

Lent and Easter

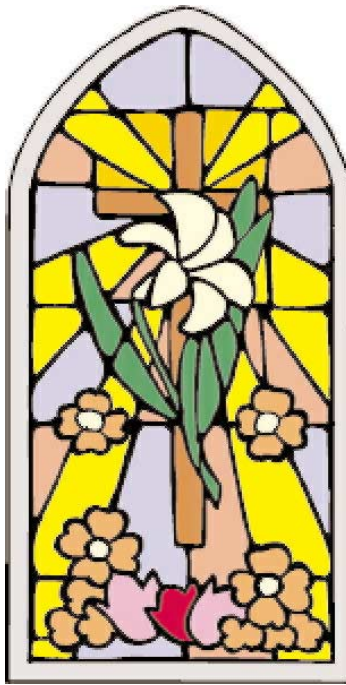
By Wyvetta Bullock and Julia Speller

Celebration of the liturgical church year from an African American perspective.



The Black Church in North America

While suffering is a universal human experience, the redemptive suffering of the oppressed gives distinctive meaning to the Lent and Easter seasons in the Black church. The themes of despair and joy, life out of death and God's ultimate victory are especially relevant to the spiritual needs of Black Christians. For example, Good Friday observances rehearse the pain and agony of Jesus on the cross through the preaching of the "seven last words," but also celebrate the faith and confidence that God will deliver Jesus. Rather than focus only on the agony of the cross and death of Jesus, the Black church anticipates the coming victory. This anticipation of victory over and above the present pain has been one of the keys to survival for Black people. This kind of faith finds joyous expression during the Easter season.



Historical Definitions of the Seasons

During the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter, the minds and hearts of Christians are focused on God's love. The seasons are the high points of the Christian year. They exemplify the depth of sin and the height of God's love. A historical glimpse of Lent and Easter bears witness to their significance in the life of the Christian Church.

LENT became an important part of the Christian Church (liturgical) calendar in the second century c.e. Originally observed as a time of preparation for new converts or catechumens, it culminated in baptism as a rite of initiation each year during the Easter Vigil. Over the centuries, as the rigorous structure of the catechumen declined, Lent became fixed as a penitential season of fasting and prayer during the forty days before Easter (Sundays are excluded in the count because they represent a weekly celebration of the resurrection). The distinctive characteristics of Lent as a liturgical season include selected Gospel readings, psalms, hymns and confessional elements during worship in addition to the special liturgical movements that emphasize the sacred meaning of the season. More specifically, personal Lenten commitments also revolve around giving up old habits as well as taking on new ones.

Ash Wednesday is the first movement of the season and it marks the formal beginning of Lent. In a special service of worship, ashes created from the burning palms from the previous year are placed on the foreheads of worshippers as a sign of penitence and mourning for sin. They also serve as a reminder of human mortality and the Christian call to walk in the steps of Jesus in one's life until death.

Palm Sunday, celebrated on the Sunday before Easter, begins Holy Week and represents great joy in the Hosannas that met Jesus in His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. It is also a reminder of the foreboding presence of the humiliation to come through his experience of arrest, trial and execution. The liturgical observations on this Sunday symbolize the extremes of triumph and sorrow in the joyous distribution and procession with palms and the sobering account of the Passion of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels.

During **Holy Week**, the third liturgical movement is experienced on **Maundy Thursday**. This very important day in the Church calendar celebrates the institution of the Lord's Supper, commemorating Holy

Communion. Also associated with this day is the blessing of oil, the washing of feet and the de-adorning (stripping) of the altar. Some traditions experience an all-night vigil in response to Jesus' command to His disciples to "watch and pray", while others celebrate with a candle-lit service and the reading of selected psalms.



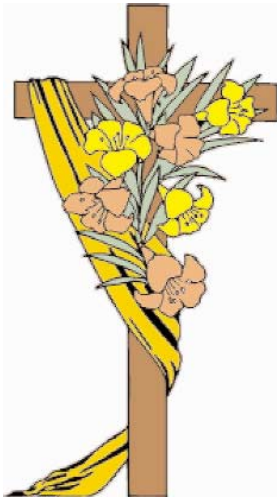
Good Friday, the fourth movement of the season, derives its name from the Anglo-Saxon word for God ("Good") and is the most somber day of the Church year. As the anniversary of the Crucifixion, it directs the thoughts of Christians toward the passion of Jesus through a recollection of the trial and execution. Services on this day include a homily or in some traditions a series of sermons built around the "seven last words" or utterances of Jesus from the

cross. Another experience is a journey through the seven stations of the cross as read in the Passion Narrative from John 18:1–19:37. While the liturgical color for Lent is purple, black is often used to drape an unembellished altar on this solemn day.

