

The Season of Lent: an FAQ

What is Lent? Lent is an old English term for “spring.” In the annual cycle of the church’s liturgy and spiritual formation, it is the time of year for preparation for new life at Easter, the celebration of the resurrection, so the connection to the season of spring is appropriate. Lent is a more solemn season than Christmas or Easter and it is not a time of excessive negativity, but a time of growing trust in God’s power to renew our lives.

When does Lent begin? Lent always begins on Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter, excluding Sundays, connecting it to Jesus’ 40 days and the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness, both times of preparation and renewal.

Why do we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday? The ashes and the whole season of Lent are a time to refocus on our relationship with God and that relationship starts with a dependence on God for our very existence. Ashes are a sign of mortality and renewal.

What are some practices during Lent? The traditional ancient spiritual practices for Lent are prayer, fasting (forgoing certain foods for a time of refocus), and almsgiving (giving to the poor). The themes of Lent are wilderness time, repentance (meaning a turning around of one’s life), following Jesus in the way of the cross, and preparation for baptism or renewal of baptism at the Easter Vigil. The Vigil is the Saturday night service before Easter Day, the most celebratory liturgy in church tradition, and the primary time for baptisms and confirmations.

Are Sundays part of Lent? Sundays are Sundays in Lent and take on a different character than other days because Sunday is always the Lord’s Day - a celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

Why don’t we use “alleluia” during Lent? Lent serves as a reminder that we do not yet experience the reign of God in its fullness. We live in the hope of the resurrection. Alleluia is a Hebrew word of praise and exhilaration. The omission of the alleluia is one symbolic way to enter into the spirit of renewal.

What is the significance of the color purple during Lent? The color purple is an additional symbol of penance. The Scriptures tell us that a purple garment was placed on Jesus during his passion as a mockery. It is fitting that the color be maintained during the days in which we focus on the need for the love of God.

What determines the date of Easter and when Lent begins? The Council of Nicaea (CE 325) set the date of Easter as the Sunday following the 14th day of the paschal full moon, which is the full moon whose 14th day falls on or after the vernal (spring) equinox. That was the date of Passover in the Jewish calendar, and the Last Supper (Holy Thursday) occurred on the Passover. Therefore, Easter was the Sunday after Passover.