



## Marked

March 6, 2019

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My daughter's friend is an avid Harry Potter fan. In true wizarding fashion, he owns eleven wands and an invisibility cloak. He knows all the characters from the books and can quote them from their movie lines. Several months ago, while playing recreational hockey, he took a puck to the face. My daughter drove him to the emergency room, as he pressed a bloody towel on his head. Nineteen stitches later, he was left with a gruesome wound. To his delight, however, it left a jagged, lightning bolt scar on his forehead – just like Harry Potter himself!

Some of us will mark our foreheads with ashes today. The sign of the cross smudged on our faces acknowledges the beginning of our Lenten journey toward Jesus' death, burial, and the Easter resurrection.

The cross lets all who encounter us know that we are Christians. They might not understand the symbolism exactly, but they usually know it's a religious thing.

And, then the next day, we wash it off.

We scrub our faces as matter of practicality, of course. If left, by the next day, the cross of ashes would have transferred to our pillows or our cheeks or our hair. We wouldn't be recognizable as Christians; we'd simply be dirty.



What then marks us as Christians, after the ashes are washed away? I'm not sure abstaining from chocolate will do it. "See her? She's not eating carbs for forty days. Truly she must be a Christian!"

Perhaps it will be one of our traditional Lenten practices: fasting, prayer, or almsgiving. For our continued Christian formation, these can return our focus to God. Jesus warned us, however, of turning our spiritual practices into a show for others. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus calls out the Pharisee who brags in the temple, in the guise of prayer, about his regular fasting and tithing – the very Lenten practices that our tradition espouses for this season. If we behave like the Pharisee, we might be marked as Christians, but not in a good way.

I wonder what we might do instead, if we considered ourselves avid fans of Jesus. What if we knew all the characters in the Bible and could quote them? What if we cloaked ourselves – not with invisibility – but with the visible signs of our faith? What if we were so excited by the story that we wove it into our daily lives? Then, even our human scars would glorify God: "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV).

I pray that during this Lenten season, you will explore different spiritual practices, not for show but to find the one that helps you draw closer to God and helps you recognize the powerful gift we have received in the resurrection. May you be marked indelibly by the cross on which Jesus died.