

Tuesday Evening Lenten Series  
A Journey through the Season of Lent  
Session 1: What is Lent? How and why do we observe it?  
Tuesday, March 3, 2020

**What is Lent?**

- The word “Lent” is the shortened form of the Old English word *lencten* which meant spring, and may be related to the lengthening of days associated with springtime.
  - In Latin, the word for Lent is *Quadragesima*, meaning fortieth. *Cuaresma* (Spanish) and *Carême* (French) are derived from the Latin.
- Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent
  - 46 days before Easter Sunday
  - In Western (Roman/Latin) Christianity, Lent is a 40-day season, because Sundays are not counted.
  - In Eastern (Orthodox/Greek/Russian) Christianity, Lent is 46 days and begins on Clean Monday.
  - Among the Oriental Orthodox (non-Calcedonian/monophysite), there are various local traditions regarding Lent. Those using the Alexandrian Rite, i.e., the Coptic Orthodox, Coptic Catholic, Ethiopian Orthodox, Ethiopian Catholic, Eritrean Orthodox, and Eritrean Catholic Churches, observe eight weeks of Lent.
    - For example, in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, fasting lasts for 55 continuous days before Easter, although the fast is divided into three separate periods: *Tsome Hirkaal*, eight days commemorating an early Christian figure; *Tsome Arba*, 40 days of Lent; and *Tsome Himamat*, seven days commemorating Holy Week.
  - Lent is marked by repentance, fasting, reflection, and ultimately celebration.
  - The 40-day period represents Christ’s time of temptation in the wilderness, where he fasted and where Satan tempted him.
  - Lent asks believers to set aside a time each year for similar fasting, marking an intentional season focused on Christ’s life, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection.
- The ashes of this holiday symbolize two main things: death and repentance. “Ashes are equivalent to dust, and human flesh is composed of dust or clay (Genesis 2:7), and when a human corpse decomposes, it returns to dust or ash.”
- There are connections to the practice of public penance, which was common in the middle ages, where “sinners” were made to appear in public wearing sackcloth and covered in ashes.

## **How do we observe Lent? Fasting and Abstinence**

What's the difference?

- Fasting is the willful refrainment from eating for a period of time. In the Christian devotional context, that means the reduction of the intake of food.
- Abstinence is the self-enforced restraint from indulging in bodily activities that are widely experienced as giving pleasure. In the Christian devotional context, that means refraining from meat (or another type of food).

In Western Christianity, there are only two fast days:

- Ash Wednesday
- Good Friday

Eastern Christianity has more fast days

### **How should one fast?**

- According to the Book of Common Prayer, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of strict fast. Only one meatless meal should be taken. If necessary for strength, a second smaller (meatless) meal may also be taken. All days in Lent except Sundays are days of abstinence and self-denial. Fasting ends after the First Mass of Easter on Holy Saturday.
- The traditional Lenten fast for Western (Catholic) Christians is as follows:
  - Fridays and Saturdays: abstinence and fast (only one meatless meal may be taken).
  - All other days of Lent: partial abstinence and fast (one one principal meal may be taken, but it may include meat).
  - Lenten Ember days: abstinence and fast.
  - Sundays and Feasts: no fasting nor abstinence
- The traditional fast for Eastern (Orthodox) Christians is much stricter.
  - Week before Lent ("Cheesefare Week"): Meat and other animal products are prohibited, but eggs and dairy products are permitted, even on Wednesday and Friday.
  - First Week of Lent: Only two full meals are eaten during the first five days, on Wednesday and Friday after the Presanctified Liturgy. Nothing is eaten from Monday morning until Wednesday evening, the longest time without food in the Church year. (Few laymen keep these rules in their fullness). For the Wednesday and Friday meals, as for all weekdays in Lent, meat and animal products, fish, dairy

products, wine and oil are avoided. On Saturday of the first week, the usual rule for Lenten Saturdays begins (see below).

- Weekdays in the Second through Sixth Weeks: The strict fasting rule is kept every day: avoidance of meat, meat products, fish, eggs, dairy, wine and oil.
- Saturdays and Sundays in the Second through Sixth Weeks: Wine and oil are permitted; otherwise the strict fasting rule is kept.
- Holy Week: The Thursday evening meal is ideally the last meal taken until Pascha. At this meal, wine and oil are permitted. The Fast of Great and Holy Friday is the strictest fast day of the year: even those who have not kept a strict Lenten fast are strongly urged not to eat on this day. After St. Basil's Liturgy on Holy Saturday, a little wine and fruit may be taken for sustenance. The fast is sometimes broken on Saturday night after Resurrection Matins, or, at the latest, after the Divine Liturgy on Pascha.
- Wine and oil are permitted on several feast days if they fall on a weekday during Lent. On Annunciation and Palm Sunday, fish is also permitted.

Who should fast? Who should abstain?

- According to Roman Catholic canons, everyone age 18-59. Those with medical issues, particularly ones that require medicines to be taken with food, are exempt from fasting. Abstinence is expected of everyone age 14 on up.
- The BCP does not specify the expected ages.

Other expectations of Lent

- Fasting/Abstinence – denial of self
- Almsgiving – the money saved from abstaining should be given to the poor
- Prayer – to be a better person, improve relationship with God, improve relationship with each other.

Why do we keep Lent?

- To focus our attention upon God, who supplies all of our needs, and less attention to ourselves and taking matters into our own hands.

Lent, the period of 40 days that precedes the celebration of Easter, has its origin in the early days of the Church. Converts seeking to become Christian, who at that time were mostly adults, spent several years in study and preparation. Under the threat of Roman persecution, becoming a Christian was serious business, so their process of preparation

was intensive! Then they went through a final period of “purification and enlightenment” for the 40 days before their baptism at Easter. The rest of the Church began to observe the season of Lent in solidarity with these newest Christians. It became an opportunity for all Christians to recall and renew the commitment of their baptism.

Today we know Lent as a season of conversion: We acknowledge the ways we have turned away from God in our lives, and We focus on turning our hearts and minds back toward God. Hence the three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These observances help us turn away from whatever has distracted or derailed us and to turn back to God. Giving up something for Lent is ultimately a form of fasting. We can deprive ourselves of some small pleasure or indulgence and offer that sacrifice up to God. Or we might “give up” a bad habit such as smoking as a way of positively turning our life back toward what God wants for us.

#### Resources

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lent>

<https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/refresher-on-the-rules-of-fast-and-abstinence-during-lent/21603>