

Community Church of Issaquah

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The Meaning of Lent

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This week we in the Church will begin a special time of observing traditions that have been with us for centuries. On Wednesday, we will observe Ash Wednesday. This will begin a period of contemplating and preparing for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ on the holiday we call Easter. From Ash Wednesday to Easter is a period of 40 days plus the 6 Sundays is called Lent or the Season of Lent. There are several significant days that we will focus on and observe, including Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But we begin this Wednesday.

The word ‘Lent’ is a shortened form of the word ‘lenten’ which means “spring season.” For those of us in the Christian faith, this spring season or Lenten Season, is a time of reflection about the final days of the life of Jesus Christ. Primarily, we are called to do three things during this period of contemplation: prayer, fasting, and giving. Prayers generally are focused on seeking God’s forgiveness and receiving God’s mercy and grace. Fasting, or giving something up that is a regular part of your life, is a daily reminder of things we can surrender in our lives. I have to personally be careful with my choice of fasting. I tried unsuccessfully to give up my Starbucks visits, my Facebook visits, and cheese. I once tried giving up chocolate but was caught by the pastor who asked, “I thought you didn’t like chocolate and never ate it, so how can you give that up?” Oops. Busted. But each of us can find one thing in our lives that we could give up for the Lenten Season.

The last way of observing Lent is to participate in the act of giving or doing something good for someone else. This is a way of responding to and sharing God's grace. This could be making an offering for the church or any other needed request. In doing any or all three of these acts we should remember that it does not cause us to earn God's grace, generosity, or love. But it is an excellent time to focus on what God has sacrificed for us as we look toward the days when Jesus was crucified and resurrected for us to have forgiveness and acceptance as a believer in Christ.

For some cultures, the Lenten Season actually will begin on the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. This day has various names – Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday. It has a variety of activities connected to it. Some observe Shrove Tuesday as Pancake Tuesday; others consider it a day to over indulge in eating as they prepare for fasting. Obviously, that is called Fat Tuesday. And if you have ever been to New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gras, you would witness a huge parade, hours of celebrating and the eating of much more food than any one person should indulge in.

For many Christians, Shrove Tuesday is a day of preparation. The word 'shrove' is derived from the word 'shrive' which means to obtain absolution of one's sins by confessing and repenting. It is difficult to understand how that meaning has evolved into a day of over-eating. For the faithful, it is a day in which we take time to burn the palm branches from the previous Lenten observance of Palm Sunday. Those ashes are blessed and are a significant part of the next day, Ash Wednesday.

In Psalm 51 verses 7 through 10, we find a cry for repentance. *“Cleanser me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity. Create in*

me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” This is what Ash Wednesday is all about. The ashes from the palm branches symbolize two main important things – death and repentance. In services that many churches hold on Ash Wednesday, participants will come forward to receive an anointing of ashes in which we say that we are sorry for our sins and that we want to use this Lenten time to work on correcting our faults, to cleanse our hearts and grow in our relationship to Christ.

Though we will not be observing Ash Wednesday as a congregation, as individuals we can take time during that day to reflect on our own lives as we seek forgiveness and grace and at the same time, anticipate the joy we will experience as we await the message of Easter and Christ’s victory over death. May we join in prayer.

Lord, we seek your mercy as we move into this time of reflection and confession. We are aware that we have fallen short of your glory, but we seek your mercy and grace. As we come to a time of Lent, we ask that you be near us. Through your Holy Spirit help us to feel your forgiveness. Help us to have strength of overcome temptation and challenges that we cannot do alone. We thank you, Lord, that as we enter Lent, we know that Easter is coming. Death will not have the victory because of Jesus’s resurrection. Help us to keep the joy of this season in our hearts for the days of our Lenten Season. Help us to be the bearers of the fruit of your Spirit. We pray that on this Ash Wednesday we might experience your redemption and move into the days ahead with anticipation of your granting us a renewed life. We pray this our prayer as a community of faithful believers and in the name of Christ.
Amen