

Lent and Holy Week Explained



Palm Sunday

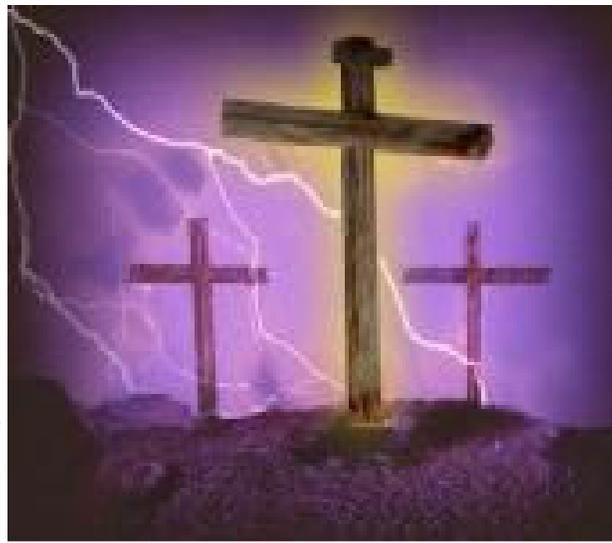


Spy Wednesday



*Mauudy
Thursday*

Maunday Thursday



Good Friday



Holy Saturday



Easter

What is Lent?

Lent is a season of preparation leading up to Easter. It is the forty days, plus the six Sundays (which are mini-Easters) before Easter. For centuries, it has been observed as a special time of self-examination and penitence. Lent is a time for concentration on fundamental values and priorities, not a time for self-punishment.

Throughout Lent, the worship services of the church take on a simpler tone, appropriate to this season. Banners are removed from the church. Crosses showing the risen Christ are veiled. The word “Alleluia” is not used in the words of the liturgy or hymns. These practices help the worshipping community to mark this season of renewal as a special time in the church year.

Observing Lent

The custom is to mark the season of Lent by giving up some things and taking on others. Both can serve to mark the season as a holy time of preparation.

Some examples of things people give up for Lent include sweets, meat for all or some meals, and alcohol. In most cases, giving up something for Lent can be made more meaningful by using the money or time for another purpose. For example, meal times on fast days could be spent in prayer. Another example is that if you give up meat during Lent, the extra money that would go to meat dishes can be given to a group, such as World Vision, which works to end hunger worldwide.

Some things added during Lent are daily Bible reading, fasting on Fridays, times of prayer, taking a course of study related in some way to spirituality.

Note that the season of Lent is forty days plus the six Sundays. This is because Sundays are celebrations of Jesus resurrection and are always an appropriate day to lessen the restrictions of Lent. So that if you have, for example, given up chocolate for Lent, you could indulge in a weekly candy bar on Sunday.

Lent is also an especially appropriate time for the practice of confession. While confession to a pastor is not required to receive God’s forgiveness, it can be a meaningful rite of reconciliation to God.

Shrove Tuesday

This is actually the day before Lent begins. The day is named for the “shriving” or confessing that was traditional on this day before beginning Lent. This day is also known as Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday,” because it was a time for eating the things from which one would abstain during Lent. Pancake suppers are traditional as they were a way of using up some of the ingredients not needed during Lent.

Ash Wednesday

The first day of Lent is marked with a special liturgy. The theme for the day, though not for all of Lent, is that we stand as sinners condemned to die, but for God’s grace. In the Old Testament, ashes were a sign of penitence (feeling regretful at offenses) and mourning. Ash Wednesday is one of two days of special observance (the other being Good Friday) for which fasting is recommended.

It always seems jarring to hear the Ash Wednesday (don’t disfigure your face to show men you are fasting) and then be invited up to receive ashes on your face! But the ashes for which this day is named are not to show anyone that you are fasting. What they are is shown by the words accompanying them: “Remember, O Man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Thus, the ashes show not fasting, but dying. Remember, O Man, and everyone who sees you that we are dying—headed for the earth. The words first spoken by our loving God on the day of the Fall ring down the centuries: “Remember! You are dust! To dust you will return!”

But there is more. The ashes are placed on the forehead in the form of a cross. A reminder that though we will surely return to the earth and die, become ashes, as it were, there is One who came among us and did this—one over whom death had no claim. And His death is the destruction of death itself—the wiping out of sin, the gift of unending life.

Thus the ashes are placed upon a dying people under the sign that this death has itself been transformed by His enduring it for us. You will die, but you will not die hopeless. You will go to the grave in the certainty that He who became dust and ashes for you will raise you from the earth to which you have returned and bring you into the Home He has prepared. Glory to Jesus Christ forever!

Refreshment Sunday

The fourth Sunday of Lent has long been observed as a day for completely relaxing the disciplines of Lent. It is also known as Mothering Sunday as this was the first Mother’s Day and a traditional time for remembering your mother.