The culmination of the week of Passion and pain comes through the joy of the resurrection on **EASTER Sunday**. In the early Christian church before Christianity and Judaism became distinct religions, Easter coincided with the Jewish Passover. Jesus' crucifixion took place during the same hour that the Passover lamb was sacrificed. The deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and the redemption of Christians from sin were both associated with the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29)

The Medieval times gave rise to folk customs centered around Spring and included Easter bunnies, colored eggs and Easter lilies. However, their significance for the liturgical and educational life of the Church hold little meaning. What has remained as the central story of the season, however, is the journey from despair to joy in Jesus' resurrec-

tion. Traditional Protestant celebration on this day begins with the Sunrise Service, reliving the joy of the women at the empty tomb. This service is often followed by celebrations that include Passion plays and Easter egg hunts by the Church school and a time of breakfast and fellowship. The day is concluded with the regular Sunday service that is highlighted by baptism and communion.



Conclusion

Our journey during LENT and EASTER exemplifies renewal and growth that are at the heart of the spiritual metamorphosis that must take place in the lives of penitent Christians. On the personal level, real spiritual renewal comes about through the recognition and acknowledgement of sin and death in one's life. Then through confession and repentance one can move from death into new life in Christ.



The Black church does not dismiss the presence of sin and transgression but places it finally under the authority and mercy of God. While sin is real and ever-present, hope provides the strength to endure. The Black church's celebration of the Lent and Easter seasons is seen, therefore, through the eyes of a "resurrection people" whose very existence witnesses to a resurrected Christ.

Hymnody

The hymns listed below tell the story of LENT and EASTER through the categories of passion, victory and commitment...

PASSION

"The Old Rugged Cross"
 "Near the Cross"
 "He Will Remember Me"
 "In the Garden"
 "Jesus Paid it All"
 "He Decided to Die"
 "Alone"
 "Wounded for Me"
 "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"

VICTORY

"Because He Lives"
 "He Arose"
 "The Blood Will Never Lose its Power"
 "He is Lord"
 "Ride on King Jesus"
 "There is Power in the Blood"
 "I Know It Was the Blood"
 "Nothing But the Blood"
 "He Lives"

COMMITMENT

"Were You There?"
 "Lord I Want to be a Christian"
 "At the Cross"
 "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?"
 "Lead me to Calvary"
 "There is Room at the Cross for You"

These musical expressions of the season can be used in addition to other liturgical experiences, including dance and drums. The "Liturgy of Joy" is an excellent liturgical resource written by an African American pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (and can be ordered from Augsburg Fortress, 800.328.4648).

Other Resources

Family and individual activities can enhance the observation of the LENT and EASTER seasons. Resources for individual and family devotions are especially helpful during LENT.

Channing L. Bete publishers produce an annual resource called "Time for a Change of Heart: A Calendar of Devotional Activities for Lent and Easter" that provides daily bible readings and gives a special focus for each day. This resource comes in both adult and children's versions. (For more information or to order, call 1-800-628-7733).

Liberation and Unity, a daily devotional guide for Lent, is published by the Consultation on Church Union. The booklet is published in cooperation with the Departments of Christian Education of The African Methodist Episcopal Church, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The booklet presents thematic reflections for the seasons (to order, call 1-609-921-7866).

Activity Suggestions

(Remember to involve youth)

1. Plan a soup dinner for one night each week during Lent.
2. Hold a Bible study each Sunday during Lent, focusing on Christ's passion and the Christian spiritual journey.
3. Clean-up a vacant lot and plant a garden.
4. Ask a different family to lead a discussion one night each week of LENT. Invite them to share their spiritual journey, telling stories about who has influenced their faith development.
5. Plan an intergenerational Passion play. If weather permits hold it outdoors. Use this opportunity to witness in the community; offer to present the play at a local nursing home.
6. Plan to feed the hungry or volunteer at a homeless shelter during Holy Week. Use

this as a catalyst to get members involved in community projects.

7. Use drums and/or dance for the call to worship during LENT and EASTER.
8. Plan an all-night prayer vigil Easter weekend.

References

Encyclopedia of Religious Education, NY: Harper & Row, 1990, s.v. "Lent," "Easter," "Church Year."

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 2nd ed., NY: Oxford Press, s.v., "Lent," "Easter," "Maundy Thursday," "Good Friday," "Palm Sunday."

The image features the text "He is Risen!" in a highly decorative, calligraphic font. The letters are a vibrant purple color with a white outline and a subtle drop shadow, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The text is set against a plain white background. The word "He" is at the top, "is" is in the middle, and "Risen!" is at the bottom, with the exclamation point being particularly large and prominent.