

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE MOST OF LENT?

Here are four disciplines our parish uses to make the Lenten journey together.

(1) Worship

In addition to our weekly Sunday gatherings at 5 pm, adjust your schedule to participate in our additional worship services (listed on pages 2-3). These services offer a structure to help us recover the reality of the cross and the resurrection.

(2) Fasting

We engage in two different kinds of fasting during the Lenten season. In the *Lenten Fast*, one abstains from something, usually food or drink, for the entirety of Lent. Examples include meat, caffeine, alcohol, sweets, television, magazines, and so on. What you give up should be something that is good and pleasurable and important to your daily life. Why? In order to create a low-grade hunger throughout the day which will cultivate in you a hunger for Christ himself. In addition, fasting and prayer are uniquely powerful spiritual weapons in our battles against sin and Satan. In this regard, some choose to fast towards some particular virtuous purpose, i.e. gaining victory over jealousy, or envy, or lust, or anger, or lack of integrity, etc.

The *Total Fast* involves giving up all food, and as much as possible, refraining from business, shopping, and pleasure, and practicing meditation, prayer, Scripture reading, and silence. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are traditionally days for the Total Fast. (Many choose to extend the fast of Good Friday until the Easter feast.) In a total fast, you allow the hunger pains to focus your longing for Christ—to be with him, to be touched by him in your inner person, to be healed of your pain, and to live fully for him.

(3) Daily Devotions

For the entirety of Lent, set aside a specific and consistent time each day for Scripture reading, prayer and meditation. Use the Daily Office Lectionary (www.esvbible.org/devotions/bcp/) to guide your Scripture readings. Use the Daily Office of the Book of Common Prayer (www.bcponline.org) as a framework for prayer. Keep a journal and note observations, questions, and points for personal application or action. Whatever you do, make time to read, pray and listen to God daily during Lent.

(4) Simplicity

We all are weak. We need the external reminders—symbols, signs—of the season of Lent. Our culture will not give them to us because Lent is not conducive to a consumeristic culture. Find ways to simplify your life during Lent so that you can focus on the Lord. Make every effort to create an atmosphere that heightens your awareness of God's presence in your living space, your work space, or wherever you spend your day.

Making The Most Of Lent

WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a forty-day pilgrimage into a *bright sadness*, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, in preparation for the ultimate destination of Easter. On the one hand, it is a *sadness* in that we mourn over our sin, brokenness and exile. Through practicing spiritual disciplines (of both abstention and engagement), we cultivate a thirst and hunger for communion with God, and our hearts grow softer towards him. This makes Lent a journey of repentance, a dying to sin and to the power it holds on our lives. On the other hand, even the dark events of Holy Week were motivated by a *blazing joy*: “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Thus Lent is also a brightness, because it does not lead to a dead end, but to the resurrection. At Easter, we enjoy the brilliance of his presence, the mercy of his forgiveness, and the joy of his new life.

Following the Christian year is a way of growing as a disciple of Jesus. Each season is focused on a different moment in the drama of redemption as it centers around Christ: Advent, the promise of Christ's arrival and return; Christmas, the joy of Christ's presence; Epiphany, the reach of Christ's revelation; Lent, the darkness of Christ's suffering; Easter, the wonder of Christ's victory; and Pentecost, the summons to Christ's mission. Taken together, the Christian year commemorates the story of Jesus. As you can see, the church's calendar, an extended commemoration of the gospel story, inserts “the fact of Christ into the rhythm of seasons, weeks, days and hours” (Yves Conger).

The length of the Lenten period (forty days) is patterned after biblical events associated with the number 40, e.g., Israel's 40 years wandering in the wilderness, Nineveh's 40 days of repentance after Jonah's warnings, and Jesus' 40 days of fasting and fighting Satan in the wilderness. Each of these “forties,” focused as they are on suffering, testing, repentance, and Spiritual warfare, inform our Lenten contemplation on the glory of the Cross-shattered Christ who saves the world.

Easter tide, the season following Lent, extends fifty days from Easter to Pentecost. Just as we enjoy and appreciate sunshine so much more after a storm, the joy of Easter is all the greater for Christians who have observed forty days of bright sadness during Lent. “Lent is only worth observing if we do so in light of the coming Easter joy; but without proper observance of Lent, Easter celebrations are cheapened and depleted of their power. In our narcissistic, self-centered culture, Lent takes on special importance. You will know you have kept Lent rightly if you come to the end of its 40 day journey with a deeper faith in Christ crucified and a greater joy in the power of the risen Christ.” (The Rev. Rich Lusk, Birmingham, AL)

HOW DOES LENT WORK?