Palm Sunday

This Sunday before Easter is the last Sunday in Lent. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday which derives its name from the spreading of Palms in Jesus’ path as He entered Jerusalem. Matthew 21:8 tells us: “*Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.*” We commemorate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem with a blessing of palms and a procession in which the whole congregation carries palms. The palm branches are then burned to create the ashes for next year’s Ash Wednesday.

The day is also marked by reading the story of Jesus’ passion (the word used to describe Jesus’ death comes

from “suffering,” which is one old meaning of passion).

Revealed in Leviticus 23:40 and Revelation 7:9, we see palms used as symbols of gladness and victory, and in II Kings 9:13, the spreading of garments is recognized as an act of homage. It was also a symbol of the Roman Empire, so it was also an expression of the people looking for an earthly king to vanquish their oppressors.

Palm Sunday has also been called “Hosanna Sunday”. “Hoshanna” is the first word of the office for the blessing of the palms and was shouted in acclamation by the crowds which welcomed Jesus as He entered Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9).

Spy Wednesday

Wednesday of Holy Week is called Spy Wednesday by some because of the preparations of Judas for betraying Christ by agreeing to show the chief priests and Sanhedrin where they could capture Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:6-15; Luke 22:3-6; John 6:64-72; Zachariah 11:9 -12)

Joseph, who prefigured Christ, was betrayed by his older brother, Judah—the father of the tribe from which King David and Christ came. Judah sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt for a few shekels of silver (Genesis 37-38; Psalm 68:2-29; Acts 1:13-20). Jesus was then betrayed by another Judah, a man who is more commonly known as Judas Iscariot (“Iscariot” refers to Kerioth, a town in Judea).

Passover Seder

We celebrate the Passover as People of the Covenant. No, not of the Old Covenant, but as People of the Promise Fulfilled. The Jews knew full well what St. John meant when he said, “*Behold the Lamb of God.*” This meal has an important significance to us. It commemorates not only an historical event, when the Angel of Death passed over the Israelite households, but for us it is the time when the Covenant was passed from the People of the Old Israel to the People of the New Israel in God’s promise fulfilled. One particularly moving seder service concludes with the Lord’s supper and then moves into the Nave to finish with the stripping of the altar and *strepitus*.

Maundy Thursday

Thursday of Holy Week commemorates the institution of the Lord’s Supper. It is called Holy Thursday by some. Its German name is Gründonnerstag (Green Payday) because the Gospel of the day was John 13:1-15, where Judas’ greed leads him to decide to betray Christ. It is also known as the Day of Foot Washing because of Jesus’ example of washing His disciples’ feet to show servant leadership (John 13:3-17).

Its present English name, Maundy Thursday, is derived either from the words of John 13:34: “*I give you a new commandment; that you love one another.*” [Latin *mandatum novum do vobis—maundy* stems from the Latin word *mandatum* (commandment)], or from the custom of carrying gifts to the poor in maunds (hand baskets) on that day.

This night we read from Psalm 22, and you are invited as the Pastor strips the altar to take the items to the Nave and gently lay them on the table in the order removed, leaving a bare altar—prepared for the Good Friday service. Crosses are removed or veiled to mark the solemnness of the occasion.

Good Friday Stations of the Cross

These are depictions of 14 incidents in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death from Pilate’s house to being placed in the tomb. They are used for the service called the Way of the Cross, which visits each station in turn with a brief reading, response, collect and on some occasions, a meditation. This is particularly appropriate for Good Friday and all Fridays in Lent.

Join in a faith walk with Christ as He journeys with His cross, and we with ours, in service to others. This service is held in the afternoon during the hours Christ was on the Cross, starting at 1:00 pm. It uses various things in and around the walk to represent scenes from Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, and death, as the worshippers move to the various stations to hear the Gospel, a reflection on its meaning, sing a hymn, and pray as the story is told.

Good Friday Service of Shadows (Tenebrae)

The Friday in Holy Week is a time for remembering Jesus’ death. Traditionally there is a Good Friday service at noon as Jesus hung on the cross from noon until 3 P.M. There may also be an evening service. This is the second day of special observance for which fasting is recommended. One should use discretion in deciding how best to observe this day. There is no celebration of Communion from Maundy Thursday until the Easter Vigil ends early Sunday morning at sunrise.

This service is also known as Tenebrae (Latin for “shadows” or “darkness”). It symbolizes the temporary victory of the forces of darkness. It uses a series of Scripture readings and meditation done in stages while the lights and candles are gradually extinguished to portray the growing darkness—not only of Jesus’ death—but of hopelessness in the world without God.

The service ends in darkness, with a final candle, the Christ candle, carried out of the Nave, representing the death of Jesus. The service concludes with a loud noise (*strepitus*) symbolizing the closing of Jesus’ tomb and the convulsion of nature at the death of Christ. The worshippers leave in silence to await Easter.

Easter Vigil

After the Service of Shadows (Tenebrae) on Good Friday the Easter Vigil begins in darkness as a flame is lit. This is the Christ candle returned to the Nave.

