



EPIPHANY 2007

Epiphany is the time during which the church remembers and celebrates the events surrounding the early life of Jesus (e.g., his circumcision, the visit of the magi, and his trip to the temple at age 12), as well as his early ministry (his baptism, his first miracles). Epiphany culminates with Transfiguration Sunday. As Epiphany winds down, we move into Lent, which focuses on Jesus' 40 day period of testing in the wilderness as well as his final journey to Jerusalem, to die on the cross for our sins.

The last Sunday in Epiphany this year is Feb. 18 (Transfiguration Sunday). Lent begins on Ash Wed. -- Feb. 21 (it's 40 days before Easter, minus Sundays, which are always resurrection celebrations/feast days).

The end of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent is usually bridged by a transitional time. This time goes by various names. Sometimes it is called "Carnival." "Carnival" comes from a Latin term for "farewell to meat." The days before Lent begins gradually became a festival time in which people would have big parties and eat all the things they couldn't eat during Lent -- including meat. This transitional time counting down the days to the beginning of Lent is also known as "Mardi Gras," which means "Fat Tuesday."

Another traditional way of celebrating the end of Epiphany before Lent begins is with a "Shrove Tuesday" celebration. The word "shrove" (or "shrive") comes from an old English term for confession and repentance. The last few days of Epiphany were known as Shrovetide -- a time for preparation, for repentance and confession before Lent. Typically, the period of Shrovetide would end with a pancake dinner celebration Tuesday night (the eve of Ash Wednesday).

You can read more about Shrove Tuesday here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrove_Tuesday. As you can see, Shrove Tuesday (or Pancake Tuesday) has a long and venerable history, especially among English speaking Christians, dating back to at least the 12th century!

Here's some background on Lent: <http://www.crivoice.org/cylent.html> and <http://www.kencollins.com/holy-04.htm>. I don't necessarily advocate giving up luxuries (a "fast" of some sort) for the season of Lent, unless doing so really enables you to grow in obedience and serve others more effectively. The main point of Lent is to focus on our need to confess our wickedness, repent, and intensify our fight against sin. We should do those things year round of course -- but it's also useful to have a special time that emphasizes these themes and obligations.

This year, we are adding two special events to our church calendar to bridge the end of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. Given the fact that it can be jarring to move from the joy of Epiphany to the more sober, solemn time of Lent, it makes sense to mark the transition in some way. Further, we must note the fact that Mardi Gras in the South (and elsewhere) has basically become a time of unchristian debauchery and wickedness. What, then, is the solution? How can we move from Epiphany into Lent while avoiding cultural pitfalls? We've decided a good way for us to maintain the best features of the traditional church calendar and to serve our needs as a community is to do a Shrove Tuesday celebration and an Ash Wednesday service.

Our Shrove Tuesday (Feb. 20) gathering will be in the evening at BPBC, in the fellowship hall. It will be a very casual, festive event. And, yes, it will be a pancake dinner! We'll gather beginning around 6 PM. Around 6:45, we'll have a very brief prayer and sing a few songs to wrap things up.

The following evening, we will gather for an Ash Wednesday (Feb. 21) service. This will be a much more formal service, as you might imagine. We will have a full liturgy, including confession of sin and ashes applied to the forehead for those who so desire (for more background on the use of ashes, an ancient Christian and Hebrew custom, see this article: <http://www.kencollins.com/question-02.htm>). We will also begin a new sermon series that evening (Lord willing) on "the seven deadly sins," which will carry us through the whole season of Lent (Ash Wed. + 6 Sundays in Lent = 7 sermons). This is not a communion service. Like Good Friday, we leave the sanctuary in silence.

Of course, towards the end of Lent, we'll have our Maundy Thursday communion feast and Good Friday service, as we did last year. Those events fall on April 5 and 6. The whole ShroveTuesday/Ash Wednesday/Maundy Thursday/Good Friday/Easter cycle will give us a well-rounded experience of the gospel story every year. It's also our hope that it will build community and give us a deeper sense of identity as a church body.

In making use of these special times and seasons, we are *not* suggesting that Christian faithfulness consists in such things. The Bible does not *require* us to have any of these services or fellowship gatherings, and none of them supplant the Lord's Day liturgy, which is always central. This is not some *legal* requirement the church is imposing on you. You are free to participate or not, as you are able and see fit. *But there is much wisdom in the use of a liturgical calendar.* God gave his people a religious calendar in the old covenant; it was perfectly "natural" that the church developed a new covenant calendar almost right away. After all, we have to track time *somehow*; why not allow the story of redemption to be the primary way we structure our yearly cycles? The calendar is a reminder that we exist in time; we are not disembodied creatures, but live within space and history. The calendar has tremendous pedagogical value, for children as well as adults. The calendar gives life a certain rhythm that reminds us of *all* the major themes of the biblical narrative. It reminds us we are part of a wider, larger, and longer story, by inserting us into the story told in the Scriptures themselves and also by connecting us with the practices and customs of the historic church. Without a disciplined use of the calendar, we all too easily focus only on the "happy times" in Jesus' life (Christmas, Easter), and we end up with a truncated, distorted, and imbalanced view of the gospel. There are certainly dangers involved in the use of the calendar. But used wisely, the traditional calendar is a wonderful tool for discipleship and maturation in Christ. It trains us to inhabit the story of redemption.

Finally note that practices like Shrove Tuesday pancakes and the use of ashes on Ash Wednesday are not exclusively (or even primarily) Roman Catholic practices. They belong to the "church catholic" -- the church in her fullness. Yes, they predate the Reformation, but we have no problem tracing our roots (theologically and liturgically) back before 1517. Making use of these special times, seasons, and rites is no more "Romanist" than making use of Christmas and Easter, or reciting the Nicene Creed, or singing the Gloria Patri. These things belong to Christendom as a whole and there's no reason for us to give them up entirely to other branches of the church. Indeed, other Protestant branches of the church continue them up to this day. Why shouldn't we join in as well? Special seasons of feasting and penitence have more than ample warrant in the Scriptures (e.g., Esther 9:18ff; Jonah 3:5ff) and make good sense.