

A HANDBOOK FOR LENT



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What is Lent?

The season of Lent derives from the ancient Church's period of preparation for those who were to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. That preparation included instruction, fasting, repentance, prayers and special acts of devotion. Today, the entire Church uses this same period and some of those same practices to prepare for the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ.

To assist in spiritual renewal, the Church makes noticeable changes in its worship. The "Alleluia" ("Praise the Lord") and the Hymn of Praise ("Glory to God," "This is the Feast") are removed from the liturgy. All hymns and songs become more reflective in nature. The paraments and banners are darker in color. On Good Friday crosses and crucifixes are covered with veils to emphasize how sin separates us from God. Everything turns inward until the victorious Resurrection when the colors brighten, the veils are removed, and the Alleluias and praises break forth in joyous celebration.

Lent is 40 days long, counting from Ash Wednesday (and minus the six Sundays, which are little celebrations of the resurrection). Those 40 days identify with Jesus' 40 days of fasting and prayer in the wilderness as he prepared for his ministry; with Moses' 40 days of fasting and prayer on Mt. Sinai as he waited to receive the Law from God; and with Elijah's 40 days of fasting and prayer on his way to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God.

The Discipline of Lent

On Ash Wednesday, as Lent begins, we are invited “to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor” by exercising the Discipline of Lent: repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love. These become the specific occasions and opportunities for spiritual renewal during this season of renewal.

Living out a discipline takes our Lord's words about self-denial seriously (Matt.16:24). Through discipline, we find freedom and grace, just as parental discipline is loving and brings a child to freedom and righteousness (Heb.12:3-13).

In the Lenten Discipline, we focus our lives on Christ's self-sacrificing passion, death and resurrection, which has brought us acceptance, forgiveness and redemption by God. Through that same discipline, we make a loving response to God.

Repentance

Repentance means turning 180 degrees away from sin to walk toward God. Repentance includes an examination of our lives and our actions in light of God's grace and love, which comes to us free and undeserved through Christ's death and resurrection.

St. Paul tells us that we have been joined to Christ's death and resurrection through our dying to sin and rising to new life in Baptism (Rom.6:3-4).

Repentance therefore also means returning to our Baptism, that occasion when we were washed of sin, joined to God in Christ and received the Holy Spirit.

Here are some ways in which we can make that return to our Baptism through repentance:

1. Remember your Baptism each day when you rise and before you retire by making the sign of the cross while saying the Invocation: “In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”
2. Attend the Ash Wednesday Liturgy to begin your Lent with this major act of corporate confession and receive the ashes as a sign of repentance and renewal.
3. Attend worship each Sunday when corporate confession is made.
4. During your daily prayers, examine your life in light of the Ten Commandments and ask God to forgive you and to lead you into ways of loving him and your neighbor more deeply.
5. Take advantage of private confession when it is offered, or make an appointment with the pastor during Lent. In preparation, read Luther's instruction on confession in the *Small Catechism*.
6. If there is conflict or tension between you and someone else in your life, seek to resolve it so that it does not become a stumbling block to your faith and spiritual growth.
7. Attend the Maundy Thursday Liturgy to receive the final absolution of Lent to close this season of repentance and renewal.
8. Renew your Baptismal vows at the Easter Day as final preparation for the great 50 days of celebrating the Easter victory.

Prayer

Prayer may generally be described as that activity in which we are drawn closer to God in contemplation and communication. Prayer is our half of a conversation with God. That means that prayer is not only speaking, but listening as well.

Prayer finds its anchor and focus in the Sunday Eucharist with the community of faith -- that Holy Supper in which we take God into ourselves by eating the Body and Blood of Christ. All prayer during the week springs forth from that union on Sunday and eagerly anticipates our Communion on the next Sunday. It helps to have a consistent time and a quiet place for prayer, although prayer can happen anytime and anywhere. A cross or crucifix and a lighted candle can help create your place for prayer. For devotional aids or spiritual direction during the season of Lent, make an appointment with the pastor.

