

THE TIME OF EASTER

Pre-Lent / Gesima-Sundays

If the Church follows the Historic lessons, there are three Sundays known as “gesima” Sundays. It is a sort of pre-Lent, as we slowly come down from the heights of Jesus’ transfiguration into the penitential season of Lent.

The Church, then, begins the penitential season. This makes itself evident in our services where our celebration is muted. Songs of praise and “alleluia’s” are put away for a while. Flowers are removed from the altar. It is a somber time, and that is reflected in the way the service is observed, too.

*Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below;
Alleluia, our transgressions make us for a while forgo;
For the solemn time is coming when our tears for sin must flow.
(Alleluia, Song of Gladness, v 3)*

The Gesima Sundays include Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima, referring to roughly “70 days,” “60 days,” and “50 days” before Easter, respectively.

If a congregation does not follow the historic lectionary but rather the three-year lectionary, there are no gesima Sundays, and the Church Year proceeds from Epiphany straight into Lent. Good Shepherd has observed both practices over the years.

Lent

*A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, our guilt and evil bearing
And, laden with the sins of earth, none else the burden sharing.
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint
To slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer,
Bears shame and stripes and wounds and death,
Anguish and mockery and says,
“Willing all this I suffer.” (Christian Worship 100:1)*

The Lenten season is a 40 day period (not including Sundays) leading up to Easter. It is a penitential season. That is why it begins with Ash Wednesday—a powerful reminder that “dust you are, and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) Since we are dust and marked for death, we approach our Lord in penitence and humility, seeking his mercy.

One of the ways we may express our penitence is by fasting. Fasting need not be a total deprivation of food. Traditionally, Christians would reduce the number of meals they ate from three to two. Of those two meals, one (usually the later meal) was rather light. Or you may partake in two rather small meals with a regular sized meal. Sundays, however, remain feast days. Fasting, prayer, and the giving of alms go together. (Matthew 6:1-6,16-18) The time that we give up on feeding our bodies is devoted to prayer and meditation, and the money we would have spent on ourselves would be given to the poor or to a charity. Though such practices are not mandatory, Luther’s Small Catechism reminds us, “Fasting and other outward preparation may serve a good purpose....”

The Lenten fast is also experienced in our Divine Services. During the Lenten season, we will not sing *Alleluia* or the *Gloria in Excelsis* (“Glory be to God on high...”). Flowers are also removed from the altar. As we continue further into the Lenten season, the fast intensifies and we will notice some omissions from our Services:

These omissions are a fast for our eyes and ears. Perhaps it will seem awkward to be missing these things, but that is the point. Lent is a penitential season. Our celebration is muted. But this also will highlight the air of celebration on Easter Sunday when all of these sights and sounds return to our worship as we will rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord.

*Grant that I your passion view with repentant grieving.
Let me not bring shame to you by unholy living.
How could I refuse to shun every sinful pleasure
Since for me God’s only Son suffered without measure?
(Christian Worship 98:5)*

Passiontide

The 5th Sunday in Lent, begins the season of Passiontide (the final two weeks of Lent), in which the Passion of our Lord intensifies. Therefore, the Lenten fast also intensifies which we can observe in our worship setting. The sights and sounds in God's house are muted even more. For the past number of weeks, our celebration has been muted in the following ways:

There is no *Alleluia* in the Verse of the Day.
We do not sing the *Gloria in Excelsis* after the Absolution.
There are no flowers on the altar.

During Passiontide, we note these additional practices.

The *Gloria Patri* (Glory be to the Father) is omitted from the Psalms
All artwork or icons have been removed or veiled.
The ringing of the church bell ceases.
All music is muted except for the support of congregational singing.

Our services will practically be barren of celebration, but that is the point. We are fasting, highlighting our penitent spirit. We are intently focusing on the sufferings and death of Jesus. Ceremony and celebration will return with vigor on Easter Sunday when we rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord which declares that sins are forgiven and that death is destroyed.

*If you think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great,
Here you see its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed; see who bears the awful load –
'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.
(Christian Worship 127:3)*

Holy Week / The Triduum

The enormous significance of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection has always been the central focus of Christian worship. Prior to the fourth century, Easter Day itself included all three emphases, but thereafter they were distributed over three days of special observance, which Augustine called "the most holy *Triduum* of the crucified, buried, and risen Lord." These days have long been understood as the climax of the Church's year.

Palm Sunday

This marks the beginning of Holy Week. We hear about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. While it is a triumphant spirit marked with shouts of "Hosanna in the highest!", we remember that Jesus entered Jerusalem to die.

*Sometimes they strew his way and his sweet praises sing,
Resounding all the day Hosannas to their King.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry. (Christian Worship 110:3)*

Maundy Thursday

The theme of Maundy Thursday, best expressed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. John, is the *novum mandatum* or "new command" of Jesus that his disciples "love one another." The institution of the Lord's Supper sets forth the depth of Jesus' love and gives power to the Church to live out his command. For the *Triduum*, Maundy Thursday marks the end of Lent proper. The service begins with the sermon *and* an exhortation regarding the end of Lent. This unusual arrangement allows the minister to explain the meaning of the Sacrament and the liturgical actions that are to take place so that they may proceed uninterruptedly and vividly from this evening through Good Friday to the Easter Vigil. The action of ceremonially stripping the altar prepares the chancel and the congregation for Good Friday.

