

# LENT GUIDE

cherry hills church  
*life together*

# INTRODUCTION

Lent is a season in the Church that has been around for centuries. It's a time-tested trellis that has proven helpful to a great many apprentices of Jesus wanting to grow in their faith, and better prepare for Easter Sunday. That said, you may have questions about Lent or be unsure of its value and role in your life. This guide to Lent was designed specifically for anyone who is curious about Lent and wants to understand more about what participation in this season would mean. If you have been considering giving this trellis a try but have hesitated due to lack of understanding, we hope this guide helps you better understand exactly what you're stepping into and why you might consider giving it a go.





# LITURGY

The word “liturgy” often feels like a foreign word to many Western Protestant Evangelicals. Especially if they’ve not set foot in any Episcopalian, Anglican, or Lutheran church services recently.

The word comes from the Greek term leitourgia, meaning “public service” or “work of the people” and it has come to describe a ritual or form of corporate worship throughout history. There is a “working service” we join or participate in when meeting together in community with God. And the liturgy is not only the pattern of the individual weekend service, but the pattern of the annual calendar of church gatherings as well.

Often a church service or spiritual discipline will be thought of as more “liturgical” when it’s more formal or rigid. However this understanding of the word can be unhelpful, leading us to associate the word liturgy with overly wooden services and legalistic disciplines that are tedious and boring, lacking life and more apt to bring death.

A liturgy, however, is neither dead nor alive. People are dead or alive, based on whether or not they choose to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and act upon this belief. A liturgy is simply a trellis upon which life can come if the proper conditions are met.

So liturgy is nothing more than a pattern or a plan. Your liturgy is the flow of your life, the story you’re living in, the path you’re moving on. Every church has a liturgy and every person practices liturgy in that every church has an order of service and every person an order to their day and their week. To be aware of and intentional with the liturgy you participate in is what matters.

The season of Lent is part of the Church calendar or liturgical calendar. It’s a season of time that rehearses part of the story of Jesus and regularly invites the Church to order itself around God’s working in history.