Daily prayer might include these things:

1. Begin by signing yourself with the cross and the words of Invocation. Then simply be quiet for a moment in God's presence.
2. Use a devotional aid as a guide for prayer and meditation.
3. Use one of the Responsive Prayer services in the front of the *Lutheran Hymnal*.
4. The Psalms are a wonderful treasure for prayer.
5. Read scripture each day, perhaps the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5-7) or a portion of the Passion Narrative (Matt. 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, John 18-19). Or take a book of the Bible, divide the number of chapters by the 40 days of Lent and read those portions each day.
6. The Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creeds or even Luther's Small Catechism are good for meditation and prayer.
7. Examine yourself in light of your reading and meditation, and ask God to lead you into repentance and renewal in faith.
8. Close your prayer time with a favorite prayer, the Lord's Prayer, or the following prayer: "Heavenly Lord, thank you for this day and for this time of prayer. Through the discipline of Lent, help me to grow in my love for you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

Fasting & Abstinence

Fasting comes to us from Judaism and was recommended by Jesus both in example and teaching (Luke 4:2, Matt.6:16-18, Mark 2:20). It is a practice that is designed to strengthen the spiritual life by weakening one's attractions to pleasures of the senses. Thus fasting is always coupled with prayer and spiritual preparation.

Since ancient times, the entire season of Lent has been marked by fasting and abstinence. Fridays in particular have been a special day of fasting because of it being the day of Christ's death.

Fasting does not necessarily mean giving up all food for a day. More frequently it is the giving up or limiting of a particular food or food group (sweets, desserts, chocolate, butter, fat, eggs, etc.).

Water is never given up in a fast. In addition, children under 16, people over 65, those who are ill or on medication, pregnant women, and travelers have traditionally been excused from fasting.

Abstinence from some activity (such as television, movies, entertainment, etc.) on certain days, at certain hours or throughout the season is another way to observe the Lenten fast. This is designed to give more time for prayer and spiritual work.

Many of the following suggestions for fasting have been practiced by Christians for centuries:

1. Fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday with only one simple meal during the day, usually without meat.
2. Refrain from eating meat (bloody foods) on all Fridays in Lent, substituting fish for example.

3. Eliminate a food or food group for the entire season. Especially consider saving rich and fatty foods for Easter.
4. Consider not eating before receiving Communion in Lent.
5. Abstain from or limit a favorite activity (television, movies, etc.) for the entire season, and spend more time in prayer, Bible study, and reading devotional material.
6. Don't just give up something that you have to give up for your doctor or diet anyway. Make your fast a voluntary self-denial (i.e., discipline) that you offer to God in prayer.

Works of Love

The intention of this part of the Lenten Discipline is to connect our faith in God's love for us with actions that are loving of others in the world.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Love is why Christ came. Love is why Christ died. Love is why God raised him from the dead. Love is the whole purpose and mission of the Church and of every Christian member: to show God's love in the world.

Consider one or more of these suggestions for this portion of your Lenten Discipline:

1. Use Matthew 25:31-40 and Luke 4:18-19 as guides for choosing to do a work of love.
2. Go out of your way to do something helpful for somebody at least once a week during Lent.
3. Make a donation for the needy through your church.
4. Volunteer a portion of your time with a local service organization that serves the poor.
5. Offer to take a shut-in for errands or go for them.
6. Ask the church's pastor for suggestions of a needy place or person that could use your time, talent or treasure.
7. Contact your local government center and see if you could perform any kind of volunteer service for the community, such as picking up litter.
8. Contact a hospital, nursing home or prison about making visits. Especially see those who otherwise receive no visitors.
9. Visit shut-in members of the church. Perhaps make something and take it as a gift (check on diet restrictions).
10. When doing your work of love, meditate upon Christ's words, "As you do it for the least of these, you do it for me" (Matt.25:40).

