

## Spiritual Preparations

A **prayerful reading of Scripture** is a way of entering into a conversation with God, and allowing God to be the first speaker. So often our prayers are a conversation in which we are the only speakers and God does all the listening. This can be our default mode of conversation with God even during a worship service. The next time you attend a worship service pay attention to the "Prayers of Confession" or "Prayers of the People," or even the "Proclamation of the Word," and compare the amount of time spent we do the talking compared to the amount of time we spend listening. As you move through these 40 days of spiritual preparation for the solemn assembly, use the suggested Scripture texts as a tool for listening. Pay attention to the words and images that come to you through the text and allow yourself to feel, and then express your response to God.

Find a place where you can sit comfortably and where you will not be disturbed for a period of about 20 minutes. Open your Bible to the selected passage. Before you read the passage, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to clear your head and release any tension in your body. Whisper a short prayer for illumination such as one of those found in the *Book of Common Worship* (see "Prayers for Illumination," Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1993, p 90). :

*God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

After the prayer, read the Scripture for the day at least twice, but perhaps three or four times. Simply respond to the reading as the Spirit leads you. If this way of reading Scripture is new to you, then you may find it helpful to use the questions for reflection that accompany each day's reading. You may also want to keep a journal so that you can look back over these 40 days of prayer and remember what you learned from it. After spending time in prayer each day write in your journal a response to these two questions: What did you hear? How did you respond?

### 40 Days Prior

Read Psalm 139. In an attitude of prayer read through the entire psalm a second time. Ask, "What does it mean to allow God to search one's heart?" Consider the ways in which you are open to the Spirit's scrutiny and the ways in which you resist the Spirit.

### 33 Days Prior

Read Mark 12:28 - 31. In an attitude of prayer read through the gospel passage a second time. What are the things that really matter in your life? How does your attitude toward God stand in comparison?

### 26 Days Prior

Read Joel 2:12 - 16. Read the passage very slowly. As you read, meditate on each phrase. The prophet is calling God's people to fervent prayer during a time of crisis. The people are tempted to blame God (and their godless neighbors) for their troubles, but Joel tells them to quit whining and take a hard look at themselves. He views the crisis as an opportunity for Israel to reorient their lives toward God. What application of Joel's exhortation can we make for our own congregation(s)?

### 19 Days Prior

Read Psalm 32. Read the psalm a second time. What joy do you find in repentance? What happiness do you find in forgiveness? If you find no delight in repentance or forgiveness, then consider this: what do you suppose the writer of Psalm 32 experienced that makes his situation different from yours?

### 12 Days Prior

Read Matthew 6:16 - 18. Prayerfully consider what type of fast you would be willing to practice. How would this fast enrich the preparations you are making for the solemn assembly? In what ways might fasting distract you from a meaningful time of preparation?

### Five Days Prior

Read Matthew 11:28-30. Read the passage out loud. Listen to the passage as though Jesus were standing in the pulpit of your church on Sunday morning and issuing the invitation to your congregation (or presbytery). What burdens is your congregation growing weary of carrying? What might it look like for your congregation to put on the "yoke" of Christ? What is it that Jesus wants us to "learn" from him?

### Four Days Prior

Read Revelation 3. Because we do not often read from Revelation, you would probably find it instructive to read the chapter from three or four different versions of the New Testament. One version that is especially helpful in its use of contemporary language is *The Message*. When John addresses the churches of Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and Thyatira he speaks God's message, accusing each church of neglecting or perverting Christian worship in some way. How is your congregation guilty of these or some similar dysfunction with regards to worship? How might the upcoming solemn assembly be used as an opportunity to reorient your worship in ways that honor God?

If you do not own a copy of *The Message*, then you can access it online through a number of Bible search engines such as Bible Gateway. Select "passage lookup" from the menu bar. Type "Revelation 3" in the box that says "enter passage," and select "The Message" from the drop down menu in the "Select version(s)" box.

### Three Days Prior

Read Ephesians 4:1 - 32. As you read the passage a second time, think about all those who will worship alongside you at tomorrow's solemn assembly. What springs up in you as you call to mind various ones be they "friends" or "enemies"? If you were to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (vs. 4), what would you need to do that you haven't yet done?

### **Two Days Prior**

Read Philippians 2:1 - 11. Read it a second time out loud. Why do we call Jesus "Lord"? In light of Christ's self-emptying, why is a solemn assembly important? What do you hope to get out of the service?

### **One Day Prior**

Read Psalm 51. Read it again, more slowly than you did the first time. What verse, or part of a verse, best matches your expectations for the up-coming solemn assembly. Meditate on the verse or phrase you've identified. Listen to the Spirit through these words of Scripture.

See Heart Rest for other resources for spiritual preparation.

<http://www.heartrest.org/DailyMediationGuide.html>