

THE HISTORY AND SYMBOLS OF LENT

The word *Lent* is from the Old English root *lengthen*, meaning Spring. This is when days get longer.

SYMBOLS OF LENT:

Color - Purple

The color for the Church Season is purple. Until about forty years ago, purple was used for both Lent and Advent. It has long been felt that, even though they are both seasons of preparation, Advent and Lent had different moods, Advent being more anticipatory, Lent being more penitential. To distinguish the two, the preferred color for Advent is blue in the Lutheran Church. (The Roman Catholic Church has not authorized the change.)

Ashes

Ashes are an ancient symbol of humility, grief, and repentance.

When Abraham **humbly** approaches God to beg for mercy for the cities of the plain he says, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes." (Gen. 18:27)

Tamar **grieves** for her circumstances: "But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went." (2 Samuel 13:19)

"When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry." (Esther 4:1)

When Job **repents** he says, "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:6)

Ashes are a sign of new growth.

In early spring farmers used to burn the stubble left in the field from last year's harvest. The practice cleared the field and got it ready to plant again. Thus, the ashes became a sign of preparation for new life.

Ashes are made from last year's palms.

The celebration of Palm Sunday is marked by waving palms and welcoming Jesus in triumph. Every year the palms are saved and burned to mark on the heads of the congregation on Ash Wednesday.

Ashes are a sign of our mortality.

On Ash Wednesday, ashes are marked on people's foreheads in the sign of the cross, in remembrance of baptism. The words are said, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return"; the words God spoke to Adam and Eve to remind them that they would die. Our Lenten journey begins with the reminder that we will die as we prepare for the good news of the Resurrection at Easter.

No Alleluias

The word “alleluia”, an ancient word of joyous praise, is omitted from the worship service. Alternate sections of the liturgy are used during Lent and no hymns that use the word are sung. This highlights the austere nature of the season. In some churches, as part of the Ash Wednesday service, the word “Alleluia” is written on a sheet of paper or banner and buried on the church property.

No flowers

In the same way, no flowers are used to decorate the church. Lent is a time for somber reflection on our lives and our discipleship. It was long the practice of the church to hold no weddings during Lent because of their celebrative nature. Now the practice is usually to avoid weddings during the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday).

HISTORY OF LENT (some references to *Church Year Guide* by Paul Bosch):

Almost as soon as Easter became a yearly festival the church began to observe a time of preparation. By the third century it was a week long fast. At the Council of Nicea it was extended to forty days – a reference to Jesus’ forty day fast to prepare for his ministry. (Matthew 4:1-2, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-2)

Easter was the preferred day for Baptism and Lent was a time for candidates for baptism to prepare themselves. Also, Lent was a time for particular sinners (either identified by the congregation or self-identified) to spend time in repentance. Because the sinners were excluded from the congregation for *forty* days, they were considered *quarantined* (from the Latin word for “forty”).

Since the seven weeks of Lent are intended to be a period of discipline and fasting, the day before Ash Wednesday took on the character of a feast – one last party. *Mardi Gras* (Fat Tuesday); *Fastnacht* (Night Before the Fast); *Carnivale* (Farewell to Meat); *Shrove Tuesday* (Forgiveness Tuesday)

LENTEN THEMES:

Catechesis

The period before Easter was a time for instruction of those to be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

Repentance

Putting off old sinfulness and turning toward a new life.

Practicing the Presence

This is an ancient term for the things Christians do to practice the presence of Christ. Extra worship services, times of devotional reading, increasing time in prayer, etc.

Fasting

This is where the practice of “giving up something for Lent” began. To give up a food or a habit is a discipline of Christians during this time of year. Also, some choose to fast for one day a week. If a complete fast is too severe, some people may choose to give up a meal.

Almsgiving

This is a time to evaluate how we share our abundance with those who have less.