

Understanding Lent

by Carolyn Moomaw Chilton

Before we begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday (March 1 this year), the church celebrates **Shrove Tuesday** - the day before Ash Wednesday. Historically, it was the custom to use up all milk, eggs and fat in a household since these were not allowed in the strict fasting of Lent. Doing this meant that Shrove Tuesday foods became very rich, and the day has often been known by the name "Fat Tuesday." Pancakes and doughnuts are traditional Shrove Tuesday foods. Another name for this day is *Carnival* meaning "farewell to meat." Medieval Christians developed carnivals to celebrate one last time before the Lenten fast. One of the most well-known such carnivals is Mardi Gras.

The name of Shrove Tuesday, however, is derived from a different custom: that of confessing sins (being shriven) in order to begin the spiritual battle of Lent renewed by an awareness of God's power and mercy.

The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencton* meaning the time of year when the days grow long. The season begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with the Easter Triduum (meaning three days) that includes Maundy Thursday through Easter Sunday. Because Lent is determined by the movable date of Easter Day, the dates are different each year. Do you know an easy way to find these dates? (Hint: look in the Prayer Book on page 882.)

Lent is forty days long excluding Sundays. Since every Sunday is a "little Easter" celebrating the resurrection, Sundays remain feast days even during the solemn Lenten season. The five Lenten Sundays are followed by the Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday), which ushers in Holy Week.

In the early church, Lent was the time of preparation for the Easter baptism of converts to the faith. Persons, called catechumens, who were to receive the sacrament of baptism were expected to fast and study. The Bible readings for the five Sunday in Lent are a short course in the meaning of baptism.

Symbols and Traditions of Lent:

- Color: purple for penitence and royalty, or rough linen or a similar material, unbleached, raw, plain, and austere, to reflect the mood of Lent. This is based upon the sackcloth of Old Testament mourning.
- Ashes - these are prepared from the previous years palms used on Palm Sunday. The ashes symbolize our mortality and sorrow for our sins. The people of the Hebrew scriptures put ashes on their foreheads as a sign of penitence.
- Alleluias, joyful canticles, the *Gloria in excelsis* are omitted from worship and replaced with songs and responses that are more in keeping with Lent's contemplative mood.
- Vestments and hangings are more austere. Flowers are omitted from the altar.
- The Cross is a symbol of Christ and his sacrifice, love, redemption, atonement, and victory.
- Stations of the Cross began in the Holy Land as a series of devotions along the *Via Dolorosa* (Way of Sorrow) and later spread to churches, where the faithful stop to pray and with paintings or carvings that outline Jesus' passion. Emmanuel has a set of Stations of the Cross. Do you know where they are?

Celebrating Lent in the Home and in the Parish

Farewell to Alleluia: The penitential nature of Lent means that we omit from worship the Alleluias, joyful canticles, and the *Gloria in excelsis*. These are replaced with songs and responses that are more in keeping with Lent's contemplative mood. An activity to teach and reinforce this is to "bury the alleluias." Make an alleluia poster or banner. There could be one for the church, or perhaps one per family. Put the banner in a cardboard tube or envelope. At the end of your Shrove Tuesday celebration carry the banner in a procession to its Lenten hiding place. This can be somewhere in the church, or even buried outside. (Just remember where you put it!) On Easter morning before the service, "resurrect" your banner and carry it in the Easter morning procession.

Letting Go and Taking On:

Many people observe Lent by self-denial – giving up something to increase their awareness of their dependence on God alone. This is often such things as sweets, caffeine, or alcohol. Others find it helpful to take on a special discipline to increase their spiritual life. This could be a reading a special book (often in a church class or book study group), a new prayer time and focus, an exercise routine, or a family project that benefits the community (this could be tied to the Lenten calendar).

Lent is also an excellent time to examine how we share our faith with others (evangelism)! How is your personal Lenten journey opening you to inviting unchurched family and friends to join you at worship?