A service is appropriate from after sunset on Holy Saturday until sunrise Easter morning. This service begins in darkness and a new fire is lit, from which the Christ candle is lighted. It signifies the light of Christ coming into the world anew at the resurrection. This service ends the season of Lent and begins the joy of the Easter season.

From the beginning of the New Testament church, the Easter Vigil was principally a means of preparing new converts for Baptism into the Christian faith. Their Baptism, then, was normally done on Easter Sunday as the central focus of the entire church year. Those baptized changed into new white clothes to symbolize their new life in Christ, which is the origin of the tradition of buying new clothes at Easter.

This time of preparation was based on a set of Scripture readings from the Old Testament that points back to the recitation of God's formation of a people in the Exodus, and a promise of restoration from Zephaniah.

Following the example of the Gospels, this establishes a critical relationship between the revelation of God in Christ and the establishment of the Church to God's past revelation of Himself and the establishment of His people Israel. This vital prominence on the connection of the Church with the Old Testament's witness to God also helps define the nature of the Church and its mission in the world by firmly grounding it in the ongoing work of God in history. The Gospel is not read again until after sunrise on Sunday at the very end of the Easter Vigil.

Holy Saturday

The service starts in the Narthex where the Christ Candle is reignited and used to light the candles of all present—signifying the saints that went before us. The Christ Candle is carried into the darkened Fellowship Hall to a series of three chants, "The light of Christ."

The service continues with readings from Creation (Genesis 26:28), the Flood (Genesis 9:8-13), the Testing of Abraham (Genesis 22:13b-18), the Parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:28-31), God's Faithfulness (Deuteronomy 31:19-21), the Valley of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:11-14), Job's Confession of the Redeemer (Job 19:25-27a), Jonah in Nineveh (Jonah 3:4-5, 8b-10), the Gathering of God's People (Zephaniah 3:18-20), and then the Fiery Furnace (Daniel 3:27-29). The service then concludes with the Gospel reading and a sermon.

Holy Saturday is the time between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and is one of the most remarkable parts of Christian teachings. It became a separate feast day in the latter half of the fourth century in Jerusalem. At that time, it was a day for new believers to receive the Sacrament of Baptism, and then their first Holy Communion. Today, Lutheran Churches recognize it as a day to renew their Baptismal vows.

We can understand from Scripture some of what Jesus was doing between His death and resurrection. When Jesus was crucified, His Spirit "*descended first into the lower parts of the earth*" (Ephesians 4:9) where He went into Hades (*Sheol*, Luke 16:19-31), took the title to Earth (Revelations 5:1; Matthew 28:18) and the keys to Hades and death (Revelation 1:18) from Satan.

Then Jesus preached to those who died without faith—condemned souls—that are waiting in the punishment side of Sheol for judgment on the Last Day (I Peter 3:18-19). He also proclaimed His victory to some evil angels (I Peter 3:19) that He imprisoned in a bottomless pit (II Peter 2:4). Some of these evil angels are to be freed (loosed) near the time of Christ's return (Revelation 9:1-11; 20:1-3; Luke 10:17-18; John 12:31-32) and some are bound permanently (II Peter 2:4; Jude 6; I Peter 3:20) awaiting their judgment.

Christ then bound Satan (limited his powers), and freed the Old Testament saints from "Paradise" (the blissful side of Sheol—the bosom of Abraham) whose sins had been atoned, but not yet removed (Luke 16:22; Luke 4:18). When Jesus was resurrected, He "led captivity captive" (Ephesians 4:8) taking the saved Old Testament saints out of Paradise to heaven (Luke 16:22). Some reentered their bodies and went into Jerusalem and proclaimed Christ (Matthew 27:52-53), but no one believed (Luke 16:30-31).

Jesus then came to the grave, raised His body and met Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-16) but He would not let her hold on to Him because He had not yet ascended to heaven (John 20:17). Jesus ascended to heaven with the saints (Ephesians 4:10; II Corinthians 12:2-4) and poured His blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant (Revelations 11:19) to make the once and for all sacrifice (Hebrew 9:12). He then came back to the grave to meet "the other Mary" (mother of James) and the others, but now they can hold on to Him (Matthew 28:9).

Easter Festival of Lights

The Gospel readings start after sunrise when the Christ Candle is returned to the Nave and the Easter Vigil ends. This return of light symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus from the grave and the light of salvation and hope God brought into the world through the resurrection. It is the triumph of the light of God's grace and salvation over the darkness of death and sin. The lights are turned on in stages as the Scriptures are read—reversing the effects of the Service of Shadows and dramatically symbolizing the "true light that enlightens everyone" (John 1:9).

Then the Pastor is given the items that were stripped from the altar on Maundy Thursday, where they are reverently replaced: chancel flowers, pulpit, lectern and altar paraments, offering plates, altar candles, missal stand, communion vessels and, finally, the Holy Scripture.

From this "new fire" on Easter morning all the other candles in the Nave are lit. Finally, all the worshippers light individual candles from the Paschal candle as they sing a song of praise.