

Lent: Our Pilgrimage of Faith

The season of *LENT* is the most penitential period of the Church Year. It is a time for Christians to focus our attention on human redemption through Christ's suffering and death.

The word *LENT* means springtime. It is from the Old English word "lengthen" recalling the lengthening of days as the dead of winter gives way to the renewing of life in spring. In the northern hemisphere we move closer to the sun, the source of life. As Christians we move closer to the Son during Lent for he is our source of life everlasting.

LENT lasts 40 days and is part of the 93 day *PASCHAL CYCLE*, which also includes *Triduum* (3 days) and the 50 days of Easter. The number 40 is significant because it reminds us of the 40 days Noah, his family and God's creatures were saved from the flood. It is the period of time that Moses, Elijah and Jesus spent in fasting as they prepared for the ministries to which God called them. It is symbolic of the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness. In the early church, a 40-day period of preparation was observed for the baptismal candidates who would study, fast and otherwise make ready for baptism and entrance into the Holy Communion on Easter.

It is therefore meet and right for us as Christians to observe the forty days of Lent as our preparation time for the celebration of Easter. The tradition of the Church and the mandate of the Gospel call us to turn away from our sins, which alienate us from God. Self-denial is one way that we can remind ourselves of the great sacrifice Jesus Christ made on our behalf. The 6th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew advises penance in three forms: Giving of alms (works of charity toward others), prayer, and fasting. Matthew is quick to point out, though, that we don't do these things to be praised or noticed by others, but to praise God who has already rewarded us by his grace.

Lent asks us to discipline our lives by praying and meditating on God's Word. We can do this by using a daily meditation guide for Lent, or by using the daily lectionary for the current year found on pages 187-188 in the front of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

Fasting by removing fats like meat from the diet has long been a tradition in the Lenten pilgrimage. Ironically, fasting in Lent prepares us for the feast of Easter. Another form of discipline may be chosen instead. We act mercifully toward others as Jesus has shown us by his example.

*However we *discipline* our lives during Lent will significantly affect our *discipleship*.

We begin the forty days of Lent with *ASH WEDNESDAY*. The worship service starts with a silent procession, suggesting the austerity of the season. (The usual festive music is absent during Lent.) We will confess our sins, but not receive forgiveness until the service on Maundy Thursday. The Confession of Sins is followed by the Imposition of Ashes. Those who desire may receive the ashes. They are symbolic of our mortality and also of our connection with the dust of the earth, God's Creation. The service then continues with the *Eucharist* (meaning thanksgiving) or the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Every Wednesday during Lent we will have the opportunity to worship the mystery of redemption in the service of Evening Prayer. These will include dramatic stories of God's mighty acts in the lives of the fathers and mothers of our faith as well as the Lord himself.

The Lenten pilgrimage concludes with Holy Week. *Palm/Passion Sunday* is the celebration of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem followed by the Passion of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion and death.

We will further commemorate our Lord's Passion in the *TRIDUUM*. Triduum means "three days" and includes *Maundy Thursday*, *Good Friday* and *Holy Saturday*. These three days are the Christian Passover where the angel of death passes over us and we are liberated from sin.

Maundy Thursday celebrates the Last Supper; Christ's ministry of service as seen in his washing of the feet of the disciples; the agony of the Garden; his arrest, and the trial. After Holy Communion the altar is stripped and we leave in silence. The service is not really over because it continues on Good Friday.

On *Good Friday* we enter a sanctuary bare of ornamentation and remember Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. But we remember these things as Christ's triumph, not as defeat. We will be using the Service of *Tenebrae*, which incorporates scripture readings and responsive readings. It is a moving service as the light of life is symbolically extinguished and the tomb is sealed. Again we recess, only to continue the service on Saturday with the *Easter Vigil*.

The *Vigil* is usually set for late night, but we begin at 7:30 p.m. so families with young children can participate. (The children will be called on to help in worship leadership.) This liturgy features the lighting of the *New Fire* and use of the *Paschal Candle*. This, of course, symbolically reverses the extinguishing of the lights on Good Friday. It is lit also at baptisms and funerals. A series of scripture lessons, prayers and songs recall the history of our redemption from Creation to Easter.

*This does not replace the Easter Sunrise service, but adds to our corporate solemnization of God's saving acts in the lives of all people.

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