



Lent

My Lenten Journey

I have grown to appreciate Lent. When I was a child, most of the time I was barely aware of Lent, even though I was actively involved in a United Methodist congregation. I saw that some of my friends who were Roman Catholic had ash crosses on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday. I heard them talking about giving something up for Lent; and I noticed that they ate fish on Fridays. But for me, Lent was mostly a nonevent. My United Methodist church had special worship services during Holy Week, but the weeks before Palm Sunday were pretty much like other weeks in the year. As an adult, I came to realize that Lent is not a season just for Roman Catholics; it can be a time for Christians of any tradition to intentionally draw closer to Jesus Christ.

Origins of Lent

The season of Lent developed over the centuries from the early church's instruction of candidates for church membership. In the first two or three centuries of Christianity, new Christians took part in an extensive new-member education program, usually lasting three years. The final weeks of this three-year process were an intense time of prayer, fasting, and instruction before the candidates were baptized during the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday evening. Gradually, these spiritually intense weeks of preparation for new Christians also became a time of renewal for those who were already Christian. "Since these new members were to be received into a living community of faith, the entire community was called to preparation," writes biblical scholar Dennis Bratcher. "Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the church would prepare to rejoin the community."

In time, Lent became a season of forty days. Forty is a significant biblical number. After Noah built the ark and gathered the animals, the Flood lasted for forty days. The Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land. And most significant for Lent, Jesus' time of prayer and fasting in the desert before he began his public ministry lasted for forty days.

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The Session at a Glance

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. What is Lent? How and why do we observe it? How does observing Lent enrich our lives?



Meet Our Writers

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Sometime during the 600's, Wednesday was designated as the beginning day of the Lenten season. This day is now called Ash Wednesday (which this year falls on February 17). The Lenten season lasts until Holy Saturday (April 3 of this year). Since there are actually forty-six days from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, some may wonder why Lent is considered to last only forty days. Sundays, which are always a celebration of Easter, are not included in the count of Lenten days; so the Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday are *in* Lent, but they are not *of* Lent.

Practices of Lent

In the Middle Ages, Christians in western Europe fasted throughout Lent, usually eating just one meal a day and abstaining from meat. Some adopted even more extreme fasts, forgoing not only meat but also eggs, milk, and cheese. Regulations for Lenten discipline were modified over the centuries. For many Roman Catholics today, Lent is a time of prayer and self-denial. Adults in good health are expected to eat just one meal a day on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and not to eat meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays in Lent (which is how the tradition of eating fish on Fridays during Lent started). Many Roman Catholics also give up something for Lent; abstinence from alcohol or chocolate is a popular choice.

Some leaders of the Protestant Reformation did not embrace Lent. In fact, John Calvin dismissed it as a "superstitious observance." Martin Luther argued that people should not fast "with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work." Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli argued that following the regulations of Lent was more about following Rome than Jesus Christ.

Recently, some Protestants have begun to embrace some of the traditions of Lent. In *Slate* magazine, journalist Andrew Santella writes that this influx of Lenten tradition has two sources. First, a number of people raised in the Roman Catholic Church are now members of Protestant churches and have brought some of their traditions with them. Second is a Protestant embrace of classic spirituality, reflected in the popularity of Richard J. Foster's 1978 book *Celebration of Discipline*. Foster, a Quaker theologian, encouraged people to rediscover spiritual practices like meditation, fasting, simplicity, and solitude.

Lenten disciplines are being rediscovered not only by mainline Protestants but also by other Protestants, evangelicals, and nonliturgical churches. For example, although most Baptists do not observe Lent,

Core Bible Passages

Luke's account of Jesus' temptation in the desert reminds us of his humanity and helps us discover how we can deal with temptation (**Luke 4:1-13**). All three of the temptations in this Scripture were very powerful, in part because they were persuading him to do good things. If Jesus could turn a stone into a loaf of bread, he could feed not only himself but also other hungry people. Jesus could accomplish so much good if he had all the glory and authority of all the kingdoms of earth. And he could start his public ministry with a flourish if he were miraculously saved from certain death by angels in full view of everyone in Jerusalem. People would be mesmerized by him from the outset.

