



What does the Bible say about Ash Wednesday and Lent ?

Good question! It came after I had mentioned that it would be best not to have a soup supper before Ash Wednesday worship, because that is traditionally a day of fasting.

The short answer (really short!) is: Absolutely nothing.

Here's what the Christian Cyclopedia has to say about the origins of both:

From early days Easter was preceded by a period of preparation called Lent (which means "spring"), a period of penitential reflection. The custom of fasting (self-denial or "giving something up") during this time was started at an early date, but the length of the fast varied. Finally, the fast was extended to 40 days (excluding Sundays), based on the 40-day period of the Lord's temptation as recorded in Matthew 4:2. Ash Wednesday (so called from the custom of daubing the foreheads of worshipers on that day in a sign of penitence and human mortality) has been the 1st day of Lent since around the 6th century.

It's easy to get the idea that, just because "we always do it that way," that, somehow, it must have been commanded by God. In reality, there are lots of things we do in church that are human traditions that are (here's a new word for you): adiaphora. It comes from a Greek word that means "middle things." Things neither expressly commanded nor forbidden by God. In other words, ceremonies that fall under the category of Christian liberty.

We are not commanded to observe Lent. Rather, we choose to observe as a way to ensure that we never forget just how much Jesus gave up for us. We observe Lent to make sure we never forget why Jesus chose to give up His very life: Our sin.

Ash Wednesday is patterned after passages in Joel chapter 2, Jonah chapter 3, and Luke chapter 10 (among others):

Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly." **Joel 2:12-15**

Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. **Jonah 3:4-5**

Jesus refers to the ashes associated with fasting and repentance:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." **Luke 10:13**

So, while neither Lent nor Ash Wednesday are commanded in the Bible, they can be helpful traditions reminding us of the need for humble repentance and following in Jesus' footsteps of self-denial.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net