



## WHAT IS LENT

## SO THE REAL BEGINNING OF LENT IS ASH WEDNESDAY?

Yes. Ash Wednesday, the day after Mardi Gras, usually begins with a service where we recognize our mortality, repent of our sins, and return to our loving God. We recognize life as a precious gift from God, and re-turn our lives towards Jesus Christ. We may make resolutions and commit to change our lives over the next forty days so that we might be more like Christ. In an Ash Wednesday service, usually a minister or priest marks the sign of the cross on a person's forehead with ashes.

## WHY ASHES?

In Jewish and Christian history, ashes are a sign of mortality and repentance. Mortality, because when we die, our bodies eventually decompose and we become dust/ dirt/ash/whatever. Repentance, because long ago, when people felt remorse for something they did, they would put ashes on their head and wear "sackcloth" (scratchy clothing) to remind them that sin is pretty uncomfortable and leads to a sort of death of the spirit. This was their way of confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness.

## WHERE DO THE ASHES COME FROM?

On what we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem while people waved palms and cheered him on. Less than a week later, Jesus was killed. The palms that were waved in joy became ashes of sorrow. We get ashes for Ash Wednesday by saving the palms from Palm Sunday, burning them, and mixing them with a little water (like tears) or oil. It's symbolic.

## WHAT DO CHRISTIANS DO WITH ASHES

At an Ash Wednesday service, folks are invited to come forward to receive the ashes. The minister will make a small cross on your forehead by smudging the ashes. While the ashes remind us of our mortality and sin, the cross reminds us of Jesus' resurrection (life after death) and forgiveness. It's a powerful, non-verbal way that we can experience God's forgiveness and renewal as we return to Jesus.

## SO WHAT IS LENT?

At Jesus' baptism the sky split open, the Spirit of God, which looked like a dove, descended and landed on Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, My Beloved, with whom I am pleased." Afterward, as told in Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus was sent into the wilderness by the Spirit. Where he fasted and prayed for 40 days. During his time there he was tempted by Satan and found clarity and strength to resist temptation. Afterwards, he was ready to begin his ministry.

(Speculation)

Maybe Jesus needed some time with God to sort through the major changes happening in his life. Maybe needed to get away from family, friends and the familiar routine in order to see God (and himself) more clearly. Perhaps he wanted some intentional time with God as he searched for direction and answers like you. Like Jesus, we may need to take some serious time to pray and listen for God.

*Lent is heavy. Lent is serious. It is a time of reflection and self-analysis and intentional consideration of what we believe and stand for as Christians. But, as dark as this sounds, if we do Lent right, we will emerge in 40 days with a renewed understanding of the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us and a renewed trust in God's sovereignty in the light of the greatest spectacle and celebration that the universe has ever known: **Easter.***

## SO, WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a season of the Christian Year where Christians focus on simple living, prayer, and fasting in order to grow closer to God.

## WHEN IS LENT?

It's the forty days before Easter. Lent excludes Sundays because every Sunday is like a little Easter. Basically, it's about one-tenth of a year (like a tithing of time). Mardi Gras is the day before Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday. This year, Lent is from Wednesday, February 22 through April 8, 2023.

## MARDI GRAS? WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH JESUS??

Mardi Gras means "Fat Tuesday." It refers to the day before Lent starts. Since Lent always starts on a Wednesday, the day before is always a Tuesday. And it's called "Fat" or "Great" because it's associated with great food and parties.

In earlier times, people used Lent as a time of fasting and repentance. Since they didn't want to be tempted by sweets, meat and other distractions in the house, they cleaned out their cabinets. They used up all the sugar and yeast in sweet breads before the Lent season started, and fixed meals with all the meat available. It was a great feast! Through the years Mardi Gras has evolved (in some places) into a pretty wild party with little to do with preparing for the Lenten season of repentance and simplicity. Oh well. But Christians still know it's origin, and hang onto the true Spirit of the season.

