



What is “Lent”?

ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the Christian Church Year season of Lent. From the Bible’s point of view ashes suggest God’s judgment and condemnation of sin, as well as human repentance and desire for a new life from God. We are reminded of the words of the burial liturgy, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Just as baptismal water suggests both death and life, drowning and birth, so do the ashes of Ash Wednesday speak of our hope in God that the old life in us will die and God’s new life will be planted in us.

LENT

The word “Lent” comes from the old English word for “lengthen;” think of the “lengthening” days of springtime. Lent spans forty days beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on the Vigil of Easter (Saturday of Holy Week). Just as Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness struggling against the devil and temptation, learning what it meant to be “Son of God” in the world, so Jesus’ disciples spend the forty days of Lent dealing with sin and temptation, reflecting on our baptism and identity as children of God and people of Christ. (Sundays are not counted in the forty days; they are for rest and refreshment on the Lenten journey.) Spiritual disciplines are a central piece of the Lenten journey—a way of receiving and being formed by God’s promise of new life, and a way of developing spiritual “muscle” strong enough to resist the devil’s empty promises.

WORSHIP

During Lent, the altar paraments and pastors’ stoles are purple, the color associated with repentance—in Greek, “metanoia,” or “changed mind/heart.” We sing no “alleluias” during Lent, saving them for the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection at Easter.

TAKING ON LENT

Popular tradition suggests that Lent is a time to give something up. Have you considered giving up chocolate or desserts? What about beer or wine? What about giving up television or even Facebook for the season? If you are giving something up, have you considered why? Is your intention to deprive yourself or cause yourself some suffering for these forty days?

That is far from the point of it all. Lent is not about deprivation or suffering. Lent is about returning to God. No matter where you have been, no matter how you have lived, everyone can benefit from a time of intentional returning to God. Giving something up for Lent can be meaningful when, say, that craving for chocolate causes you to think of Jesus or offer a prayer for someone in need.

However, you might also turn this tradition upside down. What if instead of giving something up, you took something on? What if your Lenten discipline was to pray for ten minutes each day or read through a book or two of the Bible?

No matter what, hold fast to the reason you return to God in the first place. You are not trying to “get right with God.” You are not trying to fix things. God is forever seeking *you* out. Your acts of faithfulness always come after God’s acts of generosity and mercy. You return to the one who draws you near in the first place. You return to the one who claims us in baptism.

So take something on or give something up, but whatever you do, allow it daily to draw you back to the gift of baptism, to the promise of a brand new start, to Jesus. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:21).

—from *Sundays and Seasons* (ELCA worship resource)

LENTEN DISCIPLINES

Prayer	Scripture study
Fasting	Doing deeds of love and mercy
Meditating	Almsgiving (charitable giving)
Devotional reading	Peacemaking
Simplifying	

PRACTICING LENT WITH CHILDREN

Lenten worship holds many ritual actions which children can appreciate, from the ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, to the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday, to the water that reminds us of baptism at the Easter Vigil. Throughout the forty days, children can join in many Lenten disciplines. However, if the discipline is “giving something up,” it might remind them of common punishments, i.e. “no TV for a week.” Let’s be clear that in Lent, we enter these disciplines not as punishment but as ways to refocus our attention on what is most important: Jesus’ love for us and the world.

ONE LAST WORD ON “DISCIPLINE”

“Much of the focus of American religion for the past four decades has been about shedding the obligations of the past....It was not uncommon to hear people boast about what their church did not ask of them: for example, dressing up, fasting, confession, or tithing. Such a negative approach to one’s faith formation does not provide much of a foundation to build upon. It may be that the most important project for the church in these first decades of the 21st century will be to reintroduce spiritual disciplines and long-practiced traditions that past generations can bestow on those who are open to them.”

—from “Preparing for Lent” in *Sundays and Seasons*, 2010

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For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Reflections for Lent

Instead of fasting from food, this Lent consider some other forms of fasting that might clear room in your life for the kingdom of God:

- Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.
- Fast from criticism; feast on praise.
- Fast from self-pity; feast on joy.
- Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.
- Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.
- Fast from jealousy; feast on love.
- Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.
- Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.
- Fast from selfishness; feast on service.
- Fast from fear; feast on faith.
- Fast from anger; feast on patience.
- Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.
- Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.

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Forgive them all, O Lord:
Our sins of omission and our sins of commission;
the sins of our youth and the sins of our riper years;
The sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies;
Our secret and our more open sins;
Our sins of ignorance and surprise, and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins;
The sins we have done to please ourselves
And the sins we have done to please others;
The sins we know and remember,
And the sins we have forgotten;
The sins we have striven to hide from others
And the sins by which we have made others offend;
Forgive them, O Lord, forgive them all for his sake,
Who died for our sins and rose for our justification,
And now stands at thy right hand to make intercession for us,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of the Methodists