



February 14, 2024
A Note from Pastor Jon

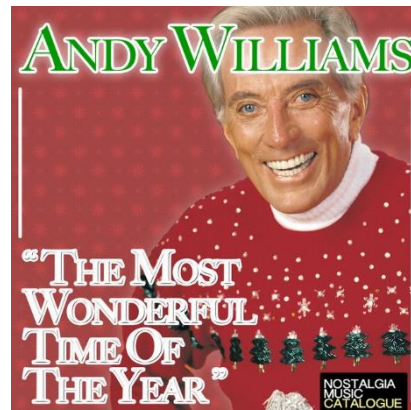
Dear Friends,

It's the most wonderful time of the year...

One of my favorite songs of the Christmas season is the Andy Williams's classic, "It's The Most Wonderful Time of The Year." I just love that song, and I get all kinds of giddy when I hear the opening notes on the radio.

That song took on a different meaning for me in college as I was about to begin my sophomore year at Carson-Newman, when Staples (the office supply store) released a Back-to-School commercial in August using the song. You can watch that funny clip here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz56prGBiS8>



I even find myself singing it to my own kids every August. They don't appreciate it nearly as much as I do (my singing voice or the sentiment of it all).



While I really do LOVE the Christmas and Advent Season, and I am grateful to see my kids return to their school year every August, in more recent years, I have come to think of Lent as The Most Wonderful Time of The Year.

On February 14 we join with Christians all around the world in the liturgical season of Lent, which starts today on Ash Wednesday.

For those like me who didn't grow up in churches that practiced the rhythms of the liturgical year, Lent is the 40 days leading up to Resurrection (Easter) Sunday.

Lent has its origins as early as the fourth century. By the year 325 there are already official church writings about this season. While early practices varied in terms of length of time, gradually Christian communities settled on the 40 days to imitate Jesus fasting in the wilderness, as told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The season also served as a time for Christians to prepare themselves spiritually for celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. How the season is observed has evolved from primarily a season of fasting to include various spiritual practices.

Yet for more than 1700 years, **the core purpose of the Lenten season is to intentionally make space for individual and communal practices that draw us into a closer relationship with God and others.**

Can you begin to see why I say it is the most wonderful time of the year?

It's not that Advent and Christmas aren't wonderful; they are just different.

Lent provides more than six weeks — in a season that is not already filled with so many other events, distractions, commercialization, glitz, and glamor — to foster space in my life and our shared lives together to draw closer to God.

While over the years I find myself engaging in spiritual practices all through the year, it is in this season when I have the gift of a set-apart time to invite others in the Christian community to join alongside.

As I said earlier, I did NOT grow up with the practices of Lent. It just felt like POOF, it's Easter.

I was in college when I came to learn about Lent and began to observe this season, albeit without really engaging any practices. After a year or two, Lent quickly became sort of a side joke of what someone was giving up for the season, which seemed to me to be things of little consequence, such as chocolate, fast food, pop, etc.

I again found little importance in Lent or need for it and didn't engage in the season. It would be several years before I would give Lent another chance and discover just how wonderful this time of year truly can become.

I can't remember exactly when or why, but I was reading about the early church and some of its earliest leaders. I came across two individuals who lived at the same time and contributed writings for the early church, John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo. Both men wrote about Lent, not as a time of giving up or taking on, but as a season of intention



to pray, examine ourselves, renew our spiritual lives, and create space for spiritual growth to occur.

What can be more wonderful in our lives as followers of Jesus than an intentional season of prayer, reflection, renewal, and growth?

I admit these days as a pastor the season can be a bit more difficult. My focus is split between my own growth and renewal and also helping to foster and lead spaces for others to grow. While difficult, I find this season is no less fulfilling or wonderful. I love being in community with others and watching and listening as others begin to share and reveal their own growth, ask their questions, express their doubts, and experience encounters with God and others.

I am excited that beginning this Sunday we will be focusing upon Romans chapter 8 as our church-wide theme for Lent. Romans 8 is a cornerstone of Christian theology. I think you will find this chapter to be one that resonates deeply with the vision of our brave, inclusive, diverse community that is seeking to learn and grow together and share in God's unconditional love for all people. You will hear themes such as liberation from bondage, life in the Spirit, and the collective journey of creation towards redemption.



So in 2024, Year 3 of the Great Story: The Church, as we navigate through Lent, each week will be an invitation for us to reflect on our communal struggles against sin, the transformative power of the Spirit in our midst, and the profound assurance of God's inclusive, unending, and unconditional love.

I hope you will find and engage in spaces this season to pray, to reflect, to self-examine, to renew, and to foster space for spiritual growth in your life and embrace God's unconditional love for you.

If you're not sure where to start, I'll encourage you to join one of our Lent classes at HUMC (<https://hilliardumc.org/grow/adults/learning-opportunities/#lent>).

I hope that if you don't already, you too will find this season to be the most wonderful time of the year.

Pastor Jon



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