

Lent 101

by Penny Ford

Lent is a season of the Christian year when people are invited to simplify their lives to focus on their relationship with God in Christ.

Where does the concept of Lent come from?

At Jesus' baptism the sky split open, the Spirit of God, which looked like a dove, descended and landed on Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, My Beloved, with whom I am pleased." Afterward, as told in Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus hiked into the wilderness. Maybe he needed some time with God to sort through the major changes happening in his life. Maybe he was searching for direction and answers. Maybe he needed to get away from family, friends and the familiar routine in order to see God, and himself, more clearly. For whatever reason, Jesus retreated into the wilderness for forty days to fast and pray. While he was there, he was tempted by Satan and found the strength to make some tough decisions. He also found clarity about God and what kind of person God wanted him to be.

What does Lent have to do with me?

It's pretty easy to get caught up in the drama of work, school, relationships, and family. Our lives are filled with distractions that take us away from living a life with Christ. We try to fill the emptiness inside us with mindless TV, meaningless chatter, stimulants, alcohol or other things. We run from silence because we're afraid of being alone with God. So, like Jesus, we need to take some serious time to pray and figure out where God is in our lives, and where God is calling us to serve. We need to re-focus our lives to be more in line with God.

How do Christians celebrate Lent?

It's different in different traditions. But generally it's a time to return to Christ by cutting out all that distracts us. For some people that means giving up something like candy, TV, soft drinks, beer, cigarettes or meat as a way to purify their bodies and lives. Others take something on and collect food for the needy, volunteer once a week to help children, or decide to be kind to someone they don't like. Whatever "stuff" is given up or taken on, the intent must be to draw us closer to Christ. Lent is a resolution to simplify our lives, and to return to the One who loves us -- Jesus.

When is Lent?

It's the forty days before Easter. Lent excludes Sundays (you math geniuses), because every Sunday is like a little Easter. Basically, it's about one-tenth of a year (like a tithe of time).

So the real beginning of Lent is Ash Wednesday?

Yes. Ash Wednesday, the day after Mardi Gras, usually begins with a service where we recognize our mortality, repent of our sins, and return to our Loving God. We recognize life as a precious gift from God, and re-turn our lives towards Jesus Christ. We may make resolutions and commit to change our

lives over the next forty days so that we might be more like Christ. In an Ash Wednesday service, usually a minister or priest marks the sign of the cross on a person's forehead with ashes.

Why ashes?

In Jewish and Christian history, ashes are a sign of mortality and repentance. Mortality, because when we die, our bodies eventually decompose and we become dust/ dirt/ash/whatever. Repentance:, because long ago, when people felt remorse for something they did, they would put ashes on their head and wear "sackcloth" (scratchy clothing) to remind them that sin is pretty uncomfortable and leads to a sort of death of the spirit. This was their way of confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness.

Where do the ashes come from?

On what we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem while people waved palms and cheered him on. Less than a week later, Jesus was killed. The palms that were waved in joy became ashes of sorrow. We get ashes for Ash Wednesday by saving the palms from Palm Sunday, burning them, and mixing them with a little water (like tears). It's symbolic.

What do Christians do with ashes?

At an Ash Wednesday service, folks are invited to come forward to receive the ashes. The minister will make a small cross on your forehead by smudging the ashes. While the ashes remind us of our mortality and sin, the cross reminds us of Jesus' resurrection (life after death) and forgiveness. It's a powerful, non-verbal way that we can experience God's forgiveness as we return to Jesus.

COOL THINGS TO DO FOR LENT

1. Skip one meal a day and give the money to the poor.
2. Start a prayer "rhythm." Say a prayer every time you brush your teeth, see a commercial, or check your e-mail.
3. Read a chapter in the Bible a day. (Matthew is a good book to start with).
4. Forgive someone who doesn't deserve it (maybe even yourself).
5. Give up beer or sodas. Give the money you save to the UMCOR.
6. Spend thirty minutes a day in silence.
7. Write someone a thank you letter.
8. Say one nice thing to someone each day.
9. Pray for others on your way to work or school.
10. Volunteer one afternoon a week at a local shelter, tutoring program or food pantry.

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