

What is the significance of the 40 days before Easter?



In the English language, the special season before Easter is called “Lent.” The word comes from the “lengthening” of daylight hours as we progress from the darkness of winter to the new light of spring.

Observing a 40 day period of penance and/or anticipation, immediately prior to the Paschal Feast (EASTER) the greatest feast in the Church. **The Scriptures are full of the significance, perhaps known only to God, of the number 40.**

In the Old Testament, God punished mankind by sending a flood over the earth for 40 days and nights. The people of Nineveh repented of their sins with 40 days of fasting. The Prophet Ezekiel lay on his right side for 40 days as a precursor to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. The Prophet Elijah fasted and prayed for 40 days on Mount Horeb. Moses fasted 40 days and nights while on Mount Sinai. Moses and the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 penitential years until they entered the Promised Land. (*You may want to read one of these Bible stories to the children!*)

In the New Testament, the Lord fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness (where He was tempted by Satan -- *Jesus triumphs*) in preparation for the beginning of His public ministry.

We model our 40 day season of Lent today on this holy tradition, established throughout Salvation History, the story of God's relationship with humanity. Most importantly we observe these 40 days of Lent in imitation of Our Lord - the example for us all.

Very early in the history of the Church, the practices and duration of Lent became more regulated, encouraging 40 days of penitential practices, typically of prayer and fasting because we take Jesus as our model, to prepare ourselves for the Paschal feast, that is, Easter. Each year the Church observes Lent where we, like Israel and our Lord, are tested. **We participate in abstinence, times of fasting, confession and acts of mercy to strengthen our faith and devotional disciplines. Fasting breaks undue attachments to material blessings and stimulates our spiritual appetite. Humble service breaks the stranglehold of pride.** And the word of God is shown as the sword of the Spirit, the secret weapon that slashes through the enemy’s lies. **The goal of every Christian is to leave Lent a stronger and more vital person of faith than when we entered.**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "The seasons and days of penance in the course of the liturgical year (Lent, and each Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church's penitential practice. These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies and pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works)." (CCC 1438)