## WHY "DO" LENT? HOW DO I START?

Are you searching for something more? Tired of running in circles, but not really living life with direction, purpose or passion? It's pretty easy to get caught up in the drama of classes, relationships, family, and work. Our lives are filled with distractions that take us away from living a life with Christ. We try to fill the emptiness inside us with mindless TV, meaningless chatter, stimulants, alcohol, too many activities or other irrelevant stuff. We run away from life and from God.

Lent is a great time to "repent" -- to return to God and re-focus our lives to be more in line with Jesus. It's a 40 day trial run in changing your lifestyle and letting God change your heart. You might try one of these practices for Lent:

**FASTING:** Some people have been known to go without food for days. But that's not the only way to fast. You can fast by cutting out some of the things in your life that distract you from God. Some Christians use the whole 40 days to fast from candy, tv, soft drinks, cigarettes or meat as a way to purify their bodies and lives. You might skip one meal a day and use that time to pray instead. Or you can give up some activity like worry or reality tv to spend time outside enjoying God's creation. What do you need to let go of or "fast" from in order to focus on God? What clutters your calendar and life? How can you simplify your life in terms of what you eat, wear or do?

**SERVICE:** Some Christians take something on for Christ. You can collect food for the needy, volunteer once a week to tutor children, or work for reform and justice in your community. You can commit to help a different stranger, co-worker or friend everyday of Lent. Serving others is one way we serve God.

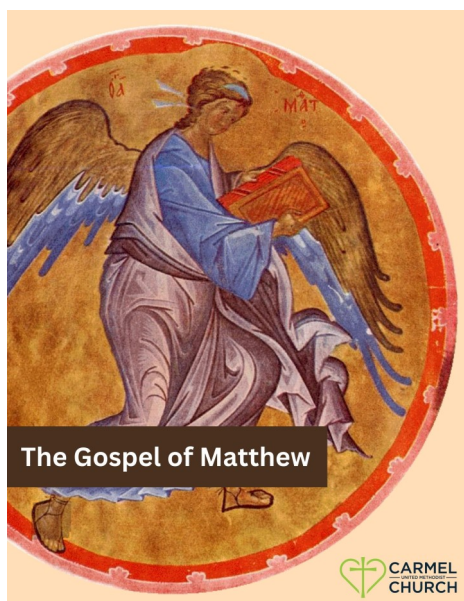
**PRAYER:** Christians also use Lent as a time of intentional prayer. You can pray while you walk, create music or art as a prayer to God, or savor a time of quiet listening. All can be ways of becoming more in tune with God.

Thanks to Rev. Penny Ford (Alabama) for this short course on Lent.

*Christians from many different traditions celebrate Lent. How will you use the time to grow closer to God?*

## TOP TEN LIST: THINGS YOU CAN TRY FOR THE LENTEN SEASON

10. Try an electronic fast. Give up TV, video games, texting, tweeting, e-mail and all things electronic for one day every week. (or everyday of Lent!) Use the time to read & pray.
9. Start a prayer rhythm. Say a prayer every time you brush your teeth, hear an ambulance, or check your e-mail. Before you text someone, pray for them.
8. Read one chapter in the Bible each day. (Matthew's a good book to start with. Psalms, too.)
7. Forgive someone who doesn't deserve it (maybe even yourself.)
6. Give up soft drinks, fast food, tea or coffee. Give the money you save to help others in crisis.
5. Create a daily quiet time. Spend 30 minutes a day in silence and prayer.
4. Cultivate a life of gratitude. Write someone a thank you letter each week and be aware of how many people have helped you along the way.
3. Be kind to someone each day.
2. Pray for others you see as you walk to and from classes or drive to and from work.
1. Volunteer one hour or more each week with a local shelter, food pantry, tutoring program, nursing home, prison ministry or a Habitat for Humanity project.



During Lent, we will continue our study of the Gospel of Matthew. Pastor Tim Burchill, and others, will lead us by discussing a chapter each week.

Visit our website to join our Lenten study focusing on the Spiritual Practices of the Saints. It will be a fun spin on the traditional type of study as we are adding a podcast to our set of materials for the class. Sign up today at: <https://carmelumc.ccbchurch.com/goto/forms/504/responses/new>

