
ABOUT THE LENTEN SEASON

A N O V E R V I E W

INTRODUCTION

Originating in the fourth century, the season of Lent spans 40 weekdays, beginning on Ash Wednesday and climaxing during Holy Week with Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was the time of preparation, study, and prayer for those who were to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were joining a living community of faith, the entire community was called to spiritual 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 this time 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 the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. Christians today use this season for introspection, self-examination, and repentance.

Penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving have traditionally marked Lent. Christian churches that observe Lent emphasize 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.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday 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 and a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. 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 foreheads of worshippers who had made public confessions 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.

PALM SUNDAY

This Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday, commemorates the beginning of Holy Week and Jesus' final, agonizing journey to the cross. The English word *passion* comes from a Latin word that means "to suffer," the same word from which we derive the English word *patient*.

Palm Sunday observes the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem that was marked by the crowds waving palm branches and proclaiming him as the messianic king. The Gospels tell us that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, enacting the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, and in so doing emphasized the humility that was to characterize the kingdom he proclaimed. The irony of his acceptance as the new Davidic King (Mark 11:10) by the crowds who would only five days later cry for his execution should be a sobering reminder of the human tendency to want God on our own terms.

MAUNDY THURSDAY, OR HOLY THURSDAY

During the last few days, Jesus and his disciples had steadily journeyed from Galilee toward Jerusalem. On the sunlit hillsides of Galilee, Jesus was popular, the crowds were friendly, and the future was bright. Even his entry into Jerusalem had been marked by a joyous welcome. But in Jerusalem there was a growing darkness as the crowds began to draw back from the man who spoke of commitment and servanthood. There was an ominous tone in the murmuring of the Sadducees and Pharisees who were threatened by the new future Jesus proclaimed.

Even as Jesus and his disciples came together to share the Last Supper, they already stood in the shadow of the cross. It was later that night, after the meal, as Jesus and his disciples were praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, that Jesus was arrested and taken to the house of Caiaphas the High Priest. On Friday he would die.

This Thursday of Holy Week is remembered as the time Jesus ate a final meal together with those who had followed him for so long. The sharing of the Eucharist, or sacrament of thanksgiving, on Maundy Thursday is the means by which most Christians observe this day. There is a great variety in exactly how the service is conducted, however. In some churches, it is traditional for the pastor or priest to wash the feet of congregation members as part of the service. Increasingly, churches are observing some form of the Passover Seder as a setting for the Eucharist of Maundy Thursday.

GOOD FRIDAY, OR HOLY FRIDAY

On Friday of Holy Week, the church commemorates Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and suffering, death, and burial.

There are a variety of worship services on Good Friday, all aimed at allowing worshippers to experience some sense of the pain, humiliation, and ending in the journey to the cross. Usually, a Good Friday service includes a series of Scripture readings, a short homily, and a time of meditation and prayer.

Some churches use the Stations of the Cross as part of the Good Friday Service. This service uses paintings or banners to represent various scenes from Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, and death, and the worshippers move to the various stations to sing hymns or pray as the story is told.

Another common service for Good Friday is *Tenebrae* (Latin for “shadows” or “darkness”). It is usually characterized by a series of Scripture readings and meditation done in stages while lights and/or candles are gradually extinguished to symbolize the growing darkness not only of Jesus’ death but also of the world’s hopelessness without God.

HOLY SATURDAY

This is the seventh day of the week, the day Jesus rested in the tomb. In the first three Gospel accounts, this was the Jewish Sabbath, which provided appropriate symbolism of the seventh-day rest. While some church traditions continue daily services on Saturday, there is no communion served on this day. Some traditions suspend services and Scripture readings during the day on Saturday, to be resumed at the Easter Vigil after sundown.

Holy Saturday is traditionally a day of quiet meditation as Christians contemplate the darkness of a world without a future and hope apart from God and his grace. It is also a time to remember family and the faithful who have died or to honor the martyrs who have given their lives for the cause of Christ in the world. While Good Friday is often a day of fasting, some also fast on Saturday as the climax of the season of Lent. An ancient tradition dating to the first centuries of the church calls for no food of any kind to be eaten on Holy Saturday, or for 40 hours before sunrise on Sunday. However it is observed, Holy Saturday has traditionally been a time of reflection, waiting, and weeping through the night while awaiting the joy that comes in the morning.

THE EASTER VIGIL

From the earliest days of the church, Easter Vigil was primarily a means of preparing new converts for baptism into the Christian faith, which was normally done on Easter Sunday as the focal point of the entire year.

The vigil can begin at any time after sundown on Saturday, although there has been a tendency in Protestant churches to begin just before sunrise on Sunday and conclude the service just after the Gospel readings while singing praises at sunrise.

In some church traditions, the Easter Vigil begins in darkness as a flame is lit. This can either be the Christ candle returned to the sanctuary or to worshippers or a “new fire” lit amid the darkness. From this “new fire” all the other candles in the sanctuary are lit. Some churches use a special Paschal Candle as the focal point for this part of the service. All the worshippers light individual candles from the Paschal Candle as they sing a song of praise.

This return of light symbolizes Jesus’ resurrection from the grave and the light of salvation and hope God brought into the world through the resurrection--the triumph of God’s grace and salvation over the darkness of death and sin. If celebrated in a sanctuary, the lights are either turned on all at once or in stages as the Scriptures are read, thus reversing the effects of the Service of Shadows and dramatically symbolizing the “true light that enlightens everyone” (John 1:9). Of course, if this is done as an Easter sunrise service outdoors, the spreading dawn serves the same purpose. In any case, the service intends to celebrate the newness, fresh possibilities, and new beginnings out of old endings that Jesus’ resurrection embodies.