I’ve never been more excited about a Lenten season than this one. We will be looking at three spiritual disciplines that are crucial for any one of us to have a genuine relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ. They are disciplines that we haven’t just made up out of the blue, but they are disciplines that we are told in Scripture to follow. They are prayer, fasting, and reading of Scripture. We are going to look at three weeks of prayer, one week of fasting, and one week of Scripture where we will be reading through the Scripture, front to back, just like we did last year from beginning to end.

Today starts it all off, we find ourselves embarking on a journey together that begins with the ashes and ends with the crucifixion. That is the end result of Lent. The history of lent is fascinating. It begin in the early Christian community as a time of preparation and very intense studying by the cathechists, those studying to become members of the community, before they would be baptized and join the church. They had to prepare themselves, individually for repentance. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem of the early church told those under his care about to be baptized that they had 40 days for repentance. It was a time of personal preparation. Ash Wednesday is recognized to have started around the 11th century. In 1662 in the first recorded service of Ash Wednesday it was called “A commination, or denouncing of God’s anger and judgments upon sinners.” It was very much geared toward the individual.

Even today in lent it is the individual who comes forward to receive the ashes, it is the individual who contemplates their sin in the face of the very powerful and real symbol of the ashes placed on their foreheads as we are marked as sinners for all to see.

Psalm 51 is very much of an individualistic Psalm. David cries out for a clean heart to be created in him and a right spirit placed in him individually. He realizes that God doesn’t want to see show of piety or a display of false religion, but rather he needs to present to God a broken spirit and a contrite heart if he is going to be receiving a clean heart and a right spirit. What we do, and this goes to discipline, has much to say with how our relationship with God is.

This is what Jesus addresses in our Luke Scripture. By now this very famous verse of where your treasure is, there your heart will be also, at first blush seems to be a stewardship sermon. You know the cliché if you want to know where a person’s devotion is then look at their check book. See how much they spend on leisure, or on a vacation and then see how much they give to the church. That is not at all what Jesus is addressing here. He is taking this theme from Psalm 51 that we recognize that it is God who is able to renew our heart and give us a new spirit so we as individuals recognize the need for transformation and ask that God do just that.

But it does take something from us to be able to do this. When we hear about prayer in our disciplines sermons, then we will have to pray in order for it to be effective and in order for it to make sense. When we hear about fasting we have to fast in order to understand the power of fasting. When we are taught about reading Scripture then we have to read Scripture in order for Scripture to be a guide to our life and a resource to our path.

Our treasures on this world tend to take up all of our time and we easily push out those disciplines that are important for us in order to make room for others that take us down a wrong path. I used to run quite a bit when I was in Florida. One of my favorite places to run was in the Ravine Gardens which was in town and it was a State Park. More often than not I would take one of the inside paths which literally paralleled a golf course. As I would run in my shorts I would see a golf ball and I would stop and pick it up and put it in my pocket, and then another and another, until by the time I was one way around my shorts would be falling off, it would have taken me 5 times longer than it should have, I was exhausted and I completely missed the purpose of my run in the first place.

If our life is a race then we have to set our goals before us and the goal has to be the treasure of eternal life in Jesus Christ, that is a reward that does not rust or fade. But in order to reach that goal we have to have discipline and we have to establish ways in which we can run our race, or live our life, so that we constantly remain in our relationship with our Savior. That way the treasure in our life never sways from Christ.

Today is our first day of lent. This Ash Wednesday is the beginning of another journey that we are going to embark together on, it is our second. In this second Lenten season it seems as if we are becoming more and more aware of the suffering that many among us are undergoing this season.

In Hebrews we read that the reason we are able to understand and love our Savior is that he was tempted in every way that we were and yet he did not sin. When we have our wilderness experiences as individuals: our marriage has fallen apart and there is nobody now to turn to and talk to, we have just moved to a new community and we feel isolated, the doctor has just informed us that there is something that he doesn’t like and could we come back in, cancer has struck our spouse and we don’t know how much longer they will be around.

We all go through wilderness experiences where suffering is as real a part of our life as the hunger that we feel when we haven’t eaten in days. The question is how do we deal with that suffering. Do we see the suffering as an unfair recompense for sins that we have not committed. Do we see our suffering as a rightful punishment for our sin. Or do we recognize it as a part of our broken life that we cannot identify as having a reason and yet know that it is something that we can use to grow and deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul in II Corinthians states “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” As contradictory as it may seem God’s power is made perfect in our weakness, because it is then that we realize that we are not able to do it on our own, but rather that only with the power and grace of God go I.

This Lenten season is going to be a powerful one if you are willing to go on the entire journey with us through prayer, fasting, and the reading of Scripture. It will allow us to remember, and with God’s help, hold onto that which is truly our treasure, our relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.