

# UNIQUE WORSHIP IDEAS FOR LENT

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## USING LENTEN SYMBOLS

The worship committee of a church asked their pastor if she could preach on the symbols of Lent during Lent. Exactly what are the symbols of Lent, though?

The symbols of Lent are those prominent in Lenten and crucifixion iconography. These are listed below with scripture references.

**Ashes** Ashes are an ambiguous symbol in the Bible. Abraham says humans are but dust and ashes in Genesis 18:27, which Job repeats (Job 30:19). Contact with the ashes of a burnt sacrifice cause the need for ritual purification, as we see in Numbers 19:7. At the same time, though, the ashes of an unblemished red heifer, which is used for a sin offering (see Leviticus 4), are set aside for the purpose of purification in Numbers 19:9. Hebrews 9:13-14 sees in this a figure of Christ: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God." Ashes are used as a symbol of repentance and grief throughout the Bible: see 2 Samuel 13:19, Esther 4:1ff, Job 42:6, Jeremiah 6:26, Jeremiah 25:34, Ezekiel 27:30, Jonah 3:6, Matthew 11:21, and Luke 10:13. Daniel 9:3 provides the best description of the ritual use of ashes as a sign of repentance: "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." Ashes are symbols of divine judgment in Jeremiah 31:40, Lamentations 3:16, Ezekiel 28:18, Malachi 4:3, and 2 Peter 2:6. Ashes were also used as a disguise in 1 Kings 20:38ff. There is a sense that smearing ourselves with ashes and self-hatred is not what God wants, though, as we see in Isaiah 58:5ff. Indeed, God desires to give us beauty for ashes (Isaiah 61:3).



**Donkey** The first time a donkey shows up in scripture is when Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. Interestingly enough, Jesus is seen as being like Isaac in the early church. Balaam's donkey is the one who speaks for God in Numbers 22. It was with the jawbone of a donkey that Samson overthrew the Philistines in Judges 15. Zechariah 9:9 is the prophetic text Jesus follows as he rides into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-40; John 12:12-16): "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having



salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass."

**Palms** Though Mark and Matthew mention cutting down branches to lay in the road before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, only explicitly mentions people cutting down palm tree branches (John 12:13). Palm branches were specified material for the making of booths to celebrate gift of the Word dwelling (tabernacling) among the people of God in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:34-43). Palm trees characterized oases in the desert and may have been an allusion to the second place where the Israelites encamped after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15:27). Jericho was known as the city of palms (2 Chronicle 28:15). Psalm 92:12 declares that "the righteous shall flourish like the palm tree." Palm trees adorned Solomon's temple in I Kings 6-7, which Ezekiel recalls with his depiction of the establishment of the ideal Temple. By specifying palm branches, John may be making the theological point that the Lord is coming to dwell among us and establish the anticipated Kingdom through the Righteous One. Palm branches signified victory in the Roman world, and there are a plethora of palms in the early Christian art found in the Catacombs, martyrs' "resting chambers" after death to signify that even in death, through Christ, the Christian life is one of victory over the forces of death, destruction, and evil Empire. They represent a kind of righteous, victorious defiance against an unjust rule.



**Alabaster Flask** This symbolizes the woman anointing Jesus with the precious gift of nard she had in an alabaster container (Matt. 26:7, Mark 14:3, Luke 7:37). The gift was equivalent to one year's wages and was considered to be his burial anointing. Anointing with aromatic oil, which is what nard was, was also done to set apart prophets, priests, and kings.

**30 silver coins** This is a symbol of the money Judas was paid to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:15, Matt. 27:3, 3-10). It hearkens back to Zechariah 11:4-14 when God breaks covenant with Israel as God's sheep pay the Lord their Shepherd wages as would-be employers. This is an utter insult, for thirty pieces of silver is restitution for a gored slave according to the Law (Exodus 21:32). See also Jeremiah 18:1-3, 32:6-15.

**Chalice**  
**Wine bottle**  
Last Supper.  
**Loaf of Bread**  
**Grapes**



These are all symbols of holy communion and the  
See Matt. 26:17-30, Mark 12: 25, Luke 22:1-20

**Wheat** While being a symbol for communion, it also echoes what Jesus says in John 12:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

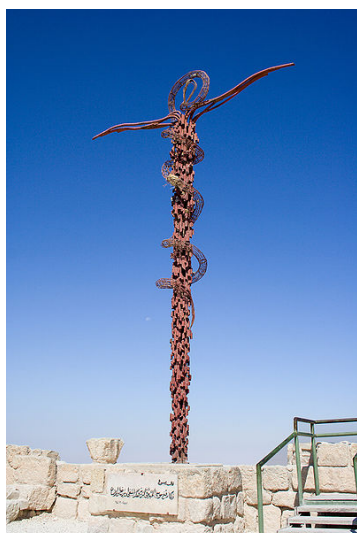


**Wash Basin and Towel** This is a symbol for the new commandment Jesus gives his disciples during the Last Supper—that we serve one another like Jesus served us when he washed our feet like a slave (John 13:1-15, 34-35). We celebrate this event on Maundy Thursday. Maundy is taken from the word *mandatum*, meaning law or command. The new commandment comes at the same time that the new covenant is made with the Last Supper. Ironically, the wash basin and towel also signifies Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for Jesus’ death, even as he allows it (Matthew 27:24). The mention of water and blood in this same verse echoes the water and blood that flowed from Jesus’ side at his death (John 19:34).

