



NEW

April 2010

Unity of Faiths

Lent, in Catholic tradition, is the period of the liturgical year leading up to Easter. The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer - through prayer, penitence, almsgiving and self-denial - for the annual commemoration during Holy Week of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the events linked to the Passion of Christ and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Conventionally, it is described as being forty days long, though different denominations calculate the forty days differently. The forty days represent the time that, according to the Bible, Jesus spent in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry, where he endured temptation by Satan.

This practice was virtually universal in Christendom until the Protestant Reformation. Some Protestant churches do not observe Lent, but many, such as Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Episcopalians, do.

What is Lent

Lent is the forty days before Easter. The first day of Lent varies every year depending upon the date of Easter. During Lent, Christians reflect on Jesus' life and ministry as they prepare for Easter, the day Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. The forty days of Lent symbolize the days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). As Christians seek a deeper knowledge of Jesus, they, too, face their own humanity as they reflect on their relationship with Jesus and the role of sin in their lives.

Why Ash Wednesday Begins Lent

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. As Christians enter a spiritual wilderness during Lent, many traditions mark believers' heads with ashes, a term called imposition of ashes, on Ash Wednesday. These ashes symbolize the believers' humanity and reliance on God for strength and support. Just as Jesus sought God's help in the wilderness, believers are also encouraged to remember they are human and very much in need of God's help, too.

How Christians Observe Lent

Many churches offer special Lenten suppers and education courses, that believers might strengthen their connection to God in the days before Easter. Many Christians mark Lent with special prayer, ritual, and a discipline, or spiritual practice specific to that individual. Popular spiritual disciplines may include Bible reading, prayer, and fasting. Some Christians, particularly Roman Catholics and certain Episcopalians, will observe a fast of no meat on Fridays. Often, fish is the entrée of choice for Fridays during Lent. This practice has roots in a much older tradition where religious people would fast during the entire season of Lent, but the discipline was limited to Fridays for various reasons.

What to Give Up During Lent

Some Christians choose to give something up during Lent, as they believe this practice brings them closer to Jesus' suffering in the wilderness. This discipline varies widely between individual Christians. Common items considered as a Lenten discipline may include giving up sugar, dessert, pop, or other items of indulgence. Giving up bad habits, such as cussing, drinking, or unhealthy patterns of relationships, are also popular options. Other Christians may decide to do something good instead of give something up in honor of Jesus' struggle during Lent. Volunteering at a homeless shelter, being compassionate to an enemy, or attending church regularly during Lent are examples of doing something good.

Sunday, a holy day, is seen as a break from the Lenten fast and time to rejoice in God's power and glory. Some Christians choose to take a break from their fast on this day, while others may persist throughout the whole season of Lent, arguing that Jesus got no break from the wilderness on Sundays.

Ritual of Lent

Whether Christians choose to give up something for Lent or not, the season is a time for them to focus on Jesus' suffering in the desert and grow, with Jesus, so that they might better understand and appreciate Jesus' death and resurrection during Easter Week.

How Christians observe Lent can vary widely, but all share a desire to draw closer to Jesus in the days before Easter, honor his battle to overcome evil, and cleanse themselves of sin. Christians hope, by observing Lent in whatever way they choose, that they can better welcome Jesus into their hearts and lives this Easter and always.

Other related fasting periods

The number forty has many Biblical references: the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 24:18); the forty days and nights Elijah spent walking to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8); the forty days and nights God sent rain in the great flood of Noah (Genesis 7:4); the forty years the Hebrew people wandered in the desert while traveling to the Promised Land (Numbers 14:33); the forty days Jonah in his prophecy of judgment gave the city of Nineveh in which to repent (Jonah 3:4).

Jesus retreated into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days, and was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-2, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-2). He overcame all three of Satan's temptations by citing scripture to the

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devil, at which point the devil left him, angels ministered to Jesus, and he began his ministry. Jesus further said that his disciples should fast "when the bridegroom shall be taken from them" (Matthew 9:15), a reference to his Passion. Since, presumably, the Apostles fasted as they mourned the death of Jesus, Christians have traditionally fasted during the annual commemoration of his burial.

It is the traditional belief that Jesus lay for forty hours in the tomb which led to the forty hours of total fast that preceded the Easter celebration in the early Church (the biblical reference to 'three days in the tomb' is understood as spanning three days, from Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning, rather than three 24 hour periods of time). One of the most important ceremonies at Easter was the baptism of the initiates on Easter Eve. The fast was initially undertaken by the catechumens to prepare them for the reception of this sacrament. Later, the period of fasting from Good Friday until Easter Day was extended to six days, to correspond with the six weeks of training, necessary to give the final instruction to those converts who were to be baptized.

