

The Season of Lent

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The season of Lent has not been well observed in much of evangelical Christianity, largely because it was associated with "high church" liturgical worship that some churches were eager to reject. However, much of the background of evangelical Christianity, for example the heritage of John Wesley, was very "high church." Many of the churches that had originally rejected more formal and deliberate liturgy are now recovering aspects of a larger Christian tradition as a means to refocus on spirituality in a culture that is increasingly secular.



Originating in the fourth century of the church, the season of **Lent** spans 40 weekdays beginning on [Ash Wednesday](#) and climaxing during [Holy Week](#) with Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday), Good Friday, and concluding Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the six Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent, and are referred to as the Sundays **in** Lent. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events, but especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could lead him to abandon his mission and calling. Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance. This season of the year is equal only to [the Season of Advent](#) in importance in the Christian year, and is part of the second major grouping of Christian festivals and sacred time that includes [Holy Week](#), [Easter](#), and [Pentecost](#).

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some churches today still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food. Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities. Most Christian churches that observe Lent at all focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God's grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.

[Might have been influenced by the Jewish tradition of 10 Days of Awe]

10 Days of Awe

<http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday3.htm>

The ten days starting with [Rosh Hashanah](#) [Feast of Trumpets / Jewish New Year – first new moon after fall equinox] and ending with [Yom Kippur](#) [Day of Atonement – 10 days later -Sept/Oct] are commonly known as the Days of Awe (Yamim Noraim) or the Days of Repentance. This is a time for serious introspection, a time to consider the sins of the previous year and repent before Yom Kippur.

One of the ongoing themes of the Days of Awe is the concept that [G-d](#) has "books" that he writes our names in, writing down who will live and who will die, who will have a good life and who will have a bad life, for the next year. These books are written in on Rosh Hashanah, but our actions during the Days of Awe can alter G-d's decree. The actions that change the decree are "teshuvah, [tefilah](#) and [tzedakah](#)," repentance, prayer, good deeds (usually, charity). These "books" are sealed on Yom Kippur. This concept of writing in books is the source of the common greeting during this time is "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year."

Among the customs of this time, it is common to seek reconciliation with people you may have wronged during the course of the year. The Talmud maintains that Yom Kippur atones only for sins between man and G-d. To atone for sins against another person, you must first seek reconciliation with that person, righting the wrongs you committed against them if possible.

Another custom observed during this time is kapparot. This is rarely practiced today, and is observed in its true form only by [Chasidic](#) and occasionally [Orthodox](#) Jews. Basically, you purchase a live fowl, and on the morning before Yom Kippur you wave it over your head reciting a prayer asking that the fowl be considered atonement for sins. The fowl is then slaughtered and given to the poor (or its value is given). Some Jews today simply use a bag of money instead of a fowl. Most Reform and Conservative Jews have never even heard of this practice.

Work is permitted as usual during the intermediate Days of Awe, from Tishri 3 to Tishri 9, except of course for [Shabbat](#) during that week.

Two lesser special occasions occur during the course of the Days of Awe.

Tishri 3, the day after the second day of Rosh Hashanah, is the Fast of Gedaliah. This really has nothing to do with the Days of Awe, except that it occurs in the middle of them. For more information, see [Minor Fasts](#).

The [Shabbat](#) that occurs in this period is known as [Shabbat Shuvah](#) (the Sabbath of Return). This is considered a rather important Shabbat.

Mardi Gras or Carnival

Carnival, which comes from a Latin phrase meaning "removal of meat," is the three day period preceding the beginning of Lent, the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday immediately before **Ash Wednesday**, which is the first day of the Lenten Season (some traditions count Carnival as the entire period of time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday). The three days before Ash Wednesday are also known as **Shrovetide** ("shrove" is an Old English word meaning "to repent"). The Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday is called **Shrove Tuesday**, or is more popularly known by the French term **Mardi Gras**, meaning "Fat Tuesday," contrasting to the fasting during Lent. The entire three day period has now come to be known in many areas as Mardi Gras.

Carnival or Mardi Gras is usually a period of celebration, originally a festival before the fasting during the season of Lent. Now it is celebrated in many places with parades, costumes, dancing, and music. Many Christians' discomfort with Lent originates with a distaste for Mardi Gras. In some cultures, especially the Portuguese culture of Brazil, the French culture of Louisiana, and some of the Caribbean cultures such as Trinidad, it has tended to take on the excesses of wild and drunken revelry. There has been some attempt in recent years to change this aspect of the season, such as using Brazilian Carnival parades to focus on national and cultural history. Many churches now observe Mardi Gras with a church pancake breakfast or other church meal, eating together as a community before the symbolic fasting of Lent begins.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday, the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the Season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. (See [Reflections on Ash Wednesday](#)). Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian.