To observe Lent rightly we must be persuaded of two facts:

- (1) those who are in Christ already stand in God's favor, and
- (2) normal spiritual growth as a Christian does not occur automatically.

Our sinful habits and false selves do not disappear either at conversion or when we have powerful spiritual experiences. Our sinful nature must be dismantled. We must work at discipleship until righteousness becomes second nature. Grace is the starting point. The hard work of Lent does not begin with our effort; it starts with the work of Jesus in us.

As you pray for and plan for Lent, remember that whatever disciplines or repentances you undertake are not the center of your Lenten journey. We fast not to accumulate favor in God's eyes, but to "establish, maintain, repair, and transform our relationship with God" (Robert Webber). The spiritual disciplines (e.g. fasting, prayer, meditation, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, & confession) are means through which the grace of God flows into our lives; they purify our doors of perception so that we are better able to see God.

Therefore, throughout Lent, keep Jesus as your focus. Our self-denials and sufferings are corollaries of our union with Christ, who has already won our salvation.

THE LENTEN JOURNEY

Each liturgical season has a tonality that is captured with color. The color of Lent is purple—a deep color of penitence, a lush color of royalty. Lent is for training kings!

SHROVE TUESDAY (Feb 9) is a festive day of preparation for Lent. In Anglican tradition, it is sometimes called "Pancake Day," because of the common practice of cleaning rich foods out of the house by feasting on them. Rez folk often use this day as an opportunity to invite friends and neighbors over to feast on a pancake supper.

ASH WEDNESDAY (Feb 10) marks the first day of Lent, and is one of two universal fast days throughout the church (the other being Good Friday). As a church we meet for worship, to begin the Lenten journey together. The worship service this day includes extensive confessions of sin and reminders of our call to journey with Jesus in the way of the cross. Also, we experience the imposition of ashes on our foreheads as a way of renewing our identification with Christ's suffering and death. This practice, developed by the early church, draws upon several biblical examples of people using ashes as a visible and tangible sign of contrition over sin (e.g., 2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1, 3; Job 2:8; 30:19; 42:6; Jonah 3:6; etc.). The ashes, made from palm fronds used in the previous year's Palm Sunday service, remind us of our own fickle hearts, bringing us face to face with the reality of sin and death.

FRIDAYS during Lent are often set aside for fasting, in remembrance of Jesus' suffering and death on Good Friday.

SUNDAYS are never fast days, because Christians regard every Sunday as resurrection day. On Sundays we rejoice in the work Christ has done for us and will complete for us when he comes again. So on each Sunday of Lent we receive back from the Lord, with gratitude, whatever we are giving up for our Lenten Fast.

PALM SUNDAY (Mar 20), the Sunday before Easter, commemorates Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem immediately prior to his arrest, trial and execution. Our worship begins with palm branches, singing and hosannas, and ends reading the Passion.

THE GREAT TRIDUUM (trid-yoo-um) extends from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday. The earliest Christians rightly recognized Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection as one single event. During the Great Triduum our worship—consisting of both public and private components—likewise extends as one continuous movement from Thursday evening to Sunday, following Jesus' passover from life to death to life again.

MAUNDY THURSDAY (Mar 24) is when we gather for worship with other churches to commemorate Jesus' final meal with his disciples, to hear his new commandment to love one another (and demonstrate it by washing one another's feet), and to remember his institution of the Lord's Supper. The service concludes with the stripping of the Lord's table as we are hurled into the darkness of Jesus' trial, torture, and crucifixion. Those who are able here begin the Great Fast, extending from this moment until the end of Good Friday, or even to the Easter feast. This fast involves choosing meditation, prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, instead of food, business, shopping and pleasure.

GOOD FRIDAY (Mar 25) is the key day in the entire Lenten journey. We call it "Good" because we know how the story ends. Our focus is not on the senseless human suffering of Jesus, but on the suffering of God in human flesh to redeem us from the curse of sin. The worship service uses readings and hymns centered on the passion story. Our parish commemorates this day in collaboration with our host congregation, Christ our Shepherd Church.

HOLY SATURDAY (Mar 26) is the final day in Lent. We are overwhelmed with the despair that the disciples must have felt as the Lord Christ lay in the tomb. At the end of the day, some choose to join the Church of the Advent in the Easter Vigil to retell the story of redemption, and to celebrate Jesus' triumph over death.

EASTER (Mar 27) is a day of fellowship, feasting and rejoicing in the wonderful news of Jesus' resurrection. That evening we gather again for a baptismal service and another time of celebration of the risen Christ.