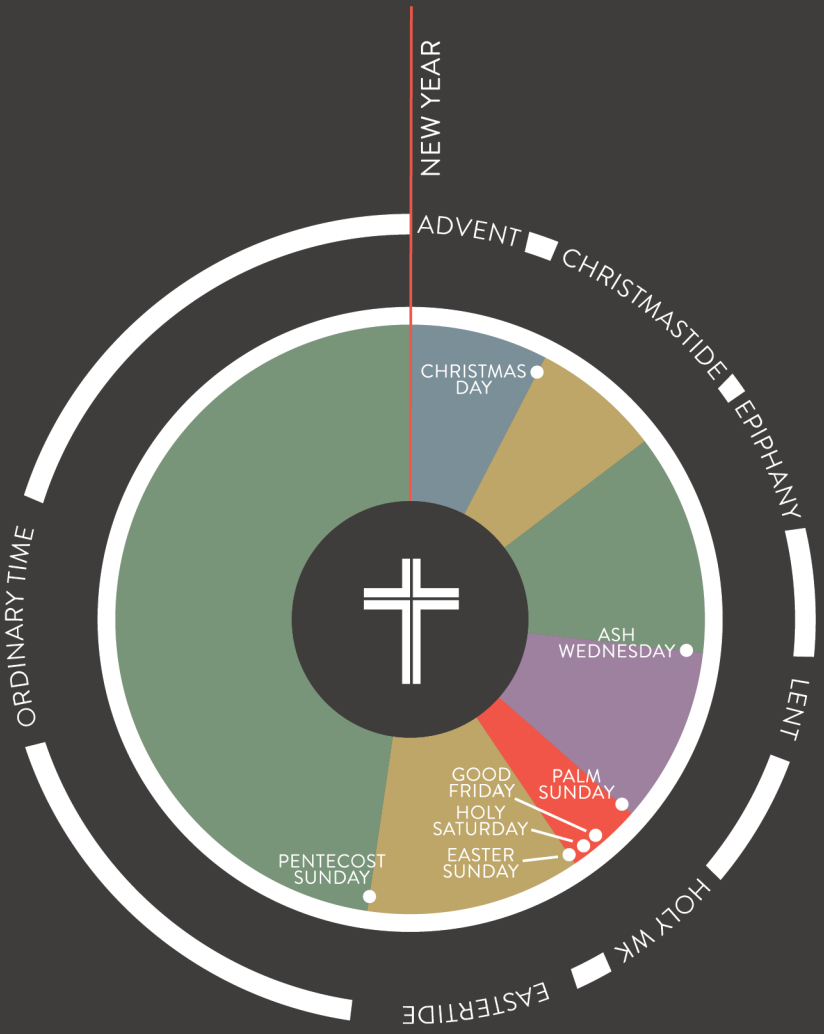


# THE CHURCH CALENDAR

We are all keeping time, and the way we keep time matters. Keeping time is not a passive activity, simply observing the flow of time. It is an active engagement with time, ordering it, marking it, giving it meaning and formative power.

In the United States, we keep time using the Gregorian calendar which came about in the 16th century, and like any calendar, is always being revised according to the culture that employs it. This calendar includes dates that represent the things most important to our nation, including love of country (Independence day, Presidents Day), love of others (Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day) and days for feasting and giving thanks (Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, birthdays). This way of marking time isn't something we think of as optional or contingent. But the numbering and naming of days of the week, month, and year, as well as the institution of certain "high holy days" like Super Bowl Sunday or the start of Oktoberfest are all fabrications of history. They were created and ordered on a calendar to elevate what we love and cyclically return to those seasons and days to form us. In this way, we give meaning to time, disrupting the flow from flat, linear, endless time into a cyclical, textured, measured time. Maybe time is less the never ending line we imagine it to be, and more a recurring cycle of pattern in our life that is making each of us who we are today.

The Church Calendar is an alternate way of keeping time that orients our days, weeks, and months around the story of Jesus Christ and His Church.



Rather than beginning the year on January 1 with New Year's resolutions that tire out by February, the Church begins the year at the end of November in stillness and anticipation. The people of God remember with awe once again how the world waited for the Messiah to come and how He arrived that first Christmas in the least likely of ways. As we enter December we see ourselves in God's story, there between Jesus' first and second coming and we reflect once again on what it looks like to actively wait for Christ's return. We journey together to Christmas Day and on December 25 we celebrate the arrival of the King of kings. We remind each other that He is a God who longs to be with us.

But we don't celebrate Christmas for just one day; no, we celebrate for 12 days: Christmastide. Why? Because the people of God are people who know how to feast! And each feast we have is in anticipation of a banquet table we will one day sit at with every tongue and every tribe at the culmination of a new heaven and a new earth.

Following Christmastide comes the season of Epiphany, where we remember the visit of the Magi and giving of gifts to the Savior of the world. We think of the baptism of Jesus and marvel at the fact that He never asks us to do something He wasn't willing to do Himself. We reflect on His 40 days of fasting, prayer, and solitude in the wilderness where Jesus went head to head with Satan and overcame His attempt to thwart the Father's plan for redemption. We think of His ministry to humanity and the life Jesus brought through that ministry.

Following Epiphany we enter the season of Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday on which we remember that it is from dust we came and to dust we will return. But for the breath of God within us and His redemptive grace where would we be? (Gen 2:7, Ecc 3:20) We journey six weeks through Lent as a way to practice taking up our cross and following Jesus on His journey to Golgotha. We feel in our body through the practice of fasting, confession, and prayer our own neediness and battle with the evil one.

After this six week journey we are more prepared than ever to lift high the name of Jesus in our celebration of Easter, proclaiming the power of His resurrection from the dead, His defeat of death and Sin, and the freedom and salvation this establishes for us as His sons and daughters. But again, we don't

celebrate for one day for we are not a one-and-done celebration kind of people. No, Eastertide is a seven week celebration, the longest of them all, for the defeat of Sin and death demands this kind of response.

And as we wrap up our Eastertide party, we step into the season of Pentecost where we think of Jesus' great commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and ascension to heaven from where He will return one day. We recall the Holy Spirit being given to the Church as a helper and wWe move into a period of the year called ordinary time, during which the Church meditates on its call to live life, led by the Spirit, on mission as the body of Christ. And ordinary time takes us back to November where we begin again with the season of Advent.



