

Lent, observing and the readings

Forty Days of Lent, 2008

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# **Forty Days of Lent, 2008**

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***“Oh, my. A members-only area  
on the message board?”  
The Sacristy Rat***

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And on the VERY LAST PAGE: Instructions on how to gain access to a special “members only” area at [nolosolo.com](http://nolosolo.com). Please join us in an ad hoc, on-the-run community to observe Lent together.

# Lent: the Not-So-FAQ

*Lent: it's not just for quitters.*

It takes a peculiar sort of mind to enjoy the details of liturgical practice and such. Someone who'd read Adrian Fortescue's *Liturgy of the Mass* just for the fun of it, if you get my drift.

But I like that sort of stuff, and I hope maybe you will, too. To put it in a format that a geek like me finds acceptable, I made up some Lent FAQs. Except that they're not really FAQs, since people *don't* frequently ask these questions. Hence the Not-So-FAQ.

## **So Lent. Big deal. It's part of Easter, right?**

Welcome to Liturgical Calendar 101. There are actually THREE separate liturgical seasons associated with late winter/early spring: Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

## **So what does Lent mean, anyway?**

Lent used to be known by the Latin term *quadragesima*, a translation from the original Greek *tessaraktoste*, the "fortieth day" before Easter. That changed to the term *Lent* in the late Middle Ages when sermons began to be given in the local languages instead of Latin. Lent means Spring and derives from the Old English work *lencten* and the Anglo-Saxon name for March, *Lenct*. Pretty much only English-speaking people call this period Lent.

## **So I'm looking at this calendar. It's more like six weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter, not forty days.**

The forty days of Lent don't include Sundays. Those are each mini-Easters, according to some.

## **So they're like business days plus Saturdays?**

Yeah.

## **But the forty?**

Forty crops up a lot in Scripture.

- Days Jesus spent in the desert, fasting and being tempted by the devil.
- Days Moses spent on Mount Sinai with God
- Days and nights Elijah spent walking to Mount Horeb
- Days and nights of rain in Noah
- Years wandered by the Hebrew people enroute the Promised Land
- Days that Jonah gave the city of Nineveh in which to repent.
- Traditional view, Jesus lay for forty hours in the tomb, which led to forty hours of total fasting in the early church before Easter.

## **When does Lent begin?**

On Ash Wednesday.

## **Oh, great. That's real helpful. So when is Ash Wednesday?**

This year, 2008, Year A, that is on February 6<sup>th</sup>.

## **Where do the ashes come from?**

The Palms from Palm Sunday the year before are saved and burnt. So if you really want to be a sacristy rat, you ought to find out where the palm fronds and crosses are stored for a year. Otherwise no one will take you seriously the next time you say, "But we've always done it that way."

## **Why ashes?**

Well, Lent is a time of penance. Ashes are the traditional sign of sorrow and repentance and are also a sign of mortality, the whole ashes to ashes, dust to dust routine. It's also very cool and circular and continuity, the ashes from the previous year turning up to mark repentance in the new year. Very liturgical calendarly sort of stuff.

## **You said something earlier about Fat Tuesday and Mardi Gras?**

Yep. Fat Tuesday comes right before Ash Wednesday. You may also know it as Shrove Tuesday and see lots of pancakes suppers hosted that day. The idea is that on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, everyone uses up the last bits of butter and fat and eggs in preparation for the days of fasting to come.



## **And that “Year A” bit?**

Oh, we’re going to have so much fun! I’m about to give you all sorts of new things to worry about.

Liturgical churches have a set series of Scripture readings specified for every Sunday. The readings are compiled into a three year cycle called a Lectionary. Those years are called Year A, Year B and Year C. The standard lectionary was revised a few years back to produce the Revised Common Lectionary.

Each Sunday has a specified Old Testament/Apocrypha/Acts of the Apostles reading, a Psalm, an Epistle/Revelations and a Gospel reading.

Year A, you read Matthew. Year B, Mark. Year C, Luke. John is interspersed throughout, especially on significant dates such as Christmas and Easter.