**Rock and Praying Hands** This is a symbol for Jesus’ earnest prayer in the garden at Gethsemane. (Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46)

**Crowing Rooster** This is a double-edged symbol recalling Peter’s betrayal of Jesus, as the Lord had predicted, before the cock crows (Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18). Because a crowing rooster marks the dawn of a new day, it is also a symbol of the resurrection.

**Cross** An instrument of political torture and capital punishment used by the Romans to keep an occupied people terrified into complying with the law, the cross was a symbol of shame similar to an electric chair to us. Yet this is what God used to accomplish the divine purpose of atonement and communion with humanity through Christ’s sacrifice of himself for us and our salvation.



**Cross Wound with a Serpent** John links the cross with the bronze serpent in the wilderness raised for the people to look upon so that they would be saved from the snakes in Numbers 21:4-9 (John 3: 14-17). The serpent is an ancient symbol of evil and sin. When we are bit by the poison of sin, looking to Jesus will keep us from dying.

**Dice** Soldiers “cast lots” for Jesus’ tunic in Matthew 27: 35,



Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34, John 19:24. Although unclear as to exactly how this occurred (it could have been by drawing straws, for example), dice are the traditional symbol for gambling in a game of chance. What they saw as chance, however, might also be seen as an oblique allusion to the urim and thummim used by priests to determine God's will (c.f. Exodus 28:30, Numbers 27:21).

**Spear** This is what the soldiers used to ensure that Jesus was dead by stabbing his side so that blood and water flowed from his heart (John 19:34). Blood and water signify the two sacraments of the church flowing from out of the heart of God. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul link the blood of Christ with the cup of the New Covenant (Matthew 26:28 Mark 14:24 Luke 22:20, and I Cor. 10:16), as blood was part of the sealing of a covenant in the ancient world. The water is a symbol of new life through baptism in Christ, as indicated by John 3:5 and I John 5:6-8.

**Whip or Flagellum** Before he was crucified, Jesus was flogged by soldiers (Matthew 27:26, Mark 14:65, Luke 23:16, 22, John 19:1). The whip used was particularly vicious with metal spiked balls on the end of several short leather straps, making the beating up close and personal. Many died of flogging before crucifixion, so severe was the beating.



**Blindfold** Jesus was bound, blindfolded, dressed up as royalty, probably turned round and round, and then beaten like a piñata by mocking soldiers and/or religious authorities. Mark 14:65, Luke 22:63.

**Club** Scriptures record Jesus being beaten with a reed, but, in actuality, this was a thick stick equivalent to a baseball bat or club. (Matthew 27:30, Mark 14:19 Ironically, this reed also appears as a scepter in Jesus' hands as he is mocked as King (Matthew 27:29). The soldiers came to arrest Jesus with clubs (Matthew 26:47, Mark 14:43, Luke 22:47-53, John 19:24). It is a symbol of brute violence and defense, subject to the humiliation of the King.

**Sword** The soldiers came out with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus, and one disciple is recorded as drawing his sword in response and cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave, which Jesus promptly heals (Matthew 26:47-56, Luke 22:47-53, John 19:24). Jesus' way of doing battle with evil is to surrender to death rather than deny God's work, for he is the sword of the Lord, the Word of God enacting the promises spoken (Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12).

**Crown of Thorns** Soldiers mock Jesus as king by placing a crown of thorns on his head. Though they could not comprehend the King of the World as a political prisoner subject to what amounted to police brutality, the gospel writers highlight the irony (Mark 15:17, Matthew 27:28, John 19:5)



**Tunic** Worn next to his skin, this is Jesus' inner garment that was all of one woven piece for comfort. Since it was a nice piece of clothing, soldiers gambled for it after crucifying Jesus. This is linked with Psalm 22:18: "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots" (John 19:23-25). The picture is one of degradation with occupying soldiers gambling for the underwear of a crucifixion victim. See also Luke 23:34, Matthew 27: 35, Mark 15:24.

**Purple or Scarlet Cloak** This is an "elegant" outer garment (Luke 23:11) such as that worn by the rich rulers of Roman society. It was used in mocking Jesus as a king, which the gospel writers use as an ironic detail of truth (Mark 15:17, Matthew 27:28, John 19:2 and 5).

**Three Nails** These signify Christ being nailed to the cross with one nail through each of his hands or wrists and one through both feet laid on top of one another. There is no direct scripture reference to these except with the blunt, "They crucified him." This was a common way of crucifying someone, and three is the number of the Trinity.

**Sign with INRI** indicates the charge under which Christ was crucified, as was the Roman crucifixion custom. INRI stands for the first letters of the Latin: Jesus of Nazareth, King (Rex) of the Jews. (Jesus and Jews started with the Roman equivalent of I). See Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:25, Luke 23:38, John 19:19-22.



