

From St. John Lutheran Church How have we observed Lent this year?

First, Lent is a special time for us. It is the 40 days before Easter (not including Sundays), and is a time for spiritual focus. We think about our spiritual state, about our own sins, how we have wandered off from God, and how we are called to return to our God. We "set our eyes on Jesus" thinking about how He has purchased and won us. And we have a place where lent is leading us -- the cross and the empty tomb.

This calls us back to some very basic things. But it is also very practical. There are times in life when we face trials and disappointments, when our lives are not happy and successful. But we know a Savior who went through spiritual trials.

When Jesus was on the cross He prayed, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me." When He bore the sin of the world He also bore judgment, separation from His Father, and being cast off and rejected. He has been there as far from the love of God as the whole complete total of the sins of the world could take Him. You cannot go farther than that. Everyone human being is included in the invitation and forgiveness Jesus brings. All are invited and all are welcome.

So how have we observed lent this year? We have been building "Cross Displays" at St. John. The crosses stand about 1 foot high and the objects on and around them remind us of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We started this in 2005 and were surprised by how many wanted them. One of our members ended up having to make 425 wooden crosses. This year with many using the crosses from last year he had to make another 150 or so.

The Objects:

A Bag of Dirt:

On Ash Wednesday (March 1) everybody who came to church received a little bag of dirt. The Youth Group put them together. It's a reminder that back in Genesis God said, "Dust you are and to dust shall you return." Since Adam and Eve we all die. But Jesus came to this world to share in our "dust-to-dust"ness. He was laid in the tomb. But He did something different with His "dust-to-dust" body. He rose from the dead, and changed our future. Because he has risen we will rise.

A Lamb:

On Wednesday (March 8) we had a guest. Bishop David Tswaedi from the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa visited. The object that evening was a lamb that the Women's Group had put together (425 were made). It reminded us of the sacrifices of the Old Testament, and how Jesus is the fulfillment of all they promised. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

A Piece of Coal:

On Wednesday (March 15) everyone got a piece of coal. Ron Rathert had gotten a bucket of coal and the Youth Group scrubbed it. It was to remind us of the prophets. In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah sees a vision of God and is commissioned as a prophet. Part of his commissioning was that an angel took a live coal from the altar, touched his lips with it, and

said "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." The altar points us to Jesus and His cross -- He is the sacrifice to take away our sin. The next thing he knows Isaiah is saying, "Here am I, send me!" He is a prophet because he is going to speak of Jesus and His cross. That is what a prophet does. And then we thought about the cross. On the cross Jesus spoke words of prophecy. He is the true Prophet, greater than all other prophets and different from them. When He speaks His words cause things to happen. On the cross he prayed "Father forgive them," and all of us were forgiven. He said, "It is finished," and judgment was finished.

A Crown of Thorns:

On Wednesday (March 22) everyone got a small crown of thorns. Henrietta Stallman made them last year from weeping willow branches. They remind us that Jesus is our king. King David wore a crown of gold and reigned in splendor. Jesus wore a different kind of crown. He is a different kind of king. He wins His kingdom by suffering for His people. He wins them by winning their hearts by His Gospel.

A Parchment and Nail:

On Wednesday (March 29) everyone got a piece of parchment with the letters INRI, and a nail to nail it to the cross. June James did the work to make these. The letters stand for the Latin words actually nailed to the cross above Jesus that mean "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." The written word reminded us of other words written long ago, by God Himself in tablets of stone -- the 10 Commandments. We have not lived up to them and are condemned. But Jesus took our guilt and the judgment of the Law on Himself. In the written word above Jesus there is a better word for us, a word of hope and life. He is the king of the Jews and of all mankind and rules in order to bring us to eternal life.

A Spear:

On Wednesday (April 5) everyone got a little spear. They were made by Henrietta Stallman. It reminded us of the Patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac. Abraham and Isaac were on Mount Moriah, later was known as Mount Zion or Mount Calvary. There Abraham took the knife to slay his son, but God called to him and told him to stop. There is only one Father who was to give His Son as a sacrifice on that mountain. That was to be God the Father who sent His Son Jesus. It is the eternal plan of salvation, from even before the foundation of the world. Abraham and Isaac have acted out the sacrifice but they are not the ones to actually do it. As Abraham looks around and sees the ram provided by God for the sacrifice he sees the promise of Jesus. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Like Isaac Jesus is brought to the mountain by His Father. He carries the wood. The blade is raised, but it has changed shape. It is the spear in the hands of the soldier, to pierce His side with the final wound.

Palm Sunday:

On Sunday (April 9) we celebrated Palm Sunday. And we had confirmation Sunday. Our 8th grade confirmands are presented in front of the congregation. They answer questions and recite Scripture for 45 minutes. Then at our 10:00 service they are given their personal confirmation verse and a blessing.

Hyssop:

On Thursday (April 13), Maundy Thursday, we will continue to build our "Cross Displays." We will share sprigs of Hyssop (still growing this Monday). They will remind us of the Passover in Egypt, where the blood of the Lamb marked the doors of the Israelites. His blood marks our lives. And He gives His blood to us in the Lord's Supper. So this is a special day for us also. Our Confirmands will celebrate their first communion.

Good Friday:

On Friday (April 14), Good Friday, we will have a Tenebrae service. Our service will follow the seven words from the cross; and will finish with something called the "Strepitus" the sound representing the sealing of the tomb.

A Rainbow Ribbon:

On Easter (April 16) we will have services at 6:00, 7:45 and 10:00. We will also finish our "Cross Displays" with a rainbow patterned ribbon, made by our Women's Group. Noah received a promise from God, and was brought through the flood and into new life. We have received a much greater promise and been brought into new life by the resurrection of Jesus. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!

We love to share the Gospel. It is the best thing and brings the most joy of anything we could possibly do.

Pastor Mark Willig