

On this day the Christian Church shifts gears from the bright star in the east and E's emphasis of making the light of Christ manifest to the inward and reflective season of Lent, the forty-day pilgrimage to the holy place of the cross and empty tomb.

This season has a certain devotional intensity to it – as one takes up the spiritual disciplines of: prayer + fasting + giving of offerings + acts of love.

Yet the days are not to be of overbearing heaviness – because we know the outcome! We are not to assume a seasonal piety, a grim or showy posture. Isn't that precisely what Jesus teaches against (in the gospel reading)?

To be sure we can use Lent as time to re-call and review and refocus our lives and turn again to the light of Christ set within us.

In the first reading the prophet Joel speaks of "rending your heart, not your clothing." In the Psalm we heard and said, "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." There is something about opening one's heart.

Henri Nouwen in *With Burning Hearts* reflects on this notion by way of the image of a garden or field. If the ground is hard and smooth water cannot penetrate the soil and will simply run off. But when the soil is broken and exposed the water can sink in to refresh and nourish.

During this season we can break up the hard top soil of our hearts and minds and take in, drink in, the water of God's mercy, forgiveness and grace, to renew and refresh and restore our lives.

Today we are living with a tragic power outage in Palo Alto, in a time of two wars, of earthquakes, and with far too many hungry and homeless people. We must also include these frightening concerns as part of the hard soil needing to be broken and exposed so that the healing grace of God can renew.

As Lenten People let us remember that our **prayers** must include all persons because Christ has come for all, our **fasting** a reminder of Christ's self-giving love for all, our **offerings** a memorial of his grace for all.

So we begin this Lenten journey with a sign of the cross on our foreheads. May the Holy Spirit till the soil of our hearts and minds, turning us to God, who is faithful and abounding in steadfast love, so that we may live again.

May we experience the blessings of this season from these ashes to the Easter feast of joy. Amen.