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events **that led up to the crucifixion**. Jesus had come into the world to bring hope and light, but at every step there were those who could not accept the power of that light. He came to create a new relationship between God and human beings, but there were those who had other ideas. Because he could not be manipulated, they sought to kill him.

In the Gospel of Matthew we read: When Jesus had finished teaching, he said to his disciples, "In two days, as you know, it will be the Passover Festival, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

The chief priests and the elders met together in the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest, and made plans to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death. "We must not do it during the festival," they said, "or the people will riot."

Then one of the twelve disciples the one named Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and asked, "What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?" They counted out thirty silver coins and gave them to him. From then on, Judas was looking for a good chance to hand Jesus over to them.

Betrayed by a kiss from a friend for thirty pieces of silver ... anyone could have been the one, Jesus came as the truth, but it was too brilliant for those who liked the darkness. As the small bag of coins was traded from hand to hand, a little of the light that had come into the world went out.

(Extinguish one of the remaining candles in the crown of thorns.)

Ceremony For The Sixth Sunday Of Lent

During Lent, we remember the events that led up to the crucifixion. Jesus had come to bring hope and light to the world, but at every step there were those who struggled with the consequences of that light. He came as a friend of sinners and many knew him, but even those who were close to him would often fail to be faithful. When he would depend on them the most they rejected him.

When Jesus and the disciples were at supper in the upper room, a discussion arose among the disciples about who was the most faithful disciple. Peter claimed that esteemed honor. But Jesus told them that the cup from which he was about to drink was too bitter for any of them to accept. One by one, each would forsake him.

Peter said, "I will not forsake you, Lord. I will follow you to the ends of the earth and suffer what you suffer." Jesus replied to him, "Yes, Peter, you will suffer what I suffer and more, but before the cock crows this morning, three times will you betray me."

After Jesus was arrested, Peter followed the crowd and warmed himself by a fire while Jesus was being questioned. As he sat there, a serving maid from the house saw him and said, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" Peter said, "No, I am not." Another heard him answer and said, "You are a Galilean. Surely you are one of his followers." Again Peter said that he did not know Jesus. A little while later, still another man came up to the fire and said, "Didn't I see you with this Jesus when he was teaching?" With anger in his voice, Peter said, "I told you. I never knew this man!" In the distance, a cock crowed. Peter glanced up and saw Jesus looking at him through the doorway. Peter turned away and ran from the courtyard, with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Even those who loved him most were unable to support him in his darkest hour. When they could have been there, they went into hiding, allowing Jesus to suffer and die alone. And as his friends abandoned him into the hands of his enemies, a little of the light that had come into the world went out.

(Extinguish the remaining candle in the crown of thorns.)