Converts to Christianity followed a strict catechumenate or period of instruction and discipline prior to baptism. In Jerusalem near the close of the fourth century, classes were held throughout Lent for three hours each day. With the legalization of Christianity (by the Edict of Milan) and its later imposition as the state religion of the Roman Empire, its character was endangered by the great influx of new members. In response, the Lenten fast and practices of self-renunciation were required annually of all Christians, both to show solidarity with the catechumens, and for their own spiritual benefit. The less zealous converts were thus brought more securely into the Christian fold.

The significance of the number forty in Christianity, Judaism and Islam

Punishment, testing, purification, for some it means Arba'een -- the last of the forty days of mourning for Imam Hussein.

The number forty holds a particular significance in the monotheistic religions. Whether or not it refers to a precise number, or a long period of time is a matter of debate. Linguistically, the number forty conveys "many" in many Biblical texts. However, some theologians say that it is used to mean a "time of testing" or a period of "revival or renewal".

It is not just in the New Testament that the number forty plays an important role; forty is a key digit in the **Torah**, also. For violating a negative commandment, the Torah specifies a punishment of forty lashes. Therefore, some believe the number forty to be associated with punishment. Others believe forty to be the number of testing. In the time of Noah, the waters abated after forty days, referring to a time of judgment -- the earth was judged by water. Moses spent forty years in Egypt; he was tested and trained there.

To a member of the Church of Rome, the number forty represents preparation, penance and purification. The Lenten fast in preparation for Easter lasts forty days.

To some Christians, forty signifies the testing of man's weakness. It seems that forty might be the time required to test oneself. How far can we allow ourselves to trust God and rely on His provision?

Another concept of forty is purification. According to Jewish philosophy, the number forty has the power to improve the spiritual condition of things. Forty measures of water purify a person, forty days of rain purified the world, and Moses was purified during the forty days he spent on Mount Sinai. Prophet Mohammad rose for service and reached prophecy after forty years.

Prophet Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty nights and days worshipping God. His people walked the desert for forty years and searched for the Promised Land for forty days.

Jesus walked the desert and fasted in the wilderness for forty days; God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent (Jonah 3:4). It had been prophesized that Egypt would be barren and desolate for forty years. According to the Talmud, it takes forty days for an embryo to be formed in its mother's womb.

Imam Baghir has said: "The prayers of someone who drinks wine are not accepted for forty days." (Al-Kafi, Vol. 6, p. 400) There is also a hadith from Prophet Mohammad that the prayers of a person who gossips would not be accepted for forty days and nights.

The unacceptance of prayer is the highest punishment for a Muslim. Based on the two hadith, it is understood that drinking wine and gossiping are intolerable acts.

Imam Ali has narrated from Prophet Mohammad that one who memorizes and preserves forty hadith relating to their religious needs shall be raised by Allah as a learned scholar on the Day of Resurrection. It is said that a person's intellect attains maturity in forty years, everyone according to his own capacity.

It is believed that one who assists a blind man for forty steps becomes worthy of entering heaven. In this case, 'blind' can be extended to a person who lacks inner vision or guidance. Helping another person who needs physically to see in order to cross the road is rewarded. Assisting a person who cannot find their path in life and needs help to discern the correct way to take is also rewarded.

Believers have also been encouraged to devote themselves to God Almighty for forty days to see the springs of wisdom break forth from their hearts and flow from their tongues. Devotion can have many meanings. For Instance, when one begins every task in the name of God and for God, everyday activities become worship.

No matter what the significance of the number forty, in the hearts of countless Muslims, forty stands for Arba'een, when these devout followers mourn the tragedies of Karbala and the hardships endured by Imam Hossein's family and the family of his companions.

In Hindu religion too, the number forty has a great significance. Many prayers of Hindu religion have forty stanzas and are famously known as chalisa (the well known being Hanuman chalisa composed by Saint Tulsidas). Mandala deeksha is a ritualistic discipline followed by Hindus for forty days. One of the most famous mandala deeksha is the Ayappa deeksha that concludes with a pilgrimage to the Sabarimalai temple

in Kerala.

As the Vedas proclaim: "Ekam Sath Vipra Bahudaa Vadanthi". Truth is but one, scholars interpret it in different ways.



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