

THE LITURGICAL SEASON OF LENT

If you think Lent seems early this year, you're right. Because Easter Sunday is not celebrated on a fixed date (but rather, determined by a complicated process we won't go into here), it is a little different each year. This year, Easter falls on March 31. Likewise, Ash Wednesday is early this year, falling on Wednesday, February 14, 2024.

For many centuries, Christians have set aside the 40 days prior to Easter Sunday as a season of fasting, prayer, and spiritual preparation. As history goes, it is hard to find the beginning, but we know that Irenaeus, who lived at the end of the second century, stated the practice of fasting in preparation of Resurrection Sunday was a tradition "handed down from our forefathers." Since he was living only a few generations after the apostles themselves, we can assume the practice developed very early in church history (Hunt). Over centuries of practice, the season took the form of forty days of fasting, plus six Sundays—on which fasting is avoided because Sundays, even during Lent, are feast days in honor of the resurrection. The forty-day period is believed to imitate the time that Jesus fasted in the wilderness, after he was baptized by John and before he began his itinerant teaching ministry (see Matthew 4). After the Protestant Reformation (in the 1500s), some Christians rejected the practice as a man-made attempt to earn one's salvation rather than trusting in the all-sufficient work of the Savior. This is why people who have been Christians all their lives may not have heard of Lent, much less practiced it in any way.

Our current season in church history has seen a return to many ancient practices of the early followers of The Way. As we enter the season of Lent approximately 2024 years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, let's do so as a way to connect with Jesus in his suffering, and also with the generations of believers who have traveled this road before us. Let's add our stories to the testimony of "the great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 11).

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, an echo of the Hebrew Bible's ancient call to sackcloth and ashes as a way of demonstrating repentance and sorrow for sin. When the pastor places ashes on our foreheads at the end of the Ash Wednesday service, we'll hear these words, "from dust you came, to dust you will return," as a reminder that our earthly lives are short.

For the next seven Sundays, Crossings' weekly devotions will focus on the central work of Christ Jesus in his death and resurrection. We have created a devotional guide based on the Revised Common Lectionary to help us participate in the Lenten journey with Christians all over the world.

Each week includes a devotional thought (day 1) based on one or more of the selected passages. This guide also features three days of guided prayer focused on the readings from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles of the Bible (days 2, 3 and 4). We will also introduce a piece of art along with a guided meditation. This practice is referred to as *visio divina*, a long established spiritual practice of using images to hear the voice of God in a unique way. At the end of each week, we encourage you to reflect on the practices and express your gratitude to God for revealing himself through words and images.

CONSIDER USING THIS GUIDE AS A DAILY DEVOTIONAL:

- Day 1 - Read the devotional thought.
- Day 2 - Old Testament guided prayer
- Day 3 - Gospel guided prayer
- Day 4 - Epistle guided prayer
- Day 5 - Visio divina - an image with guided prompts
- Day 6 - Journal your weekly reflections, thanking God for what he is showing you.

WORKS CITED

Chittister, Joan. *The Liturgical Year*. Thomas Nelson, 2009.

Hunt, Christopher. "A Short Version of the Long History of Lent." *Groundwork Bible Study*, 1 February 2018, <https://groundworkonline.com/blog/a-short-version-of-the-long-history-of-lent>. Accessed 13 January 2024.