But all three were temptations to turn from God. The second temptation, in which the devil offered worldly glory and power if Jesus would worship him, is the most explicit turning. Yet if Jesus agreed to any of the three, he would be following the devil's path, not God's.

The text tells us that Jesus fasted during his forty days in the wilderness (**verses 1-2**). Each time he was tempted, he answered with a biblical text. Of course, the devil showed scriptural knowledge as well, quoting from **Psalms 91:11-12** in his third attempt to sway Jesus. But Jesus trumped the devil by quoting **Deuteronomy 6:16**, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test."

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the Reverend Kermit McGregor of Calvary Baptist Church in Missouri finds value in the Lenten discipline of fasting, which is “a great way to focus and to enter more deeply into prayer” and to identify with Christ’s sacrifice. According to the Reverend Daniel K. Dunlap of Houston Graduate School of Theology, “there is a trend . . . toward more sacramental forms and it is not surprising to see the recovery of imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday.”

Sarah Wilson, editor of *Lutheran Forum*, writes that with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, it is easy to lose focus on what is most important. One way to refocus on God is to adopt a Lenten discipline. “This discipline is not supposed to be some kind of punishment,” Wilson argues. “The point of it is to do something that will catch your attention every day, and every time your attention is caught, you focus your mind on God, remembering what [God] has done for you.”

“Lent is not about being miserable, sad, and funereal in anticipation of Good Friday,” asserts Daniel Benedict, former director of worship resources at the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship. He thinks of Lent as “a time for the church to journey together toward Easter and the reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant.”

Congregational Observance

Congregations can do much to help members observe a meaningful and holy Lent. Some ideas include:

Provide a checklist of a number of spiritual practices. People can use the list as an aid to discovering and choosing practices for Lent.

Host soup-and-sandwich suppers once a week during Lent. These simple meals provide a time for Christians to gather for food, fellowship, and spiritual nurture. This can be an ecumenical effort. While I served as one of the pastors of Hockessin (Delaware) United Methodist Church, the churches of the Hockessin Inter-Church Association (HICA) sponsored such soup-and-sandwich suppers. Each week, a different church would host. The host church provided soup and beverages, and those attending brought their own sandwiches. The host church also led a brief worship service in its tradition.

Provide Lenten devotionals for all who are interested. Your congregation could also develop its own devotional. One possibility is to ask for submissions this Lent to be used for next year’s devotional.

Sponsor short-term classes for spiritual growth. Possibilities include a study of some spiritual practices such as *lectio divina*, Bible studies, or other options. Your congregation might want to consider short-term classes for children and youth during this time as well.

Encourage people to engage in service opportunities during Lent. Consider opportunities that are common during December, such as visiting residents of nursing homes, but that other groups rarely think of doing the rest of the year.

Host a concert series during Lent featuring sacred music. You might feature a variety of different genres such as classical, Christian contemporary, or Southern gospel music.

Be creative in your support of the One Great Hour of Sharing. This is one of the United Methodist special offerings, suggested for the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14 of this year. The One Great Hour of Sharing offering supports

Lenten Checklist

Daniel Benedict offers a checklist of spiritual practices for Lent, based on a resource he developed while serving a church in Chula Vista, California. This checklist can help you make commitments for spiritual growth during this season. Here are some options:

Spend time in solitude each day.

Read a book for spiritual growth.

Read through the **Gospel of Luke** two times.

Keep a journal of prayer concerns, questions, and readings.

Make a list of people with whom I have a broken relationship. Pray for each person on the list, and let God guide me in my thoughts and feelings toward them.

Forgive someone who has hurt me.

Visit a shut-in neighbor or church member once a week.

Write a thank-you letter once a week to a different person who has touched my life.

Say no to something that is a waste of time and/or money.

Pray for strength to resist racial prejudice and for courage to oppose it.

Listen and respond to Jesus’ call to love my neighbor by _____.

Live out my baptismal promise to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression” by _____.

Benedict suggests that to be most effective, you should share your plan with someone as you enter the season. During Holy Week, report back to that person about your Lenten experience.

the work of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), providing the necessary funds so UMCOR can respond quickly whenever disaster strikes, such as in Haiti. One idea is to ask people who fast to donate the cost of the meals they miss to UMCOR. Perhaps those involved with your congregation's United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, or youth ministry could have a group fast and seek sponsors to pledge a set amount of money for each hour a participant fasts, with the proceeds going to UMCOR. You could conclude the fast with a celebratory breakfast at the church.

