

The Significance of 40

There are certain numbers which carry significance in the Bible. We have one God who exists in three persons which we define as the Trinity. The number seven reminds us of the gifts of the Spirit and is a number describing perfection. The prime numbers 1,3, and 7 carry meaning throughout the Bible.

As we begin Lent on Ash Wednesday we are reminded of another significant number in both the Old and New Testament. The number 40 appears in the Scriptures at very significant times:

- It rained 40 days and nights when God sent the flood because of sin
- The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years because of their lack of faith
- After his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted
- Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples after Easter before he returned to his father

You will note that the number 40 is always connected with a time of preparation for something new connected with temptation and repentance. After destroying the world because of sin, God created a new world for Noah and his family. After the wilderness journey God lead the children of Israel into the promised land and a new beginning. It was the 40 days of temptation which Jesus resisted in preparation for the beginning of his ministry. The disciples needed 40 days of repentance and renewal in preparation for their mission to tell the world about what Christ had done.

It was the early Church Fathers who then determined that the people of God should have a time of confession and repentance in preparation for the celebration of new life experienced in the resurrection of Jesus. Following the Biblical example, they established the 40 days of Lent from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday as a time of reflection and repentance for the people of God. Sundays were not counted in the 40 days because every Sunday is to be a "little Easter" for the believer.

How appropriate that Ash Wednesday begins this year on Valentine's Day. On a day when we think about love, we are reminded of the greatest act of love, Jesus dying on the cross for us. God's valentine is not in the shape of a heart but a cross. As we begin our "40 days" may we reflect on our need for a Savior and a God who loves us beyond our understanding.

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