

LENT 101

For Christians who were not raised in liturgical churches, or who are not into liturgical tradition, Lent can seem a bit weird or confusing. I hope these few basic questions and brief explanations about this season can lead us all into a deeper, meaningful journey toward Easter.

What is Lent?

Lent (from the Anglo-Saxon *lecten* which means “spring”) is the forty day period traditionally set aside for self-examination, fasting, and repentance before Easter. During this time, followers of Christ often commit to a special discipline during Lent in order to deepen their relationship with Christ.

Why forty days?

Forty is a number of symbolic significance throughout Scripture. After his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness praying, fasting, and even being tempted! Moses and the Israelites wandered for forty years in the Sinai wilderness, learning to trust on God’s promises of providence. Forty often represents a time of trial and testing, but it also points to an eventual fulfillment of promise, just as Easter does for Lent.

If you’re wondering why Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday is more like 45 days than 40, here why: Lent excludes Sundays, because every Sunday is like a little Easter (you’re wanting to look at a calendar now, aren’t you?)

What is Ash Wednesday?

As the first day of the forty days, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a season of repentance and self-reflection in Lent. It is a time to repent (turn our hearts and lives to God) and confess our sin before God. Those participating in worship services on this day or evening are often marked with ashes on their foreheads as a reminder of our mortality and our intention to turn back to God.

What does Mardi Gras have to do with Lent?

Since Lent always begins on Ash Wednesday, the Tuesday before was traditionally set aside (especially before the Reformation) as a sort of “last hurrah,” a day of celebration before lenten confessions and disciplines. Because many people used Lent as a time of fasting and repentance (and since they didn’t want to be tempted by sweets, meat and other distractions in the house) they cleaned out their cabinets. They used up all the sugar and yeast in sweet breads before the Lent season started, and fixed meals with all the meat available. It was a great feast! In England, this became known as Pancake Tuesday or Shrove Tuesday (from shrive meaning “confess”). If you grew up in an Anglican or Episcopal church, you may know about this. In other parts of the world, it is known as “Fat Tuesday,” or as the French would say, *Mardi Gras*.

Through the years Mardi Gras has evolved (in some places) into a pretty wild party with little to do with preparing for the Lenten season of repentance and simplicity. Oh, well. But Christians who still know its origin can hang onto the true Spirit of the season.

Why set aside a special season of repentance when repentance is something that we should do all year round?

While that is good question, and one would be absolutely correct in saying that repentance is something that we should do daily and all year round, I believe that deliberately and intentionally devoting a period of time specifically for self-examination, fasting, and prayer, can only be a good thing. The apostle Paul reminds us that spiritual discipline is something to which God calls every believer).

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

-1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (The Message)

The word “repentance” in the NT is the Greek word “metanoia” which means literally “to turn around and go the other way” (do a U-Turn). That is the perfect description of repentance. Repentance means turning away from that which is displeasing to God and turning back around to God. It’s much more than just feeling sorry for doing wrong (although that is the place to start). It’s an active transformation; a commitment to do, to act, to move in accordance with God’s will rather than against it.

And that is where the whole idea of a Lenten discipline comes in. For believers, Lent can be a time when you actively work to rid yourself of sins that have grown into habits, or addictions and even character traits- external or internal. (Yes, this should be something we do all year round but it’s helpful to have a time like Lent set aside for that very purpose).

And this is where prayer is so vital! Ask God to search your heart and bring to your mind those habits of thought, word, and/or deed that are keeping you from God. (Sometimes what is displeasing in your life will be so obvious that you won’t even need to pray about it, you’ll already know as God the Holy Spirit will already have convicted you of it).

So use Lent to be a time to intentionally “give up” those things that are keeping you from God. Also, let it be a time to “give back” and develop practices and disciplines that reflect a desire to please God (prayer, sacrificial service, above and beyond giving)

Finally, think about how Lent can change your life beyond the forty days. Don’t just give it up for Lent, use Lent to give it up forever. Likewise, if you take up something during Lent, use Lent to keep it forever! Let the Lord know that you are committed to turning your life toward Him and then ask Him to help you in your task through the power of his Holy Spirit. Of course we can do all of this at any time during the year, but I suppose the question is “do we?” For me, the answer, sadly, is “no”, so I personally need the emphasis on repentance that Lent brings.