In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday. Ashes became symbolic of that attitude of penitence reflected in the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, NRSV).

Colors and Symbols of Lent



The color used in the sanctuary for most of Lent is purple, red violet, or dark violet (see [Colors of the Church Year](#)). These colors symbolize both the pain and suffering leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus as well as the suffering of humanity and the world under sin. But purple is also the color of royalty, and so anticipates through the suffering and death of Jesus the coming resurrection and hope of newness that will be celebrated in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Some church traditions use grey for Ash Wednesday or for the entire season of Lent, or for special days of fasting and prayer. Gray is the color of ashes, and therefore a biblical symbol of mourning and repentance. The decorations for the sanctuary during Lent should reflect this mood of penitence and reflection. Some Anglican churches use unbleached muslin, which can range from white to beige, with accents in red or black for Lent to symbolize this same spirit of penitence. Some churches avoid the use of any flowers in the sanctuary during Lent, using various dried arrangements. This can be especially effective if a [flowering cross](#) is used for Easter. Other churches use arrangements of rocks or symbols associated with the Gospel readings for the six Sundays in Lent (see [The Symbols of Lent](#)).

In Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, as well as some Protestant traditions, the fourth Sunday of Lent is known as Laetere Sunday (*lay-TAH-ray*, a Latin imperative meaning "rejoice!"). In the midst of the more somber tone of penitence during Lent, this Sunday anticipates the resurrection of Jesus, a day of hope in light of the coming Easter Sunday. As such, it parallels the third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday (*gow-DAY-tey*), with the theme of celebration for the immanent work of God in the world. In traditions that observe Laetere Sunday, Rose is used as a sanctuary color for that Sunday, a lightening of the purple of Advent with the white of celebration.

Some church traditions change the sanctuary colors to red for [Maundy Thursday](#), a symbol of the disciples and through them the community of the church. Since Eucharist or communion is often observed on Maundy Thursday in the context of Passover, the emphasis is on the gathered community in the presence of Jesus the Christ.

Traditionally, the sanctuary colors of [Good Friday](#) and Holy Saturday are black, the only days of the Church Year that black is used. It symbolizes the darkness brought into the world by sin. It also symbolizes death, not only the death of Jesus but the death of the whole world under the burden of sin. In this sense, it also represents the hopelessness and the endings that come as human beings try to make their own way in the world without God (see [The Days of Holy Week](#)). Black is always replaced by white before sunrise of Easter Sunday.

The Journey of Lent

There are many ways for a congregation to mark the journey of Lent. Of course, beginning with a service of worship for Ash Wednesday is always appropriate (see [Ash Wednesday: A Service of Worship](#)). During Lent, one of the most effective visual reminders of the season that can be expanded in many variations is to use a rough wooden cross as a focal point in the sanctuary.

The type of cross and how it is constructed will depend on exactly how it will be used. The cross is usually erected in the Sanctuary on Ash Wednesday as a visible symbol of the beginning of Lent. It is usually draped in black on Good Friday. The same cross can also become a part of the congregation's Easter celebration as it is then draped in white or gold, or covered with flowers (see [The Flowering Cross](#)). Responsive readings associated with various symbols of Lent placed on the cross each Sunday in Lent can provide a structure for penitential prayers during this season (see [The Symbols of Lent](#)).

Another effective way to make use of the cross is to use it as a Prayer Cross during Lent. A hammer, square nails, and small pieces of paper are made available near the cross. At a designated time of prayer during the Sundays in Lent, or beginning with Ash Wednesday, people are invited to write their prayer requests on the paper, and then nail them to the cross. The quiet time of prayer with only the sounds of the hammer striking the nails can be a moving time for reflection on the meaning of Lent, and a powerful call to prayer. The prayer requests can be removed and burned as part of a [Tenebrae](#) or [Stations of the Cross](#) service during [Holy Week](#) to symbolize releasing the needs to God.

Some churches have a special time of prayer or meditation one night of each week during Lent. Often Catholic and high church traditions pray the Stations of the Cross (see [The Fourteen Stations of the Cross](#)). Some Protestant churches have a special series of weekly Bible studies followed by a time of meditation and prayer. Often, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, the prayer time is followed by a simple meal of soup and bread to symbolize the penitence of the Season.

Reflections on Lent

We enjoy celebrating [Palm Sunday](#). The children get to make paper palm branches and for many it is one of the few times they get to take an active role in "big church." We wave the palm branches and celebrate. And we all love Easter Sunday! It is a happy time, with flowers, new clothes, and the expectation of Spring in the air.