*Draw near and take the body of the Lord,
And drink the holy blood for you out-poured.
Offered was he for greatest and for least,
Himself the victim and himself the priest. (Christian Worship 309:1)*

Good Friday

As the middle service of the *Triduum*, Good Friday is prepared for by Maundy Thursday. In turn, it leads into the Easter Vigil. The absence of a benediction the previous evening and again on Good Friday underscores the connectedness of the *Triduum* service. Good Friday is not a "funeral" for Jesus, but an austere celebration of the Lamb and his sacrifice.

*Oh, sorrow dread! God's Son is dead! But by his expiation
Of our guilt upon the cross gained for us salvation. (Christian Worship 137:2)*

The service is highly meditative in nature and is celebrated simply and not hurried. The primary Good Friday service has historically been observed sometime during the “hours of the cross,” between noon and three o’clock. It may also be used in place of the Service of Darkness (*Tenebrae*) as an evening service, as is the case at Good Shepherd.

*O sacred head, now wounded,
With grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded,
With thorns your only crown,
O sacred head, no glory
Now from your face does shine;
Yet, though despised and gory,
I joy to call you mine. (Christian Worship 105:1)*

Easter Vigil

The climax of the *Triduum* comes in the Vigil of Easter, a service of watching and waiting which utilizes prayer, Scripture, and hymns. The Vigil is composed of four parts.

- I. *The Service of Light* focuses on the Paschal Candle, the representation of the unconquered life of Christ.
- II. *The Service of Lessons* uses Old Testament texts that foreshadowed our deliverance and rescue by Jesus.
- III. *The Service of Holy Baptism* emphasizes our baptismal connection to the crucified and risen Christ.
- IV. *The Service of Holy Communion* proclaims the risen Savior and our blessed reconciliation to God.

In the ancient Church, the Vigil began on Saturday and continued through to Easter Dawn. It was at dawn that the cry rang out: “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” We honor the spirit of the Vigil, beginning our Easter Vigil at an early hour on Easter Sunday. With the service of Easter Dawn, we conclude the *Triduum*.

Our Festival celebration is held at our regular hour of Divine Service, at 10:00 AM.

*Come, you faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness!
God has brought his Israel into joy from sadness.
See the spring of souls today: Christ has burst his prison
And from three days’ sleep in death as a sun has risen.
(Christian Worship 142:1)*

Easter

M: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Cong: **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Triumphant from the grave rose Jesus, strong to save.

He crushed – O Christian, mark it well – sin, Satan, death, and hell.

Now sing your glad song and joyous praise to him prolong.

(Christian Worship 151:1)

The Christian Church does not celebrate Easter on one Sunday; Easter is a season. It is seven Sundays—a week of Sundays. During this celebration, we proclaim our Alleluias regularly and repeatedly. All of the ceremonies that were peeled back during Lent are returned and accentuated. God's people rejoice. The victory is won, and Christ has made us partakers of the victory with him.

Here the true Paschal Lamb we see, whom God so freely gave us;

He died on the accursed tree – so strong his love – to save us.

See, his blood now marks our door;

Faith points to it; death passes o'er,

And Satan cannot harm us. Alleluia! Alleluia!

(Christian Worship Supplement 720:5)

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

The entire Christian faith rests upon Jesus' death and resurrection. It is our joy to repeat the story, to sing his praise, and to delight in God's mercy and grace.

For the joy your advent gave me,

For your gospel's great reward,

For your baptism which has saved me,

For your supper and your Word,

For your death, the bitter scorn,

For your resurrection morn:

Lord, I thank you and extol you,

And in heav'n I shall behold you. (Christian Worship 147:5)

Ascension Day

Forty days after Easter, Jesus ascended into heaven. It marked Jesus' departure from which time he was no longer visibly present with his disciples. Now Jesus Christ—true man—is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty and is ruling all things for us, his brothers and sisters, his Church.

*Crown him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave
And rose victorious in the strife for those he came to save.
His glories now we sing who died and rose on high,
Who died eternal life to bring and lives that death may die.*

*Crown him the Lord of heav'n, enthroned in worlds above;
Crown him the King to whom is giv'n the wondrous name of Love.
Crown him with many crowns as thrones before him fall;
Crown him, ye kings, with many crowns for he is king of all.*

(Christian Worship, 341:3,4)

What is more, Jesus is preparing a place for us in that heavenly kingdom. Just as man conquered death by his resurrection and ascended into the heavenly realms, so also we who are mankind will follow the path he has trod. We look forward to our own resurrection from the dead and ascending to heaven to live and reign with Jesus.

*On Christ's ascension I now build the hope of my ascension.
This hope alone has always stilled all doubt and apprehension;
For where the head is, there as well
I know his members are to dwell
When Christ shall come and call them. (Christian Worship 173:1)*

Good Shepherd often transfers Ascension Day from its proper Thursday observation to the following Sunday so that this important festival is not missed during the Church Year.