



Why is Ash Wednesday so late this year - wasn't it in January last year?

Ash Wednesday falls on Wednesday, March 9 this year. (Incidentally, the latest that it can ever be is March 10, and that won't occur until 2038).

With regard to Ash Wednesday falling in January recently, it actually was in February the last two years. But in 2008 it did fall during the last week of January. So, you can see there really can be quite a range of dates for Ash Wednesday.

It would be easy to get the impression that the date for Ash Wednesday must be chosen in some random way like in a special ceremony where a designated person tosses a dart at a calendar, and whatever date the dart lands on becomes Ash Wednesday next year. That might be more fun and suspenseful, but it doesn't happen that way.

Actually there is a "rhyme and reason" to this date-hopping. The date of Ash Wednesday is determined by the date of Easter, and Easter is a "moveable" festival (as opposed to Christmas, for example, which always falls on the same date each year), so Ash Wednesday also moves around from year to year.

Here's the formula for setting the date of Easter:

The first Sunday after the first full moon ...after the Spring Equinox.

Thus Easter can be no earlier than March 22 and no later than April 25. You can actually find the dates Easter will be celebrated through 2050 on page xxiii in the front of our hymnal. Find the Easter date, then go back 46 days and you've got the date for Ash Wednesday that year.

(Which leads to a second question: *Why is Ash Wednesday 46 days before Easter when Ash Wednesday begins Lent and Lent is supposed to have only 40 days?*)

It's true that Lent is 40 days long - patterned after the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan (see Matthew 4 or Luke 4). Those 40 days of Lent were designed to be days of somber, self-sacrifice helping us to recall the sacrifice Jesus endured for us on Good Friday. BUT, every Sunday is designed to be a mini-Easter - a celebration reminding us that Jesus didn't stay dead in the tomb, but rose and is alive! Because of the celebration aspect of Sundays, they are not counted as part of the somber season of Lent even though they fall in that time-frame.

Thus, you have 40 days of Lent plus 6 Sundays (a total of 46 days) between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net