

**Ash Wednesday
February 25, 2009**

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Lent begins each year with a quiet invitation to repentance. It is an invitation to change something about ourselves. But it is a curious invitation. You have to remember that you do not have to change for God to love you. It's because God loves you that everything has to change.

Every Ash Wednesday begins with the words I used a few minutes ago: "Let us pray in quiet remembrance of our need for redemption." The whole Lenten journey really is that simple, that focused, that pointed. The next forty days offer an invitation to each one of us: an invitation to do three things: to be still, to pray, to repent (which means to turn ourselves around a bit). In short, Lent is an invitation to try to really believe the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's really all there is to it.

First, can you hear God saying to the whole community—to all Israel, to all the church, to you and me—be still. Shush! Be quiet. It's only forty days! Be still and know that I am your God.

Second, can you hear God saying to us all: pray. Just pray a bit. You don't need long formulas; you don't need song and dance; you don't need fancy prayers piled up to impress someone. You don't even need *learn* how

to pray. Just listen and *be* at prayer.

Mary Oliver has a poem called *Praying*. She says: just “pay attention, then patch a few words together and don’t try to make them elaborate, this isn’t a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.”

Thirdly, can you hear God inviting us to repent? Not to feel gloomy or sad; not to beat up on ourselves and pretend we’re the worst of sinners. That’s too easy; most of us can do that all the time—and frequently do. No, this is an invitation to real repentance. The word means to turn around—to turn around yourself a bit and look carefully at what you see there—inside yourself. To allow yourself to have a change of heart—a real *metanoia* (the Greek word from which the word “repent” derives)—is not as simple or straightforward as you may think. All sorts of things *can* get turned around.

To be quiet; to pray; to repent: three themes of Lent. In short, we are invited to believe the Good News—to really believe it as good news. This will be the prayer in a few minutes as we sign ourselves with ashes: Turn around; turn away from sin. Be faithful to the gospel. Believe in it. Remember: “You do not have to change for God to love you.” But because God does love you, everything needs to change. This is what Lent is about.