Just as we set aside time to spiritually prepare for Christmas Day, it makes sense to set aside time to prepare for the two most important days of the Christian year. Lent is a time that offers us an opportunity to come to terms with the human condition we may spend the rest of the year running from and it brings our need for a Savior to the forefront. Like [Advent](https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/the-beautiful-meaning-and-purpose-of-advent.html), Lent is a time to open the doors of our hearts a little wider and understand our Lord a little deeper, so that when Good Friday and eventually Easter comes, it is not just another day at church but an opportunity to receive the overflowing of graces God has to offer.

While Advent is a celebration and a time of great anticipation, Lent is more frequently seen as a time of solemn observance and preparation for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. From its start on [Ash Wednesday](https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/lent/when-is-ash-wednesday-this-year.html) until its conclusion on Easter Sunday, Lent has been a traditional time for fasting or giving something up or abstinence. Just as we carefully prepare for events in our personal lives, as a wedding, or birthday; a commencement Lent invites us to make our minds and hearts ready for remembering Jesus’ life, death, and body resurrection.

Every year, Ash Wednesday denotes the beginning of Lent and is always 46 days before Easter Sunday. Lent is a 40-day season (not counting Sundays) marked by repentance, fasting, reflection, and ultimately celebration. The 40-day period represents Christ’s time of temptation in the wilderness, where he fasted and where Satan tempted him. Lent asks believers to set aside a time each year for similar fasting, marking an intentional season of focus on Christ’s life, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection.

Ash Wednesday emphasizes two themes: our sinfulness before God and our human mortality. The service focuses on both themes, helping us realize that both have been triumphed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ashes are an [ancient symbol](https://www.umc.org/en/content/why-ashes-connecting-to-who-we-are-and-who-we-can-be). In Genesis, God formed human beings out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). After expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the first human beings are told by God, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). The Hebrew word translated dust, is occasionally translated ashes elsewhere. Throughout scripture, ashes are part of rituals when people seek forgiveness and mourn their sin (see Numbers 19:9, 17; Hebrews 9:13; Jonah 3:6; Matthew 11:21, and Luke 10:13, among others).

As the ashes are placed on the forehead, words such as these are spoken: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," recalling God's words to Adam in Genesis 3:19, or “Repent, and believe the gospel” recalling the message of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Mark 1:15).

Learning 1: be humble and repent