

What is Lent All About?

Lent, the forty days in the Christian year that lead up to Easter, is a valuable time for Christians. The word "Lent" comes from a variety of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic words meaning "spring", a time budding with new life and hope. For Christians, Lent is not a celebration of nature; rather, it is a process of prayer and spiritual renewal looking to a time budding with new spiritual life and hope. The Lenten season is an opportunity to cultivate the interior life through spiritual exercises and practices.

In the early church new believers were baptized into its fellowship once a year on Easter. Leading up to their baptism a period was set aside for their formation in the faith. In their baptism they would signify their death to the power of evil and their call to be risen into new life in Christ, who overcame the power of death on the first Easter. In time the whole community of the faithful came to experience this season as a time for growth in faithful discipleship. Lent emerged as a time when both new converts, as well as the body of believers, would join more closely with the living, dying and rising of Jesus. Thus, in today's Church, as in the early Church, Lent is meant to be experienced as a time for the making of disciples.

Rather than being seen as a forty day endurance test, or a bleak and restricted time, Lent is a quality season. It is a time of rediscovery, a golden chance to open ourselves more deeply to the beauty and power of the dying and rising to new life in Jesus. It is a time to ponder the reality of the death and resurrection and to allow it to soak into our deepest parts.

Lent is the time for new life and hope. In the Lenten season, self-examination is crucial. An individual's response to the call for purposeful reflection on one's need for God is an important factor in choosing how one will observe Lent.

Through the centuries, Lent became characterized by practices which typify the meaning of this season. One of these is prayer. Lent invites us to step aside from the busyness of our daily life, the many things that clutter and crowd our life in order to get in touch with the self and at a deeper level, with the Spirit of God within. Essentially, prayer is attention to God; it places us in a posture of listening. Amidst all the noise and tumult of our daily life, Lent encourages us to experience a new depth of prayer, an authentic attentiveness to God through which we learn to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Second practice associated with this season is fasting. Fasting signifies a willingness to free ourselves from the desires, ambitions and pursuits that center on the demands of the self. It points to a willingness to be freed from the self-centeredness that drives so much of our life in order to experience more fully the liberating power of Christ. Fasting reminds us of the truth that the deepest hunger in our lives must be the hunger for God. Third practice is almsgiving. True hunger for God leads to the giving of ourselves to others. Lent calls us to a greater compassion for others, especially the poor and needy. It invites us to examine ourselves honestly on how subtly we have accepted society's addiction to possessions, to affluence. Through the days of Lent we are encouraged to focus our eyes on Jesus who gave his whole life in faithfulness to God, giving his life totally out of love for all. As we keep that clear focus we join our life in the loving intention of Jesus to give himself for all.

Lent is a shining opportunity for experiencing "the unsearchable riches of Christ", a time for spiritual growth so that we might walk in newness of life. Let us determine how we can take advantage of this opportunity and then dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to our Lenten practice.