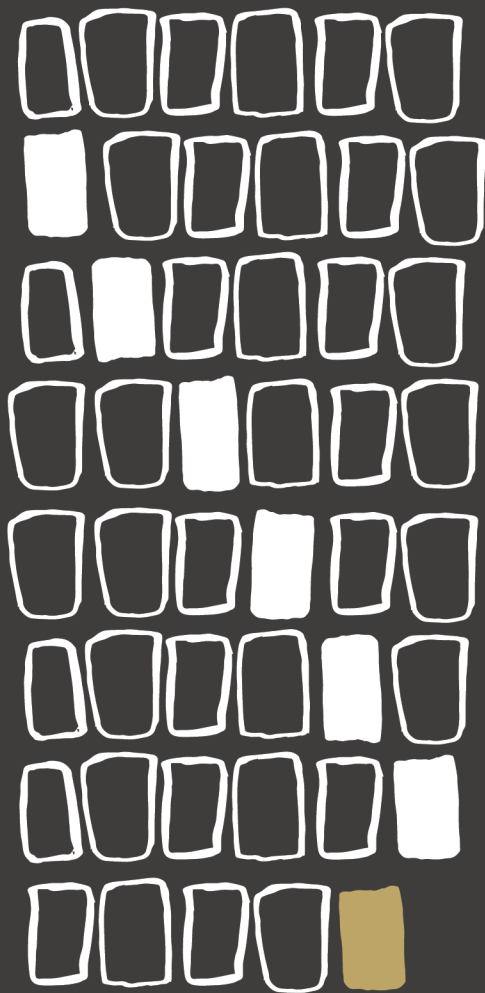


# LENT: OVERVIEW

Lent is a period of forty-six days leading up to Easter. It consists of forty “fasting days” practiced Monday through Saturday and six “resurrection days” on Sunday (or whenever you practice your weekly Sabbath). During this time, the Church is invited to follow Jesus on His journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where He will establish the Kingdom of God through His death and resurrection.

Following Christ’s ascension and the events described in the remainder of the New Testament, the Church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries developed multiple different family traditions for celebrating and rehearsing the story of Jesus. In some contexts, it became customary for new Christians to be welcomed into the family through baptism on what quickly became the church’s most important holy day: Easter. Leading up to baptism, these new members of the covenant community would undergo focused times of instruction, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines to be initiated into the ongoing story of Jesus and His people. This school of discipleship process gave birth to Lent as a time of fasting leading up to the celebration of Easter. Lent became official (sort of like a local custom becoming a federal holiday) at the Council of Nicea in 325. In 487 it was determined that Sundays were not days for fasting but days for feasting— mini resurrections that should be celebrated every week. Because of this, Lent was lengthened to 46 days and Sundays declared days for the Lenten fast to be broken. Because of this, the start of Lent was moved to a Wednesday which became known as Ash Wednesday.

Lent has historic roots and has been practiced by Western and Eastern Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants, people of every church tradition and denomination. It is not a way to earn some kind of spiritual reward or exercise spiritual rights. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But like any liturgical season or spiritual practice, Lent is a way to see God’s story as our story, and to step into a means of transformation.



# LENT: PURPOSE

You don't have to observe Lent. Just like you don't have to observe Christmas or your birthday. It's not commanded in the scriptures. However, in church culture that often celebrates Easter Sunday in the blink of an eye and quickly transitions to the coming of spring, Lent offers an opportunity to prepare for Resurrection Sunday in a powerful way.

Dallas Willard once said, "One drop of water every 5 minutes won't get you a shower." (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p 390) In the same way, it's good for us to be immersed in the reality of the kingdom of God for large doses of time.

Perhaps we need more than a Good Friday Service two days in advance to get our hearts and minds ready to celebrate the resurrection. As Aaron Damiani puts it in his book, *The Good of Giving Up: Discovering the Freedom of Lent*, "Perhaps we feel halfhearted on Easter Sunday because we've been malnourished along the way...secretly snacking on lesser stories such as politics or our children's athletic success. In theory, the gospel is compelling, but...we are so full on the junk food of our culture that we cannot metabolize the feast on our Easter plates." (*The Good of Giving Up*, # 22-23)

# LENT: PARTICIPATION

Traditionally, followers of Jesus have participated in Lent by choosing to fast, abstain, and/or pray for a period of 46 days leading up to Easter Sunday. Fasting is the practice of giving up food for a specific time period as a way to feast on the spiritual food Jesus offers us. Abstaining is giving up something else (social media, buying new clothes, podcasts in the car, etc.) for the same purpose. It's common to use the terms fasting and abstaining interchangeably.