The readings are arranged so that the congregation will hear the same writer week after week, a continuity sort of thing. Each year, that year’s Gospel is heard from beginning to end. Same thing with much of the rest of the New Testament.

Although they’re not arranged by a specific theme, general ideas and principles seem to emerge sometimes, or at least it seems so to me. It’s an interesting balance, looking for correlations without falling into the trap of proof-texting.

## **And the readings you're running on about?**

Weren't you paying attention? They're from the Lectionary.

Oh, and while we're at it—there's a daily reading Lectionary as well, for churches that have weekday services or for individual worship. The Daily Readings usually consist of an Old Testament or Epistle selection, a Psalm, and a Gospel selection. The readings are shorter and all four Gospels are read every year.

You'd think this would be set up on a three year cycle like the RCL, wouldn't you? But no. The Dailies are on a TWO year cycle and those years are Year 1 and Year 2.

Here are a few links for the Lectionary:

<http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/>  
[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/liturgy\\_music.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/liturgy_music.htm)

Daily Readings:

<http://www.usccb.org/nab/faq.shtml>

## **Enough already! So how do we know when Easter is? Since that's what drives when Lent starts, right?**

Things are about to get crazy. If you hate even simple math, read the next few paragraphs and when you get to the word **SKIP**, go on to the next Not-So-FAQ. That way your head won't start hurting.

No brain cells will be killed by reading the following short answer: Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21. In 2008, Easter is March 23.

### **SKIP.**

If you're a liturgical geek (and have just finished googling Fortescue and have decided you've GOT to know whether the right hand goes in the left sleeve first or the left into the right sleeve), read on.

Like most short answers, the one above is not entirely accurate. It's actually the first *ecclesiastical* full moon, not just normal full moon. And because of the international date line, Easter can actually be celebrated on different dates in different parts of the world.

The following is taken from the Naval Observatory website:

The rule is that Easter is the first Sunday after the first ecclesiastical full moon that occurs on or after March 21. The lunar cycles used by the ecclesiastical system are simple to program. The following algorithm will compute the date of Easter in the Gregorian Calendar system.

The algorithm uses the year,  $y$ , to give the month,  $m$ , and day,  $d$ , of Easter. The symbol  $*$  means multiply.

Please note the following: This is an integer calculation. All variables are integers and all remainders from division are dropped. For example, 7 divided by 3 is equal to 2 in integer arithmetic.

$$\begin{aligned}
c &= y / 100 \\
n &= y - 19 * (y / 19) \\
k &= (c - 17) / 25 \\
i &= c - c / 4 - (c - k) / 3 + 19 * n + 15 \\
i &= i - 30 * (i / 30) \\
i &= i - (i / 28) * (1 - (i / 28) * (29 / ((i + 1)) * (( \\
21 - n) / 11)) \\
j &= y + y / 4 + i + 2 - c + c / 4 \\
j &= j - 7 * (j / 7) \\
l &= i - j \\
m &= 3 + (l + 40) / 44 \\
d &= l + 28 - 31 * (m / 4)
\end{aligned}$$

For example, using the year 2010,

$$y=2010,$$

$$c=2010/100=20,$$

$$n=2010 - 19 \times (2010/19) = 2010 - 19 \times (105) = 15,$$

[see note above regarding integer calculations]

etc. resulting in Easter on April 4, 2010.

The algorithm is due to J.-M. Oudin (1940) and is reprinted in the Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac, ed. P. K. Seidelmann (1992).

Or you can use the formula and table at:

<http://www.almanac.com/edpicks/formula.html>

## **My head hurts. So it's forty days in late Winter when I give up chocolate or smoking, right?**

You could do that. But there's actually a good deal more to Lent than just giving something up.

One view is that Lent is about justice, and those are intertwined with three traditional practices taken up during Lent:

- Prayer, justice towards God.
- Fasting, justice towards self.
- Almsgiving, justice towards neighbors.

### **Are we done now?**

Yep. On to the readings.

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