**Sponge on a Stick** (Matthew 27:24, 48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29) Jesus was offered vinegar from wine gone bad on a sponge attached to hyssop (which was used for cleansing and anointing in the ancient world). This was in fulfillment of Psalm 69:21: "They gave me poison [or gall] for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." This also signifies the wine mixed with myrrh or gall, which had a narcotic effect, that Jesus was offered but refused in Mark 15:23 and Matthew 27:34.

**Torn Curtain** Matthew 27:51, Luke 23:45. The veil of the Temple that separated people from the holy of holies, where only the high priest went to atone for the people was torn in two from the top to the bottom to signify that there is now no more separation between God and the people because of the atonement offered once and for all by Christ the Lord on the cross. A human being might rip the curtain from bottom to top, but Matthew stresses that it was torn from the top to the bottom to indicate divine action. Hebrews 9:8 and 10:19 offer comment on this, and Exodus 26:31-35 describes the making of the curtain.

**Linen Graveclothes** These are the clothes Jesus was hurriedly wrapped in before his body was laid in the borrowed tomb. See Matthew 27:59, Mark 15:46, Luke

23:53, John 19:40). A linen cloth could also symbolize our nakedness before God, like the disciple whose linen loincloth came off during his escape when soldiers sought to capture him when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:52-52). He fled naked before the crucifixion of the Lord, which is where we all stand before the cross of Christ. While overtly a symbol of death, they also signify that Jesus has escaped the judgment of death in the resurrection (Luke 24:12, John 20:6-7).

## TABLEAU OF SYMBOLS

For each Sunday in Lent, you could do a tableau of symbols from the lections for the week that you keep adding to on or at the base of a large rough cross assembled by a parishioner and installed on Ash Wednesday. Then the remaining ashes from an imposition of ashes can remain in their dish and placed at the base of the cross.

**The First Sunday of Lent (Year A).** A crown of thorns could be hung on the cross, using the Romans lection to talk about the Dominion of God from the Romans lection, which Christ inaugurated ironically through the wearing of the crown of thorns.

**The Second Sunday of Lent (Year A).** You can toss 30 silver coins against the cross, perhaps connecting the symbol with the talk of the wages of in the Romans text and reflect upon how wages objectify the worth of a human being in ways contrary to the Way of God.

**The Third Sunday of Lent (Year A).** Lent 3 includes the lections on Moses striking water from the rock and the woman at the well, so the symbols of water and a rock with praying hands could be used and added to the tableau beneath the cross.

**The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year A)** could add a stuffed animal lamb to connect with the sacrifice offered by Jesse and the youth of David and Christ our Passover lamb.

**The Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year A)** could have bones and graveclothes in play with the Ezekiel and Lazarus texts.

**The Sixth Sunday of Lent (Year A)** is Palm/Passion Sunday so you can add the palms and any other symbols you want to add depending upon what you decide to do in Holy Week.

**Maundy Thursday** can add the towel and basin and highlight the rock and praying hands with the traditional texts of Maundy Thursday.

On Good Friday you can add the other symbols by having different people dressed in black reverently place the symbol on or around the cross as the narrative names that symbol in the reading of the passion story.

## NAILING SINS TO THE CROSS

Have someone assemble a large rough wooden cross in the sanctuary in such a way that it will be stable. In whatever way works best for your congregation, make sure everyone has 2 x 3 pieces of paper and access to writing implements. After the call to confession, invite people to write or draw whatever is hindering them from following Christ. Collect these. After a corporate prayer of confession, have three people nail the pieces of paper, written side down, onto the cross in bunches during the silence that follows a corporate prayer of confession. Let the hammering be all that is heard. Then pronounce an assurance of pardon with boldness:

Hear the good news!

This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance—

That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross

That we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good.

I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ,

You are forgiven.

Amen!

As forgiven and freed people

Bound by the grace of God,

Let us share a sign of God's peace with one another.

Flower over all of these with a flowering of the cross on Easter (see below).

## FLOWERING OF THE CROSS

For Easter Sunday, do a flowering of the cross. Cover the cross with chicken wire, rabbit fencing, or other similar material. Have everyone bring a bunch of flowers to church on Easter Sunday so that they can readily and quietly share with visitors. During the singing of the opening hymn, such as "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," have everyone come up and stick their flower stems through the wire on the cross until the whole cross is blooming in flowers. You will also want to

have some extra flowers on hand to fill in the bare spaces on the cross. This works better when Easter is late and there are plenty of flowers blooming in everyone's garden and in the fields or woods.



Photo by Dennis Bailey of the Rev. Elizabeth Patrick serving Sinking Spring Presbyterian Church, Abingdon, VA

## LENTEN DISCIPLINE

Lent is a time when we give things up to God, making space for the Lord to work more directly in our lives. It's often a time for fasting and prayer, a time of increased devotion through Bible study, worship, and good works.

You may want to avail yourself of Lenten materials from the Hunger Program at [www.pcusa.org/fast-lent](http://www.pcusa.org/fast-lent) or check out Lenten resources around God's desire for us to be good creation stewards at [www.pcusa.org/tread-lightly-lent](http://www.pcusa.org/tread-lightly-lent)