Beginning Your Discipline

As with all things, begin with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for guidance in choosing those things that would best fit you for your Lenten Discipline.

Prayerfully dedicate all your choices to God as a commitment for the six weeks of Lent, and ask that your Lenten Discipline move you closer to God for the sake of the sufferings and death of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Keeping Your Discipline

After making your choices and beginning your discipline, it is not necessary to share your choices or your acts of love with anyone else. In fact, anonymity is regarded as better (Matt.6:1-7, 16-18).

Don't be too hard on yourself, too rigorous, or too legalistic. The idea is to have a discipline that moves you spiritually closer to God, not one that focuses you solely on your discipline.

If you break your discipline, you certainly will not be condemned eternally. However, breaking promises to God is not something to take lightly. So if you break your discipline, simply repent quietly and start over. Remember that Peter denied Jesus and all the others abandoned him. Yet all repented and were welcomed by Jesus after the resurrection.

A Lenten Discipline Worksheet

THE CHURCH'S TRADITION

A. *Repentance:* Corporate Confession on Ash. Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and all Sundays in Lent, Private Confession by appointment and during Holy Week.

B. *Prayer:* Holy Communion on all Sundays and Holy Days, Daily Private Prayer.

C. *Fasting:* Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, all Fridays in Lent, Self-denial all the days of Lent.

D. *Works of Love:* Almsgiving, volunteer work, helping others

MY DISCIPLINE FOR THIS LENT

A. For Repentance, I will:

B. For Prayer, I will:

C. For Fasting, I will:

D. For Works of Love, I will:

Making the Sign of the Cross

"(Name), receive the mark of the holy cross, as a sign that Christ the crucified has redeemed you."

Those words were spoken at your Baptism as a cross was marked upon you, perhaps with oil. That same cross is made upon you with ashes after your confession on Ash Wednesday. With that cross, we are blessed forever. Under that cross we live. And by that cross we are brought to eternal life.

As Christians, we are proud to bear the cross of Christ and to show that sign before all, whether that cross is in jewelry that we wear or embossed upon a book that we carry. For the same reasons, Christians since the second century have marked themselves with the cross, as a sign of allegiance, as a sign of blessing, and as a sign of remembrance of their baptisms.

To make the sign of the cross, one touches the forehead, the mid-section, one shoulder, then the other.

It doesn't matter which shoulder is touched first, nor which hand is used in making the sign. The sign of the cross is made at the beginning and end of private prayer, at the Invocation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at Communion, and whenever the cross symbol + is seen in the liturgy.

Because of Lent's focus on the cross of Christ, it is a good time to make use of this ancient Christian custom. Many Lutherans have "tried it on" and find that "it fits" their piety.

Should I Go to Confession?

"Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

The Church of Jesus Christ has always provided a means by which Christians burdened by sin may confess and find the healing grace of personal forgiveness. Jesus forgave sins as a part of healing and charged his disciples to do the same (Luke 5:17-26; John 20:22-23).

Martin Luther regarded private confession as a "precious and comforting treasure" (*Large Catechism* 457:7), because it "strengthens and consoles the conscience" (*Apology to the Augsburg Confession* XII:39).

Should I go to private confession? Examine yourself and your relationship with God and with others. Is there something in the way? Is there something you have trouble forgetting? Private confession is an exercise in complete honesty about ourselves that seeks to remove obstacles to our spiritual growth in Christ.

How to Go to Confession

From the Small Catechism

by Martin Luther

WHAT IS PRIVATE CONFESSION?

Private confession has two parts. First, we make a personal confession of sins to the pastor, and then we receive absolution, which means forgiveness as from God himself.

This absolution we should not doubt, but firmly believe that thereby our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

WHAT SINS SHOULD WE CONFESS?

Before God we should confess that we are guilty of all sins, even those which are not known to us, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But in private confession, as before the pastor, we should confess only those sins which trouble us in heart and mind.

WHAT ARE SUCH SINS?

