

Psalm 25:1-10 and Mark 1:9-15 | First Sunday in Lent | February 18, 2024 | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

What is Lent and why do we practice it anyway?

Lent is a reflective time in the church in which we remember the time in the wilderness spent by Jesus. Often, within Christian traditions that practice Lent, there is a spiritual component—which could include giving “up” something or adding a spiritual discipline like prayer, reading a devotional, or attending a weekly service.

Lent is from an Anglo-Saxon word, “lencten”—spring. When the days are getting longer in the Northern Hemisphere, this season began as a period of fasting leading up to Easter.

Why isn't Easter always on the same day?

Well, Easter is called a “moveable feast” because it's determined on the schedule of the moon.

Easter is always celebrated the first Sunday following the first Paschal full moon that occurs on or after the first day of Spring.

Paschal full moon? What does that mean? Paschal comes from the Aramaic word “Passover”—when the Israelites slaughter a Passover lamb and the final plague that makes pharaoh relent and let the people go.

Jesus, due to the writing of Paul, is considered our paschal lamb—his sacrifice is for our salvation—so the feast of resurrection often coincides with Passover.

Except this year, of course.

Thanks to a shorter Hebrew Calendar, based on the lunar cycle, an extra month is added to keep pace with the seasons. This year's Passover is the last week of April. While Passover and Easter often coincide, they don't this year.

The earliest possible day of Easter is March 22nd. This is RARE. It's actually the most unusual date according to long-term averages.

The most common dates for Easter?

Actually, this year's date—March 31st... and April 16th.

When I say Lent, there may be a few misconceptions about it.

For one, it's not just Catholics that observe Lent. Liturgical based traditions, like most Lutherans, also observe Lent.

But, in my experience—especially from working with chaplains from many non-denominational and Baptist backgrounds, Lent is not universally recognized by all Christians.

Sermon Transcript

I almost got brought in to help with Ash Wednesday by a Baptist chaplain who doesn't know about the tradition—he asked if I could come by his unit—but fortunately our Catholic chaplain was available.

So, if the predominant groups of Christians in our country don't practice Lent, perhaps that is why there are so many questions about it—even in a Lutheran church.

We don't need to overthink it. Lent is measured 40 days, plus all the Sundays—which don't count as Lent because Sunday is the celebration of the resurrection—so it's really 47 days... before Easter.

After the Passover, the people of Israel spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness until entering the promised land.

And of course Jesus, who is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, spends 40 days being tested by the devil.

40 is a symbolic number in the Bible. It's meant to get our attention—something new is about to happen—new life and transformation will occur.

Lent is our chance to intentionally observe that time. To prepare our own hearts for what is to come. To take on different forms of spiritual discipline to be ready for Easter.

But to take on any new discipline, it's important that we set parameters and expectations. It's valuable to keep accountability.

I see Jesus entering the wilderness as a way for him to get ready for the difficult ministry that is to come. He takes the time away, alone, to prepare for the mission at hand.

When he returns, John the Baptist is arrested and the time is at hand. There's no waiting around in Mark's telling of the story—the kingdom is near!

The next thing that Jesus does is gather his disciples. They need to get trained up and prepared to lead the way.

I can't even imagine how unsettling this must have been—to follow this new teacher and participate in a ministry that hasn't been done before.

The disciples are completely blind—trusting in the guidance of Jesus to help them figure out what they're doing.

Following the way of Jesus, especially when it comes to exploring new spiritual disciplines, can be challenging. We might feel unprepared. It can be like doing a trust fall and counting on others to help us along the way.

Kind of like this

TRUST FALL

Ouch.

Sermon Transcript

I felt bad for the leader. What did he forget to do?

He assumed that Harrison knew which way to fall. He stood in front of Harrison, so that made Harrison think everyone was in front of him—and to fall forward.

He didn't fully prepare him to succeed in his task—he thought he had, but he assumed everyone knew what to do and they didn't.

Lent can be that way, too.

What do we do? Are we supposed to do something? Is it bad if we DON'T do it?

You might have heard about “giving up” something for Lent—chocolate, social media, alcohol, meat.

These can all be part of a spiritual discipline that helps us get closer to God.

But they aren't the only way.

A few years ago, Pope Francis shared a Lent reflection that I've quoted before, but it bears repeating.

Giving up something for Lent isn't just about a changed behavior—**it's about changed hearts** (Francis).

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worried and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints; contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful
- Fast from bitterness; fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled
- Fast from words; be silent and listen

Depriving ourselves from things won't change our hearts towards how we love and care for our neighbor.

Look at the right side of this list. Is there a spiritual discipline you need to focus on? Is there a behavior that you know you've neglected and your heart is filled with anger or worry?

Sermon Transcript

Write it down. On your bulletin or in a journal when you get home. Type it to yourself in on your phone. Write it on a white board on your fridge.

I'm writing "fast from words... be silent and listen" and putting it next to my desk. I know how important that intentional listening will be for me during this season of reflection—waiting for Easter. Waiting to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, who died for our sins as an act of grace and love.

Be graceful to yourself. Be kind and forgiving to others. Be loving when our hearts are inclined to turn to hate.

Lent is about our attitude and how we put our trust in God—and know that Christ is there to catch us when we fall. Amen.