Returning to My Lenten Journey

While I had little direct experience with Lent as a child and teenager, the season is now a vital part of my spiritual life. Every Lent I fast for at least two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. I fast for approximately twenty-four hours each time. On Ash Wednesday, I eat nothing after dinner on Tuesday evening until dinner on Wednesday evening. I will drink water during that time, but no other beverage. Every hunger pang I feel is a call to prayer. When my stomach growls, I also remember that as much as I need food, I need God even more.

Some years during Lent, I adopt a new spiritual practice; and I set out with the understanding that I will engage in this practice for the season. I may decide to continue this practice throughout Easter, or I may return to it at another Lent.

For me, Lent has become a time of personal spiritual renewal. Contrary to popular opinion, it is easy for pastors to get caught up in the busyness of everyday life and lose focus on what is really important. Lent provides a time for me to refocus, renew, and recommit myself to Jesus Christ; and perhaps it can be such a time for you as well.

Wesley and Spiritual Disciplines

John Wesley believed the means of grace are “outward signs, words, or actions” God uses to deliver grace. Wesley understood that the means of grace include works of mercy (doing good for others) and works of piety (spiritual disciplines). “The chief of these [spiritual disciplines] are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord’s Supper,” Wesley wrote. “These we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”

Wesley considered prayer to be the most important spiritual discipline. He had an expansive view of prayer. “Whether we think of; or speak to, God, whether we act or suffer for him, all is prayer, when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him,” Wesley wrote in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

In his early years, Wesley fasted every Wednesday and Friday; later he fasted every Friday. He believed fasting was a biblical practice that advanced holiness. Wesley read the Bible daily. He urged reading a chapter from the Old Testament and the New Testament every day. He advised praying before and after reading, and “frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read.”

Lectio Divina

Lectio divina (Latin for “divine reading”) is a prayerful way to engage Scripture rooted in Jewish traditions of reading and praying over Scriptures. Such sacred reading was an important part of the life of Benedictine monastic communities by the fifth century A.D.

Luke Dysinger, a Roman Catholic priest, writes, “Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. In *lectio divina*, God is teaching us to listen . . . [God] does not reach out and grab us; rather, [God] gently invites us ever more deeply into [the divine] presence.”

To practice *lectio divina*, Dysinger suggests first selecting a biblical text you wish to pray. You can select a biblical book, focus on a Scripture passage from a recent worship service, or choose a passage at random. Remember that the goal is not to “cover” a set number of verses; let God choose the amount of Scripture you pray.

Next, become comfortable and silent. Read the text slowly, listening for a word or phrase that strikes you as significant. Memorize it by slowly repeating it to yourself. Dysinger advises not to be afraid of distractions. Instead, “allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.”

Then speak to God, using ideas, images, words, or all three, as you would interact with one who loves you and accepts you. “Give to God what you have found within your heart.” Finally “rest in God’s embrace,” and rejoice in knowing that God is present with you.

Lent

How does observing Lent enrich our lives?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternative” to plan this session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Pray the following prayer aloud, or ask a volunteer to lead it.

O God, just as Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness, teach us to keep a holy Lent during these forty days. As he resisted temptations, give us strength to resist the temptations we face. During this season, may we draw closer to you and renew our commitment to live as your people; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

EXPLORE the Topic

Talk About Lenten Memories

Ask group members to pair up and talk about their Lenten memories. Ask: How did your family observe Lent when you were a child? How did your church fam-

ily observe Lent? What were the most meaningful Lenten traditions for you when you were a child? Do you still maintain these traditions? Why or why not? What are the most meaningful Lenten traditions for you today? Ask volunteers to share a favorite childhood tradition with the whole group.

Discuss Lenten Origins

Review “Origins of Lent” (pages 1–2). Lent grew from the early church’s practice of having a time of prayer, fasting, and instruction before candidates were baptized at Easter. These weeks of preparation for new Christians also became a time of renewal for those who were already Christian. Why is such a time of renewal helpful for people of faith? Lent was also a time for those who had been separated from the church to prepare to rejoin the faith community. Would such a process for reconciliation be helpful in your congregation or group? Why or why not?