We can examine our everyday life according to the Ten Commandments -- for example, how we act toward father or mother, son or daughter, husband or wife, or toward the people with whom we work, and so on. We may ask ourselves whether we have been disobedient or unfaithful, bad-tempered or dishonest, or whether we have hurt anyone by word or deed.

HOW MIGHT WE CONFESS OUR SINS PRIVATELY?

We may say that we wish to confess our sins and to receive absolution in God's name. We may begin by saying, "I, a poor sinner, confess before God that I am guilty of many sins." Then we should name the sins that trouble us. We may close the confession with the words, "I repent of all these sins and pray for mercy. I promise to do better with God's help."

WHAT IF WE ARE NOT TROUBLED BY ANY SPECIAL SINS?

We should not torture ourselves with imaginary sins. If we cannot think of any sins to confess (which would hardly ever happen), we need not name any in particular, but may receive absolution because we have already made a general confession to God.

HOW MAY WE BE ASSURED OF FORGIVENESS?

The pastor may pronounce the absolution by saying, "By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Those who are heavily burdened in conscience the pastor may comfort and encourage with further assurances from God's Word.

The Triduum:

The Three Sacred Days

The ancient Triduum, the Three Sacred Days, are the most dramatic and moving liturgies of the entire Church Year. It is the Christian Passover. The Triduum (pronounced "trid' - oo - um) counts the three days from sundown on Maundy Thursday to Easter sundown.

Once begun on Maundy Thursday, the liturgies continue in succession until the Easter victory is celebrated. Thus the Passion and Resurrection are observed as a whole, with each part and each liturgy dependent upon the next.

The central events of Christianity are commemorated during the Triduum. For this reason, it is important to plan ahead and clear calendars so that you can attend each liturgy.

Maundy Thursday

The Maundy Thursday Liturgy is one of endings and beginnings. What was begun on Ash Wednesday is brought to a close on this night. What begins this night does not end until the resurrection.

The liturgy sometimes with the sermon, which serves to bridge the ending of Lent and the beginning of the Triduum. The theme is love, our Savior's love for us, expressed in the washing of the disciples' feet, in giving himself in bread and wine, in dying upon the cross.

On Ash Wednesday, Lent began with a major act of confession and ashes. The last corporate confession of Lent is made on this night, with the absolution. The lessons of love are followed by an example of love in the footwashing, Christ the Master serving the servant. A new command derives from it: "Love one another." From this new command (*mandatum*) comes the name for this night: Maundy Thursday.

The Lord's Supper continues the love theme with Christ's self-giving of his body and blood in the forms of bread and wine. Too soon, the love feast is ended, and the markings of betrayal are seen. The symbol of Christ in our midst, the altar, is stripped bare as Christ was stripped of his power and glory. The starkness of Good Friday and death is inescapable. All depart in silence.

Good Friday

The Good Friday Liturgy begins as it ended on Maundy Thursday: with austerity, and (in many churches) with silence. The chancel is bare. In many churches there is no organ music except to accompany hymns. Everything is focused on the adoration of the Crucified Lord, reigning from the throne of the cross. The opening of the liturgy includes no praise, but proceeds directly to the Prayer of the Day and the lessons. The Passion according to St. John details the events of this day and is followed by the Bidding Prayer for the needs of our world.

The cross becomes the focus of adoration of the crucified Christ. The words of meditation are the ancient Reproaches, in which God directs his reproach at us, his people, who have crucified his Son by our sin (cf. Micah 6:3-5).

The liturgy does not end on a note of reproach, however. The closing versicles and prayer emphasize the triumph and redemption that comes through the cross. God will have the final word, but we must wait.

Easter Day

The Triduum continues on the night before Easter, and many churches celebrate the Easter Vigil at this time. It is traditional at this service for new believers to be baptized or confirmed. When there is no Easter vigil, the congregation celebrates together the victory of Christ over death on Easter Day.