Scriptural Roots of Palm Sunday

Isa 62:11 Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; [yeshay = a form of Yashua, the Hebrew name of Jesus] behold, his reward *is* with him, and his work before him.

Zec 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he *is* just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Dan 9:26 And after [the] threescore and two weeks [483 years] shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof *shall be* with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.

Mat 21:7 And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set *him* thereon.

Mat 21:8 And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed *them* in the way.

Luk 19:37 As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen,

Luk 19:38 saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” [**Psa 118:> traditional acclamation at the coming of the king**]

Psa 118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psa 118:25 Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!

The word *hosanna* (Latin *osanna*, **Greek** ὡσαννά, *hōsanná*) is from **Hebrew** הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא *hōšî ‘ā-nā* and related to **Aramaic** אוֹשַׁענָא (*’ōsha ‘nā*) meaning "save, rescue, savior".^[1] In the **Hebrew Bible** it is used only in verses such as "help" or "save, I pray". It is applied in numerous verses of the **New Testament** including "Hosanna; blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (**Mark 11.9**), "hosanna in the highest" (**Mark 11.10**); "hosanna to the Son of David" (**Matt 21:9**). In that context, the word Hosanna seems to be a "special kind of respect" given to the one who saves, saved, will save or is saving now. If so Hosanna means "a special honor to the one who saves". The old interpretation "Save, now!",^[2] based on Psalm 118:25, does not fully explain the occurrence of the word in the **Gospels**^[3] as a shout of jubilation, and this has given rise to complex discussions.^[4]

Psa 118:26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

Psa 118:27 The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!

Psa 118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.

Psa 118:29 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

[**Israel was held accountable for not knowing when the Messiah would come.**]

Luk 19:41 And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it,

Luk 19:42 Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things *which belong* unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

Luk 19:43 For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

Luk 19:44 And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. [**Roman destruction of Jerusalem 70ad**]

Hos 5:15 I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me.

Mat 23:39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” [**acknowledge him as King and Lord**]

Yet there is something significant missing if we only concentrate on celebration for these two Sundays. It is too easy and promotes much too cheap a grace to focus only on the high points of Palm Sunday and Easter without walking with Jesus through the gathering shadows of Maundy Thursday and the darkness of Good Friday. [Is our righteousness dependent on our works?] For us, that journey begins on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent is a way to recall a larger story than just celebration. It is a way to face the reality of the consequences of sin and the terrible toll it takes on the world. Lent calls us to examine our own lives with the prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me (Psa 139:23-24).

The journey through Lent is a way to place ourselves before God humbled, bringing in our hands no price whereby we can ourselves purchase our salvation. It is a way to confess our total inadequacy before God, to strip ourselves bare of all pretenses to righteousness, to come before God in dust and ashes. It is a way to empty ourselves of our false pride, of our rationalizations that prevent us from seeing ourselves as needy creatures, of our external piety that blinds us to the beam in our own eyes.

Through prayer that gives up self, we seek to open ourselves up before God, and to hear anew the call "Come unto me!" We seek to recognize and respond afresh to God's presence in our lives and in our world. We seek to place our needs, our fears, our failures, our hopes, our very lives in God's hands, again. And we seek by abandoning ourselves in Jesus' death to recognize again who God is, to allow His transforming grace to work in us once more, and to come to worship Him on Easter Sunday with a fresh victory and hope that goes beyond the new clothes, the Spring flowers, the happy music.

Yet, that celebration begins in ashes. And it journeys through darkness. It is a spiritual pilgrimage that I am convinced we must all make, one way or the other, for genuine spiritual renewal to come.

I have heard the passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14 quoted a lot: ". . .if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This usually is quoted in the context of wanting revival or renewal in the church. The prayer is usually interpreted as intercessory prayer for others, since we too easily assume that any problem lies with someone else. Yet a careful reading of the passage will reveal that the prayer that is called for here is not intercessory prayer for *others*; it is penitential prayer for the faith community, for **us**. It is not to call for others to repent; it is a call for **us**, God's people, to repent. It is **our** land that needs healed, it is **our** wicked ways from which we need to turn, **we** are the ones who need to seek God's face.

Perhaps during the Lenten season we should stop praying for others as if we were virtuous enough to do so. Perhaps we should take off our righteous robes just long enough during these 40 days to put ashes on our own heads, to come before God with a new humility that is willing to confess, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Maybe we should be willing to prostrate ourselves before God and plead, "Lord, in my hand no price I bring; simply to the cross I cling." That

might put us in a position to hear God in ways that we have not heard Him in a long time. And it may be the beginning of that healing for which we have so longed.

O Lord, begin with me. Here. *Now*.

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