

Prayer: Please, Lord, keep me moving forward, keep me excited by life, and keep me on track so that at the end of the ups and downs of this earthly life-ride I may come to You face-to-Face, and enter with You into endless joys, excitements, and splendors beyond any possible human imagining. This I pray to You in fervent hope, deep trust, and joyous excitement! Amen.

Lent – Spiritual roller coaster
Today is the First Sunday In Lent.

Last week we transitioned from Epiphany which had an emphasis of how Christ and his teachings were revealed to the world. We have begun the season of Lent. This is the season of the church year that leads us into Easter. Lent brings us to Jesus' death and resurrection. For most of the Lenten season, the normal hymns are "Old Rugged Cross" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord". Lent is a roller coaster ride of emotions. During Lent we talk about what we are going to "give up". Typically, in Lent, we extinguish candles until the room is dark. The astonishing bombshell in the season of Lent comes at the end of the story...a dead Jesus comes back to life!

In Lent we look inward at our own spiritual lives, our own actions, possibly making corrections along the way and but hopefully accepting and taking on new challenges. Jesus presented the disciples with a set of challenges – recognize he will be going through a period of struggle, be rejected by the authorities, and ultimately be killed.

This week is a spiritual roller coast ride. We ascended the mountains with Christ in service with the Transfiguration on last Sunday only to be reminded of our own mortality on Ash Wed with Lent's beginning. It forces us to look at life differently and to shift gears, step back and examine ourselves. – we give up things but do more prayer, maybe participate in a different set of spiritual practices, and look at our relationships with others and how we can draw closer to God. Look outside to see more of ourselves – and more possibilities.

If you're like me you might be wondering why we've even embraced this journey of darkness.

Sure, Ash Wednesday we get: an annual reminder of our mortality seems appropriate in our often self-absorbed and "main-character-energy" filled lives. Why the other days, though? Why the long journey?

Darkness fatigue is a natural feeling during the season of Lent. We'd rather be people who walk in the light than in the dark. The reality is we're often never honest enough with ourselves to admit that life is never fully lived in the light.

Wars are being fought all over our world. Sickness and disease fill our lives and our communities. Disagreements over so many things tear us apart every day. Mental and physical health affect us like a roller coaster ride as we ride the hills up and down over and over again.

Even the moments of clarity when everything is going well and we can't think of a single dark thing affecting our personal lives, we know that the waves of darkness could be just a corner turn away.

The season of Lent reminds us of this reality. It reminds us that we live in a world that exists between the dark and the light, never fully falling into either. As Jesus trudges through a desert of darkness so, too, do we push through the sands of pain and grief.

The truth is that we can't fully understand the light of Easter if we don't first take the long journey through facing the realities of darkness. Jesus didn't just pop up alive, he had to face deeper darkness than we could ever imagine getting to resurrection day. So, too do we.

I truly love the season of Lent. I love the ups and downs, the uncertainty, the twists, the highs, and lows that make up the story of Jesus' life, and death, and life. You need to emotionally buckle up when we come to this liturgical season of Lent. The ride gets a little wild as we climb higher to jettison down to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the clearing of the Temple; children laughing and throwing palm branches; a mother crying as her son is taken away; a last meal with Jesus and his friends; and a betrayal at that same meal.

Death on a cross. Life from the tomb.

Are you ready? Are you prepared for this amazing season of Lent? The season filled with ashes and sackcloth and repentance and tragedy. The season filled with shouts of Hallelujah and meals of remembrance and washing of feet and rejoicing. A season of death. A season of life. Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Lent has a depressing element, but it doesn't have to end up that way and can be viewed in retrospect to be a fulfilling time of year. Paul wrote, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." We are reminded that while this is a season of suffering and ashes, God accompanies us in this process and that through Christ, God promises that sin, death, and destruction will not triumph in the end. We come out enriched and renewed only to enjoy the celebration of Easter even more.

Welcome, my brothers and sisters...to the season of Lent.