

Ideas for Lenten Disciplines

How long is Lent?

It's forty days, running from Ash Wednesday until Holy Saturday (the day before Easter).

If you count the spaces on the calendar, however, you'll find that there are forty-six days in that period. The reason is that the Sundays are not counted in the forty days.

Sunday, in ancient Christian thinking, is *always* a celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection, in fact, prompted early Christians to shift their worship day from Saturday, the millennia-old Sabbath of Judaism, to Sunday. They could not imagine *fasting* on the Resurrection Day, so the Sundays are not actually part of Lent. In fact, they are referred to as the Sundays *in* Lent.

Should I give something up for Lent?

The ancient method to prepare for a religious celebration was very simple: Fast. Don't eat food.

The length of the fast dictated the boundaries of the fast. Someone fasting for a day or so would eat nothing, and drink nothing (except possibly water) for the length of the fast. If the fast continued for some days, it might be limited to certain kinds of foods – frequently meat and sweets – or it might be limited to the daylight hours. Contemporary Muslims, for example, fast for an entire month at Ramadan: during daylight hours. They break their fast each day after sundown with a meal that is usually quite a celebration.

The real question around “giving something up for Lent” is this: what will it mean to you? Will the fast help you appreciate the Easter celebration that is coming? Will it help you reflect upon your relationship with God, and the overwhelming love of Jesus Christ? Will it help you live in the power of the Holy Spirit?

If you don't know, then give it a try. It might help, and it might not. People are different – and you will be different at different periods of your life.

What to give up?

Well, you might give up something you consider a “bad habit” or a behavior you'd like to change:

- Addictive substances like tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs;
- A behavior that harms relationships like sarcasm, jokes at others' expense, or aggression;
- Unhealthy eating;
- Anxiety; or
- Staying up late at night.

Please note that some of these may be far more deeply rooted than a single Lent can change. Addictions, eating disorders, and anxiety may require both lengthy work and skilled help. Lent *might* be a good time to start them, but those are really long-term struggles.

You might also give up a pleasure:

- A food or beverage item;
- An activity like a computer game or golf; or
- Regular entertainments like a television program or movies.

Try not to give up a pleasure that also feeds your soul. I could never give up hiking for Lent, for example. It means too much to me.

Over the years, here are some things I've given up for Lent:

- Anxiety,
- Bacon,
- Computer games,
- Soda,
- Sausage, and
- Beer.

Should I take something on for Lent?

Particularly among Reformed Protestants as they reclaimed Lent, the idea of *adding* a discipline, activity, or charity during Lent has taken hold. Here are some ideas:

- Follow the Lenten Carbon Fast: www.macucc.org/carbonfast
Though it sounds like a “give it up” approach to Lent, the Carbon Fast is actually a combination of activities, prayers, and “give it up” ideas for the season, all around reducing our negative impact on the environment. Signing up gets you a daily email through the season. It may include an inspirational message or a prayer to raise, or a practical suggestion for reducing your energy expenditure.
- Take up a daily devotional:
A daily devotional offers a Scripture reading, short reflection, and prayer for each day. Some run throughout the year, while others cover a certain season (like Lent!). Church of the Holy Cross has copies of a UCC Lenten guide on hand, and makes *The Upper Room* devotional guides available throughout the year. The UCC's *Daily Devotional* is available via email at ucc.org/daily_devotional – it's free and it runs 365 days a year!

- Regular Bible reading:
Set aside a time of day to read the Scriptures. There are many guides around – a list of suggested readings for each day. Or choose a specific book of the Bible and begin reading it through.
- Make additional gifts to a charity:
Is there a cause you'd like to promote? Lent is an excellent time to help it along with additional financial gifts or donations of time and talent. This might be an organization you have a long relationship with, or you might take on something new (to you) for these forty days.
- Help a specific person:
Do you know somebody who has unmet needs that you might help fulfill? Lent is a great time to give them extra support. Be cautious, though: Do not assume that you know what they need. Ask first. Then offer what you truly can. This could range from providing transportation to yard work to having a few dinners together.
- Take on a creative project:
Over the years, I've had friends invite me to participate in such things as creating daily photographs on a theme, writing short pieces, or composing prayers. You can create a schedule of your own, or search the Internet for activity or theme calendars.
- Take on an activity:
Perhaps you could take up an exercise regimen, or select some times of day to pray regularly throughout the season.

Over the years, here are some “added” disciplines I've used during Lent:

- Created something each day following a calendar of themes,
- Chosen an overriding theme for the season (one year it was “Attentive Lent”) and created something each day to reflect on it,
- Written a poem each day, and
- Daily pushups and sit-ups (really).

Make it work for you

Whatever you take on or give up, let it reflect your self and your spirituality. Connect it to God, and to your anticipation of the Easter celebration. Let it be something you truly love, either as a devotional discipline in setting aside, or as mission work in taking up.

This is yours; it is between you and God.

May your Lenten season be filled with blessings.

Where does Lent come from?

Nearly since its birth, Christianity has put a high value on *preparation*, on getting the individual ready for something. Quite a few of Jesus' parables or statements emphasize *readiness* (which

is not exactly the same thing), stressing the closeness of the reign of God. The young women without spare oil for their lamps in his story represent the human being whose relationship with God has received no attention at the moment history ends.

Within a short time, the Church realized that history was not ending as soon as they'd thought, and began annual celebrations of Jesus' resurrection. Shortly after that, they began to prepare themselves for the Easter. Ancient letters suggest that this first "Lent" was quite short – just a couple of days in duration – and it probably consisted of a fairly rigorous fast. The "controversy," according to Irenaeus of Lyon (around 203), was about whether the fast should last a day, or two, or forty hours.

For hundreds of years now, the Church has recognized a forty-day period for Lent. Churches out of the Reformed tradition abandoned it, however, during the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin, a major theological inspiration for the Reformed movement, believed that Lent promoted superstition, as it had taken on the character of a personal sacrifice in order to gain salvation by the sixteenth century. Even more than the other Reformers, Calvin rejected that practice.

The English and American Congregational churches followed Calvin and left Lent behind, but in the late 20th century the practice returned, and has slowly grown more common among UCC churches and others of the Reformed tradition. The intervening centuries have allowed us to reclaim the work of preparation, and the value of concentration on our faith.