Consider Lenten Practices

Read highlights from the section “Practices of Lent” (pages 2–3). Some leaders of the Protestant Reformation were concerned that the traditions of Lent were

more about following church leaders than following Jesus Christ.

Ask: What are some potential downsides to Lenten practices? What can be done to help people experience Lent as an opportunity, as Sarah Wilson says, to “catch your attention every day, and every time your attention is caught, you focus your mind on God”?

Engage Scripture Through *Lectio Divina*

Review “Core Bible Passages” and “*Lectio Divina*” (pages 2; 4). Luke Dysinger also recommends a group method of *lectio divina*. This model is used in some churches in developing nations where access to books is limited. The same text is read aloud three times. Each time, the participants listen in silence, meditate, and then share what they have discovered. The first reading is to hear a word or phrase that touches the heart. The second reading is to “hear” or “see” Jesus Christ in the text. The third hearing is to experience Jesus calling us.

Form small teams to explore Luke 4:1-13. Have a volunteer in each team read the biblical text while the rest of the group listens and reflects on the passage in the

silence that follows. Then ask each participant what word or phrase has touched him or her. Have a second volunteer, preferably someone of the opposite gender from the first reader, read the same text, followed again by a time of silence. This time ask the participants what each heard or saw. Have a third volunteer read the passage. After the silence, ask the participants to share any insights into what Jesus is calling them to do or to become through this text.

Make Commitments for Spiritual Growth

Review “Lenten Checklist” (page 3). Ask: What are the benefits to having such a checklist? What possibilities could you add that would be meaningful to your congregation or group? Take some time for each participant to consider silently what commitments she or he will make for this Lent. Encourage the group to share their plans with someone and, later, report back their experiences.

Develop Congregational Suggestions

Review the suggestions for observing Lent in the section

“Congregational Observance” (pages 3–4). What does your congregation do to help members observe a meaningful and holy Lent?

Imagine that your FAITHLINK group is a task force commissioned to recommend ways your congregation can more effectively encourage people to refocus, renew, and recommit themselves to Jesus Christ. Brainstorm what your congregation could do. To be most effective, do not discuss the ideas during the brainstorming. Instead, let the ideas flow.

Afterward, discuss the ideas using these questions: Which of these suggestions do you think would be most readily embraced? Is it possible for a congregation to offer too many Lenten practices? What can your congregation do to help people not feel overwhelmed with Lenten duties and thus miss that Lent is to be a time for spiritual renewal?

Create an Advertising Campaign

You will need large sheets of paper, markers, crayons, pencils, scissors, tape, and other craft supplies. Form teams of three or four.

Say: For this activity you will need to use your imagination. Pretend that your group works for an advertising agency. You have been contacted by Promote Lent, a new nonprofit organization focused on encouraging people to observe Lent in order to refocus, renew, and recommit themselves to Jesus Christ. Design an advertising campaign to proclaim the organization’s message to people who are caught up in the busyness of everyday life and lose focus on what is really important. Have the teams present their campaigns to the larger group.

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

If participants made commitments for spiritual growth using the Lenten checklist during this session, ask them to hold their completed checklists while you or a volunteer pray:

O God, help us to observe a meaningful and holy Lent. May this be for us a season of self-examination, prayer, fasting, reading and meditating on your Holy Word, and drawing closer to you, so that we refocus, renew, and recommit ourselves to you. Amen.

Teaching Alternative

In the main essay, we read that one of the sources of the recent Protestant interest in Lenten traditions is “a Protestant embrace of classic spirituality, reflected in the popularity of Richard J. Foster’s 1978 book *Celebration of Discipline*” (page 2). It would be difficult to fully explore *Celebration of Discipline* in your regular FAITHLINK sessions or during Lent. Instead, consider offering a twelve-week study at some other time of year.

To make the most of this opportunity, design the experience so that the group focuses on one chapter a week. Have participants read the chapter early in the week, and then for the rest of the week engage the spiritual discipline described in that week’s chapter. When the group gathers each week, discuss each participant’s experience with that week’s spiritual discipline.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

African American History and Methodism

Methodism has a rich and vibrant African American history that has shaped all United Methodist Christians. What is this history, and how has it enriched Christian faith?