

The Season of Lent

Theme:

Retreating Into the Wilderness with Jesus

Dates:

Lent is a forty-day period before Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the day before Easter Day. We skip Sundays when we count the forty days, because Sundays commemorate the Resurrection.

In the Roman Catholic Church, Lent officially ends at sundown on Holy Thursday, with the beginning of the mass of the Lord's Supper.

Colors:

In most churches, the decorations are purple or blue, royal colors to prepare for the King.

The East:

In Orthodox churches, this season is called the Great Lent. It begins on Clean Monday.

Special Days:

Ash Wednesday
The Annunciation, 25 March

Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days. All churches that have a continuous history extending before AD 1500 observe Lent. The ancient church that wrote, collected, canonized, and propagated the New Testament also observed Lent, believing it to be a commandment from the apostles. (See *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book V, Section III.)

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that does not involve starvation or dehydration. Quite often, our bodily appetites control our actions. The purpose of fasting is to make your bodily appetites your servant rather than your master.

The Western Church

Because Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, we skip over Sundays when we calculate the length of Lent. Therefore, in the Western Church, Lent always begins on Ash Wednesday, the seventh Wednesday before Easter.

In many countries, the last day before Lent (called Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, Carnival, or Fasching) has become a last fling before the solemnity of Lent. For centuries, it was customary to fast by abstaining from meat during Lent, which is why some people call the festival *Carnival*, which is Latin for *farewell to meat*.

The Eastern Church

The Eastern Church does not skip over Sundays when calculating the length of the Great Lent. Therefore, the Great Lent always begins on Clean Monday, the seventh Monday before Easter, and ends on the Friday before Palm Sunday—using of course the eastern date for Easter. The Lenten fast is relaxed on the weekends in honor of the Sabbath (Saturday) and the Resurrection (Sunday). The Great Lent is followed by Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday, which are feast days, then the Lenten fast resumes on Monday of Holy Week. Technically, in the Eastern Church, Holy Week is a separate season from the Great Lent.

Special Days

The purpose of the liturgical calendar is to relive the major events in Jesus' life in real time, which is why Lent is forty days long. If Jesus were born on 25 December, then His conception would have been nine months earlier, on about 25 March. That is when the angel Gabriel would have announced Jesus' birth to Mary. Thus 25 March is known in the historic church as *The Annunciation*.

Roughly speaking, the Western Church consists of Protestants, Catholics, and Anglicans. The Eastern Church consists of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Oriental Orthodox churches, and the eastern-rite churches affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church

Copyright ©1995-2004 by the Rev. Kenneth W. Collins. All rights reserved.
Reprinted by permission.