

WEEKLY FAMILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

By MaryJane Pierce Norton

The church season of Lent is a wonderful time to start weekly family devotions. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and lasts forty days (not including the Sundays). Sundays are excluded because those are the days we remember Jesus' resurrection. Every Sunday is a little celebration of Easter and thus a time of joy.

Historically, the Christian church has recognized Lent as a time to deliberately bring oneself closer to God. Individuals and groups have engaged in Bible study, in mission and service, and in fasting to prepare themselves for Easter.

The forty days of Lent are symbolic of Jesus' time in the wilderness before he began his ministry. During that time, he was tempted and stayed true to God.

FAMILY STUDY FOR LENT

Ash Wednesday -- Do Not Worry

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-35

Symbol: Flower

Discussion & Activity: If you are able, attend an Ash Wednesday Service at church. Talk together about the service and what it meant to you.

In reading Matthew 6:16-35, we are reminded that God is there for us. Through the entire season of Lent, we will be seeking ways to help one another remember that God is with us.

Pass a flower from one to another. Think about the beauty of the flower and how God has created it so that we see that beauty and life. Talk about the ways each person can use Lent to stay focused on God's presence in our lives.

Often, Lent is seen as a "giving up" time. Plan ways that Lent can be an "adding life" time. Prepare a list with each person's name on the list. Together, decide what each person will do to add life during Lent. Think about such things as recycling items, reading Scripture daily, sending a note of thanks each week to someone who has helped the family member feel God's love, adding a household task that helps everyone enjoy the home more, exercising each week.

Prayer:

Dear God: As we begin our Lenten observance, we are reminded that you created us just like you created the flowers. We owe our beauty and our life to you. Keep us from needless worry and open our eyes to ways we can more fully enjoy the life you have given us. Amen.

Week 1 -- Jesus Is Tempted

Scripture: Read together Matthew 4:1-11

Symbol: Rock

Discussion & Activity: When we read about the temptations of Jesus, we are reminded that we all face temptations in our lives.

Pass a small rock around to family members. Think about how hungry Jesus might have been and how tempting it would have been for him to turn a rock into bread.

Talk together about what temptations each one in the family faces at home, at school, at work, in the community. Those temptations may lead you to identify what you would like to give up during the season of Lent. You may choose to give up certain foods or treats that tempt you to eat too much; or you may choose to give up an activity on which you spend too much time. You may choose to think of others instead of thinking only of yourself. You might want to give up sweets, or give up texting for one day a week, or give up a cup of coffee, or give up a television program. You might also want to assess a money value for each thing you give up. Save this money; then at Easter give the money saved as an offering for church or for a community project that serves those in need.

Decorate an empty plastic container with symbols, pictures, and words that remind you of the temptations of Jesus and of your own temptations. Place this on your dining table or in another place where everyone in the household can see it. Each day, place into the container money that family members would have spent on the activities they have given up.

Prayer:

Gracious God. Just as you were with Jesus through his temptations, we know you are with us as well. Help us to remember we are not alone. Help us to share this knowledge with others so that they too can know your love and care. Amen.

Week 2 -- Teach Me Lord

Scripture: Read together John 3:1-21

Symbol: Candle

Discussion & Activity: Often when we read the story of Nicodemus, we concentrate on being born again. While that's part of the message of this story, another part is Nicodemus's willingness to come to Jesus in order to learn more from him. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he wants to know more about God. And Jesus teaches him -- just as he teaches us when we read the Scripture.

Light a candle. Dim the lights and together look at the light from the candle. Think about these words in the Scripture: "Light has come into the world..."

Recall together where you have seen God's light this week through the actions of others, in the news, in things that have happened in the family. Create a poster of light. Cut out paper candles. Each day, write on a candle one way you have experienced God's care. Glue this onto a larger sheet of paper or poster board. Daily give thanks for how you see God's light in the world.

Prayer:

God, our Teacher. We learn about you from those who wrote the Bible. We learn about you when we listen to one another tell of your presence and actions in our lives. We learn about you when we look around us and see your creation. But sometimes we forget to take time to worship and praise you. Help us take time to offer our praises and prayers. Amen.

