

Lenten Observances March 2010

We are entering the season of Lent this Wednesday with Christians from around the world. The term Lent comes from the English word *Lenten* which in turn comes from the English word *lengthen*, referring to the season of the lengthening of the days. Ash Wednesday is the first day in the Lenten season, and has traditionally been a day of repentance, of remorse for sin symbolized by the imposition of ashes, but in that imposition is the sign of hope, for the ashes are imposed in the sign of the cross—the means by which our sins were atoned for. During this season we think especially about discarding the old ways that have plagued us and putting on the new life that Christ has for us.

The services and this season are a means to remind us of our need for repentance and change, but change must come from within, from the heart. Without a change of heart we are merely dressing over old wounds that will fester and become infected. A story comes to mind that reminds me of this truth.

When Ole quit farming and moved, he discovered he was the only Lutheran in his new town of all Catholics. That was okay, but the neighbors had a problem with his barbecuing beef every Friday. They were not allowed to eat red meat on Fridays, but the tempting aroma was getting the best of them. Beside themselves, they got together and confronted Ole.

"Ole," they said, "since you are the only Lutheran in this whole town and there's not a Lutheran church for many miles, we think you should join our church and become a Catholic." Ole thought about it for a minute and decided they were right. Ole talked to the priest, and they arranged it.

The big day came, and the priest had Ole kneel. He put his hand on Ole's head and said, "Ole, you were born a Lutheran, you were raised a Lutheran, and now," he said as he sprinkled some incense over Ole's head, "you are a Catholic!"

Both Ole and the neighbors were happy. But the following Friday evening, the aroma of grilled beef still wafted from Ole's yard. The neighbors went to talk to him about this, and as they approached the fence they heard Ole saying something strangely familiar to the steak: "You were born a beef, you were raised a beef, and now" he said as he sprinkled salt over the meat, "you are a fish!"

A few ashes on the forehead or water over the entire body will not change us. Change comes from the Spirit of God fashioning a submissive will for the glory of God. I encourage you to use this season to submit to God more fully in your daily lives.