

PREPARING FOR EASTER THROUGH THE CELEBRATION OF LENT

Lent typically is not a common observance in the Protestant church. A season of reflection and preparation observed during the 40 days prior to Easter, Lent is most associated with the Catholic Church and perceived by some Protestants as an unnecessary tradition.

Dr. Eric Costanzo, FBC minister of community ministries and teaching pastor, points out that Baptists, and evangelicals in general, often are skeptical of anything that might appear to be Catholic. "Sometimes we need to be reminded that the Church existed for a millennium and a half before the Protestant Reformation," Costanzo said. "That Church had some meaningful forms of worship that are worth remembering and, at times, practicing. As Martin Luther, the Father of Protestantism said, 'The fathers have written many things that are pious and useful, but they must be read with discrimination and judged by the Scriptures.'"

So what is Lent? Lent is an old English word meaning "lengthen or to make longer." Lent is observed in the spring, when the days begin to get longer. Through Lent, Christians replicate Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days and mark this by fasting, both from food and festivities. Lent recalls the events leading up to and including Jesus' crucifixion.

FBC Lead Pastor Deron Spoo and his family have observed Lent for several years. "Typically, we give up television, pop or chocolate. While it [giving up favorite things] is a simple gesture, it serves as a powerful daily reminder that sacrifice is central to the Christian message," Spoo said. "In a season which leads up to a cross, a daily reminder of sacrifice helps keep pressures and priority of self in proper perspective."

Western churches begin Lent on the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday. The day is referred to as Ash Wednesday, and it falls on February 22 in 2012. Roman Catholic, Anglican and Episcopalian churches, among others, hold special services on Ash Wednesday. During the service, ashes are used to mark worshippers' with a cross to symbolize death and sorrow for sin. As the minister or priest marks each worshipper, he or she typically says something similar to, "Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return." The service draws on the ancient Biblical traditions of covering one's head with ashes, wearing sackcloth and fasting.

The day before Lent begins is called Shrove Tuesday. It is considered a day for penitence and to clean the soul. Because Shrove Tuesday also is the last day to feast before Lent begins, it is considered by many to be a day for celebration. Shrove Tuesday gets its name from an old ritual called "shriving" during which Christians would confess their sins and receive absolution – which means be forgiven and released from the guilt and pain that their sins caused. Historically there are many foods that some Christians give up during Lent such as meat, fish, fats, eggs and dairy products. On Shrove Tuesday, families would feast and eat up all the foods that would not last through Lent. The need to eat up all the food gave rise to the French name "Mardi Gras," meaning fat Tuesday. The day also is known by some as "Pancake Day," as preparing pancakes would help use up all the eggs, fats and milk in the house.

"The celebration of the Lenten season has its roots in good biblical theology. Rather than celebrating the resurrection for one Sunday, or even for a week, Lent gives us five Sundays during the course of 40 days to reflect on the Living Christ," says Costanzo.