Week 3 -- Jesus Gives Us Living Water

Scripture: Read together John 4:5-42

Symbol: Pitcher of Water

Discussion & Activity: Although John 4:5-42 may be a familiar story for you, it may not be as familiar to children and youth. It's a great testimony to the fact that we do not have to be perfect to experience God's love. This Samaritan woman was not perfect. We don't know all of her story. We know only what is written here, and there is just enough information to realize she had lived a life that wasn't perfect. But Jesus offered her God's love. And she believed and told others. She became a disciple -- one who learns from a wise teacher -- that day at the well. And the water reminded her -- and us -- that God gives us what we need for life.

Part of her ability to believe came because Jesus offered love and acceptance to her. Sometimes when we deal with one another within the family, we find ourselves not able to truly love and accept one another. Something another person does makes us angry, or sad, or impatient. God doesn't ask us to forget those actions. God asks us to continue loving and caring for one another, even as we try to change actions that hurt others. Talk together about what it means to show love to one another even though we do things we shouldn't do. Make a list together of ways to show love to others.

Pour water from a pitcher for each person. Drink the water and reflect on how it nourishes us and helps us have life.

This week, make a list for each person in the family. This can include those who live in the household and/or those who live in other places. Use a separate sheet of paper for each person. At the top of the paper, put the name of the person. Under the name, put ways others in the family can show love to that person. During the week, ask each family member to do one thing for all others in the family from their lists.

Prayer:

Dear Lord. We know you forgive us when we sin, but it's hard to admit to those sins. It's hard for us to trust that you will forgive us. And it's hard to trust that those in our family will forgive us as well. Help us focus on ways we can show love and trust to one another. Help us keep our trust in you. Amen.

Week 4 -- Jesus Helps Us See

Scripture: Read together John 9:1-12

Symbol: Bowl of Dirt

Discussion & Activity: When we read Scripture, we are often confronted with happenings that to our logical minds do not seem possible. Think about what you have just read. Jesus puts mud on the man's eyes, and the man sees! How fantastic is that! It had to be miraculous for Jesus' followers to witness this. And as the story attests, it was hard for those who saw the man to believe what had happened. It is even more difficult for us to understand because we can only read the account. We can't see for ourselves.

The simple message for Lent is that those who follow Jesus are able to see more clearly. Followers of Jesus are able to see more clearly the behaviors we need to exhibit as children of God. Followers of Jesus are able to see more clearly ways to serve God. Followers of Jesus are able to see more clearly the responses demanded of us to situations of injustice.

As you talk about the Scripture, have family members place their hands in a bowl of dirt. Mix the dirt with water to make mud. Think about how Jesus placed mud on the eyes of the man who could not see.

This is a difficult message for adults -- as well as for children and youth. In your family, talk about what difficult decisions you need to make this week. Talk about how you see what the right response needs to be. Talk about ways you see one another as God sees each of you.

Create portraits of each family member. On a piece of paper, draw a face -- or just a circle -- for each family member. Talk together and decide what words best describe each family member. Write these words in the face or circle. This week, pray for all the family members, thanking God for all that they are.

Prayer:

Gracious God: We are reminded that through the teachings of Jesus, we are able to see ways God would want us to live our lives. And we are able to see each person as a loved child of God. Help us look at one another as God would look at us. And may we help one another choose the actions and words that help those around us know of God's love as well. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen

Week 5 -- The Meaning of the Cross

Scripture: Read together John 11:1-57

Symbol: Cross

Discussion & Activity: You may want to divide this passage as follows for study and reflection in your family: John 11:1-16; John 11:17-37; John 11:38-44; John 11:45-57. We often stop our reading after Lazarus is raised from the dead. But the consequences of this action are explained in verses 45-57. And because we know the Easter story has to include Jesus' death on the cross, it is helpful to realize that there were those who had decided that Jesus must die.

Sometimes it is hard for us to talk about Jesus dying on the cross. Because we know that he rose from the dead, we sometimes try to skip over his death. But this was what he was willing to do for people to know of God's love and care for all.

Pass around a cross. Tell family members to feel each part of the cross. Recall that the cross on which Jesus died was not a smooth, beautiful object like the jewelry we wear today. Think about the pain that was part of Jesus' cross.

Ask each person in the family to say how it makes him or her feel to talk about Jesus dying on the cross. Remind one another that we use the sign of the cross to remember Jesus even today.

A food that is part of the Lenten season is Hot Cross Buns. You can make these using prepared cinnamon roll dough or bread dough. Add a cross of white sugar frosting to the tops of the rolls. Eat these as a reminder that Jesus died so that all might know God.

