

THE SYMBOLS OF LENT

Colors: Violet is the usual color for Lent, symbolizing repentance. Red on Good Friday relates to Jesus death, while white is the color for Easter.

Ashes placed on the forehead hint at an ancient ritual—covering oneself with ashes in penitence. Receiving the cross shaped “smudge” reminds us that we are dust and is a public statement of repentance. Usually the ashes are from the previous year’s Palm Sunday branches, illustrating the circle of the Church Year.

The **Forty Days of Lent** parallel the 50 days which Jesus spent in fasting and prayer in the wilderness.

Palm branches in ancient times signified victory and were used in triumphal processions by Romans and Jews.

The **Paschal or Easter Candle** is a large, decorated and dated candle, lit each year at the Easter Vigil bonfire and then carried into the darkened church. Standing for the risen Savior who is the light of the world, it is then displayed prominently at services and baptisms during the year.

Pretzels had their origin in early Christian Lenten practice. Made from simple dough which has no dairy or fat, pretzels remind us of fasting and, shaped like two arms crossed, of prayer.

A **fish** is a Lenten symbol for the obligation to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and to abstain from all flesh meat on every Friday in Lent.

Stones remind us of Jesus’ experience in the desert for forty days and being tempted by the devil. Jesus remained steadfast and overcame the temptations. The stones symbolize austerity and rigor, desolation, misery and sadness.

MORE ABOUT THE THREE BASIC LENTEN DISCIPLINES



Fasting: Expresses our desire to find happiness in God rather than in the satisfaction of our physical needs. The control we gain over our appetites helps us recognize more deeply that all true and lasting pleasure comes from God. Knowing this we are freed to gratefully accept food and savor it, or to avoid or limit foods that we know are unhealthy for us. Through fasting, our relationship to ourselves is reoriented toward God.



Almsgiving: Provides assistance to the poor among us and helps us recognize God as the true source of our security. Property and wealth exercise less control over us when we give away or share our wealth out of love for God and for others. Almsgiving is a way of bringing our relationship to others into the orbit of Christ’s love.



Prayer: Changes our relationship to God. Through prayer, we admit our need for a power that is greater than ourselves. We acknowledge our limitations and let go of the drive to control everything. In the process, we open ourselves to all that God has to offer us.



WHY DOES LENT SEEM SO NEGATIVE?

Starting with the somber symbol of ashes, Lent indeed has its negative side, in part because Lenten discipline aims to make us aware of our own weakness and need for conversion and renewal. We won’t seek a doctor if we don’t know we’re sick. We won’t seek help unless we realize how much we need help. But the purpose of Lenten discipline isn’t negative. Self-denial is necessary, said St. Augustine, because, unless we can give up what is good, many of us cannot avoid committing evil when tempted. Self-denial helps us empty ourselves so that we can be filled with God, helps us hunger and thirst for the food and drink our souls need. We freely give up good for the promise of something better. We should not undertake Lenten disciplines as if by themselves they heal us, make us holy or earn God’s favor. Rather, their purpose is to open our hearts so that the Holy Spirit can work in us.

READINGS FOR LENT 2023

Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

1st Sunday: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

2nd Sunday: Genesis 12:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; Matthew 17:1-9

3rd Sunday: Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

4th Sunday: 1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

5th Sunday: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

Palm Sunday: Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11;
Matthew 26:14—27:66

Holy Thursday: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

Good Friday: Isaiah 52:13—53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16 and 5:7-9; John 18:1—19:42

Easter Vigil: Genesis 1:1—2:2; Genesis 22:1-18; Exodus 14:15—15:1;

Isaiah 54:5-14; Isaiah 55:1-11; Baruch 3:9-15, 32—4:4;

Ezekiel 36:16-17a, 18-28; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10