



“Jesus washing the feet of the Disciples” by Tzeroon (Շերուն), 14-15th cent.

What is Great Lent?

Great Lent is the 40-day period of spiritual preparation that leads to Easter. In Armenian, the term for Great Lent is Medz Bahk (Մեծ Պահք), which means Great Fast. It is the longest and most significant of all the periods of fasting and prayer that precede other Church feasts. It recalls the 40 days Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness, away from family, friends, food, and all distractions. Read about the story in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

When did Great Lent originate?

The first reference to Great Lent is from the 4th century by St. Athanasius. In one of his letters, he refers to a 40-day fast beginning the sixth week before Easter, and including Holy Week. By the year 340, Lent became universally recognized and practiced, and by the year 384, there is very clear evidence that Great Lent was fully developed in Jerusalem, including liturgical services that were a part of the tradition of Armenians there.

How did Great Lent originate?

Most likely, Great Lent originated as a period of preparation for those who would be baptized on Easter, as throughout the Christian world Easter had become the preferred time to conduct baptism for those entering the Church. Over time, the preparation period of 40 days developed into a formalized period of pre-baptismal instruction for converts (catechumens), and then came to be observed by the whole Church.

Are there exactly 40 Days in Great Lent?

The number forty is theologically significant, as it implies completeness. When John the Evangelist writes about Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness, he was suggesting that Jesus spent enough time in the desert to fulfill what was required of Him by God. Subsequently, Churches began to adjust their liturgical calendars to make Great Lent exactly 40 days long. In the Armenian Church, Lent begins on the Monday after the 7th Sunday before Easter, and ends on the 40th day, the Friday before Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday.

What can we eat during Lent?

The authentic fasting tradition of the Armenian Church can be found in various writings of our Church Fathers. Here is what we know:

- ❖ There is not one, absolute, and universal set of fasting regulations. Fasting rules varied from church to church, and monastery to monastery, geographically, and over time.
- ❖ Fasting was generally strict in Armenia, and in some monasteries the Lenten diet consisted of salt, bread, and water. Some lay people followed this regimen as well.

- ❖ No animal products were consumed during Great Lent. For Armenians, there is no difference between fish and meat.
- ❖ There is uncertainty surrounding the consumption of alcohol, oils, olives, honey, and some other foods. Strict followers would abstain from these, while others, in some places and times, did not.
- ❖ Traditionally, Saturday and Sunday were not considered fasting days in the Armenian Church. Sunday is the Day of the Lord, and Saturdays are devoted to commemorating saints and martyrs. As such, it is spiritually incompatible to fast on these days. Over time, the custom of the Lenten fast extended to Saturdays and Sundays, contrary to the ancient and original tradition.

How should we practice Great Lent?

Create a fasting regimen that you can reasonably follow and reflects both the Lenten spirit of dedicating yourself to God and the joy of the resurrection of Jesus. Remember that we fast in order to realize our hunger for God, and hunger pangs should become reminders to fill that void with the Word of God through prayer and acts of charity such as giving, sharing, and forgiveness. Fasting may also include abstaining from something special, such as an activity or hobby. Moderate your fast on Saturdays, and especially on Sundays during Great Lent.

Create a habit of prayer and keep it going after Great Lent. Find prayers from Armenian Church fathers, such as the 24 short prayers known as *I Confess with Faith* by the great Catholicos, writer, and ecumenist St. Nersess Shnorhali (1102-1173). Create your own prayer rule by taking prayers from the *Badarak*, or other favorite prayers from preferred sources. You can even write your own prayer.

Reflect upon the lessons of the Sundays of Great Lent. These take us through the history of God's relationship with us, from Creation to the present moment.

- ❖ Like all major feasts in the Armenian Church, Great Lent is preceded by a celebration Sunday called Poon Paregentan (Բուն Բարեկենդան). In the Garden we live in the joy God intended for us, knowing Him face to face. It is our pure life, lived in the image of God. Read Genesis chapter 2. Lectionary Gospel reading: Matthew 6:1-21
- ❖ Sunday of the Expulsion recalls the loss of that original joy and happiness through pride and mistrust. Sin, that which distracts us from undivided devotion to God, deprives us of Paradise and knowing God fully. Read Genesis chapter 3. Lectionary Gospel reading: Matthew 5:17-48
- ❖ The Sunday of the Prodigal Son tells the story of a lost son who returns to his father and family home in sorrow and penitence. How great is the Father's

love and forgiveness that provides a way back into Paradise and communion with Him! Lectionary Gospel reading: Luke 15:1-32

- ❖ The Sunday of the Steward reminds us that repentance is always possible, and one must start somewhere. Because of the steward's regret, he became wiser and turned toward righteousness. Lectionary Gospel reading: Luke 16:1-31
- ❖ The Sunday of the Judge teaches us true dependence on God. God in His infinite love knows our needs and answers them in the proper time. In the meantime, we are called to trust God, even in our suffering. Lectionary Gospel reading: Luke 17:20-18:14
- ❖ The Sunday of Advent is dedicated to the mystery of the Second Coming of Christ, the culmination and fulfillment of all that happened on earth with the first coming of Christ. It points us toward a time when He will come again as the righteous Judge and Savior, of which we are in need. Lectionary Gospel reading: Matthew 22:34-23:39

Attend church services that are held at your local parish. As much as you are able, participate in the sacramental life of the Church during Great Lent. Learn what the services mean, and give thanks to God through prayer.

Practice penance, but remember that Great Lent is not necessarily a time for morbid sadness. The true practice of penance is a joyful endeavor, because at its heart is a realignment of ourselves with God by coming directly into His presence with a heart open to change. (Matthew 3:1-2)

What did Armenian Church Fathers say about Great Lent?

Now, by such forty days the Lord defeated the tempter, Satan, on the Mount of Temptation. This is to be held as an ideal example of victory for all believers... Now, if we are unable to "die daily", according to the saying of Paul (I Cor. 15:31), let us at least try to partake of the suffering of Christ during these forty days, to lay on the altar of sacrifice the sins of the year. Let us humble ourselves for forty days. Do you not know that only those who in a determined way become partakers of the suffering of Christ will be able to share in the glory of the resurrection of Christ? For he says that "it behooves us not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for His name's sake" (Phil 1:29). - Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (5th cent.)



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