When giving something up, it's wise to consider what you'll replace it with. Every fast conceals a feast. It might be helpful to go for a walk during that meal time you're skipping, or pray during the morning time when you might be getting on social media.

Choose a time in advance of Ash Wednesday to consider with the Holy Spirit's help what you might give up during this season, or another way you might participate. Consider the following questions as a way to decide on what you might give up and read on to learn more about the practices of fasting and abstaining.

- What cravings have a hold on me?
- What would be truly liberating to leave behind?
- Have I become dependent on a particular food, drink, substance, or activity?
- What would truly be challenging to give up?
- What is Jesus asking of me?



# FASTING & ABSTAINING: WHY

Jesus fasted regularly, passed it on to his disciples and named it in his top three spiritual practices. (Matt. 6) He overcame Satan's temptation in the wilderness by fasting, gave instructions on how to fast and assumed those who followed him would fast. Not only this but the early church fasted regularly. In the last half of the 20th century, in our culture, fasting has become more of a lost art. But maybe, just maybe, it's a practice whose time has come again.

Consider fasting because there is good in giving things up and there is grace that comes in saying, "No, I don't need that, I have sustenance that comes from another place." (John 4:32) Consider fasting because there's nothing quite like saying 'yes' to the practices Jesus said 'yes' to and nothing quite like joining with those who have come before us in this way. Consider fasting because walking with Jesus to the cross in this manner will prepare you for Easter in ways you won't otherwise experience. There is learning about Jesus and His way and then there is stepping into His way experientially, personally, as a practitioner. Fasting offers us the opportunity to step into His way.

# FASTING & ABSTAINING: HOW

First, if in any way, you have a difficult relationship with food, have walked through an eating disorder or otherwise struggled with body image in this way, please talk to a doctor or a trusted friend before participating in this practice. There is a way forward but it should be done in community with those you can trust.

If you are new to the practice of fasting, start small. Consider fasting from one meal during the week or eating broth one day from sunup to sundown. Spend time in prayer during that meal time or some time during the day asking God to teach you more about walking in step with His Spirit.

Decide in advance when you will fast. Choose a specific day and a specific meal(s). Choose this time at the beginning of the Lenten season and stay consistent as best you can throughout. If you miss a day, don't despair and simply begin again at the next opportunity.

Consider fasting with others. Fasting in community is almost always more rewarding and encouraging. Consider sending one another prayer requests and encouragement throughout the day.

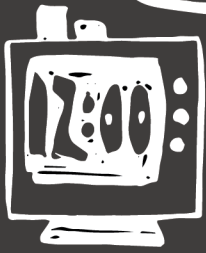
Begin your fast with prayer asking the Spirit of God to be your teacher during this time and end your fast in peace and with self-control by eating healthy foods such as broth, vegetables, or fruit. Ending a time of fasting by scarfing down three meals worth of food is not advantageous spiritually, mentally, or physically.

Know that fasting is not easy nor was it meant to be. You are essentially picking a fight with your flesh (Gal. 5:13-26). Lots of stuff will come to the surface. When we fast, we often get really irritated and impatient. Yes, this means fasting is working! This is what's supposed to happen. Fasting reveals the things that still control us, the areas where our God is still our belly like Paul says in Phil. 3:19.

Adjust as you go. Fasting is an experiment as much as anything else. Adjust your plan as you go if need be and listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit on how to do this.

If you can't fast for medical or other reasons, or notice God nudging you to give up something else during Lent, abstaining from something is also a great way to engage in this season. As with fasting, start small, make a plan, consider abstaining with others or at least getting some accountability from friends, and adapt as needed. The main thing is to do something and not give up!





# CONCLUSION

Consider how James K.A. Smith speaks about the people of God engaging the Church calendar. “Like operatives launching a mission in a spy thriller, coordinating their watches so they’re all on the same time, the people of God synchronize their soul clocks in relation to a story that cycles and repeats in the liturgical calendar. In the liturgical calendar, we are indexed to the solar time of the Son who is the light of the city of God.” (How to Inhabit Time, 93)

Time marches on, but what we make of it makes all the difference. We are attuned to the celebrations, rhythms, and observances of our civic and family calendars— why not become attuned to the story of God as rehearsed in the Church calendar?

