

## **What is Lent, Anyway? (It doesn't belong under the bed)**

Lent is a time of preparation before Easter. Lent is an old English word that means "spring." For Western Christians, it begins 40 days before Easter, the day when Christ's resurrection from the dead is celebrated.

However, if you were to count backwards 40 days from Easter (April 1 this year), you would not end up at February 14. That's because the Church says that every Sunday is a "mini-Easter," a feast day and so Sundays are not counted in the 40 days. During Lent, we are encouraged to reflect on baptism and its basis in the death and resurrection of Jesus: a time for rebirth and renewal in preparation for Easter.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday where the faithful receive ashes on their foreheads with the words, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." The ashes are made from palm branches and so there is a connection between Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, and Ash Wednesday. Like those who originally carried palm branches to greet Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, all of our own promises will come to naught. By Friday of that same week, the cries had turned to "crucify him!" and Jesus was dead.

One tradition that has been recorded from early Christianity is that of fasting in preparation for Easter. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. In the Western Church, people have fasted by not eating meat during this time. More recently, people have given up chocolate or sweets for Lent. In the Eastern Church, people traditionally give up all animal products including milk, butter and eggs. We are also encouraged to intensify our spiritual lives by participating in additional worship services and prayer and to find additional ways to help the poor. At Messiah, we will gather together for worship on Wednesdays at 11:00 am, followed by a simple lunch of soup and bread. We will also collect food for those in need.

During Lent, we highlight the fact that God sacrificed everything for people who most often want to do it "my way," and not necessarily God's way. That is sin and because God is the source of Life, when we turn away from God, we turn toward death. But God loves us enough not to leave us to our own destructive devices. Instead, God became human to live with us and to allow us to think we could kill God. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God essentially said, "I will continue to love you and care for you no matter what. I offer you a new way of life and a new way of being human, one that truly is Life. There is nothing that can defeat my love for you."

This new life and this victory over death and our own destructive tendencies is what we celebrate in Easter. And in preparation for that, we spend time in Lent, looking at who we are and what God has done for us.