Prayer:

O God: It is hard to think of Jesus, whom we love so much, being put to death on the cross. And yet, when we look at the cross, we are reminded that he did this as a gift so that we might be forgiven of our sins. Thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. Amen.

Week 6 -- The Meaning of the Resurrection

Scripture: Read together Matthew 21:1-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Symbol: Egg

Discussion & Activity: This week -- Holy Week -- we are in the midst of remembering Jesus' death. You may actually want to start the week reading the first passage from Matthew, then reading the second passage, dividing it up for the rest of the week, ending with Matthew 28:1-20 on Easter Sunday.

Invite family member to hold an egg in their hands. Ask them to think about how within the egg, there is life; but from the outside, we don't always see it. Name other things you see that hold life, but don't seem to do so just by appearance. Think about plant bulbs or bare tree limbs.

While we remember Jesus' death, we also prepare to celebrate his new life. After being so sad about Jesus' death, we learn that he is alive; and this fills us with joy! Ask each person in the family to tell of one thing about Easter that makes him or her happy. As each person says what makes him or her happy about Easter, respond by saying "Alleluia!"

Decorate Easter eggs together. We use eggs as symbols of the new life we have because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Make a list of other things that help us remember new life.

Prayer:

God, as we remember Jesus' last week, remind us that through bad times and good times, you are with us. Help us notice the suffering in the world around us. Help us find ways to offer the blessings of Easter to those who are in need in our community. Don't let us skip too quickly over the suffering just to get to the happiness of Easter. Remind us that you are there for us in both bad times and good times. Amen.

Easter -- Alleluia

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

Symbol: Butterfly

Discussion & Activity: Attend an Easter worship service. Ask family members to list things that happened in worship that help them be aware of God's love.

Sometimes Easter can be just a day when we eat chocolate, go to church, and are happy for a short time. But Easter gives us reason to be joyful every day. Look at a picture of a butterfly. Think about the beauty that emerges from a dull chrysalis.

Decide on one or two Easter actions to continue during the next weeks that help spread the news of God's love. Ideas include continuing to give to a charity, taking food each week to a food pantry, praying for one another, writing a note each week to someone who might be lonely.

Prayer:

God: We say together "Alleluia" because Jesus rose from the dead. We see new life around us, and we give thanks to you for all the signs of new life. Help us be joyful this Easter and never forget the wonderful gift Jesus gave to us all. Amen.

An Introduction to Lent and Easter

The date for **Easter** changes each year as it is the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox on March 21st. Therefore the date falls sometime between March 22 and April 25.

The season of **Lent** consists of the 40 days, not including Sundays, before Easter. The word Lent is derived from the Germanic root for long because it is observed in spring when the days get longer. Lent is a time to prepare for the holiest time of the Christian year by fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and other acts of penance. Many people give up something for Lent (a food, watching TV, etc.) or do something to bring them closer to God such as daily devotions or charitable donations. The church color for most of Lent is **purple** which symbolizes repentance as well as royalty. The word alleluia is not used during Lent and some churches perform a ritual called the "putting away of the alleluias" before Lent begins.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. Ashes are a sign of repentance and for centuries the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" have been spoken as the sign of the cross is made with ashes on Christians' foreheads at special Ash Wednesday services.

Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday and is a time of celebration and eating of rich foods made with eggs, sugar, and butter, which were traditionally prohibited during Lent. The term shrove is the past tense of shrive which means to obtain forgiveness of sins by confession and doing penance; in the past preparation for Lent included going to confession. Other names for the day are Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, Tuesday of Carnival, Fastnacht Day, and Pancake Tuesday. Churches today celebrate Shrove Tuesday with Mardi Gras celebrations which may include pancake races and dinners of pancakes and other rich foods.

Holy Week is the last week of Lent and the week before Easter; it commemorates the last week of Jesus' earthly life. It begins with **Palm Sunday** when Jesus entered Jerusalem, continues with Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, and Holy Wednesday, and ends with **Maundy Thursday** (Holy Thursday), **Good Friday** and Holy Saturday. The word Maundy is thought to be derived from the Latin word for command and refers to the command Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper. The time from the evening of Holy Thursday until the evening of Easter Sunday is called the "Easter Triduum". A Tenebrae service may be held on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday; the word Tenebrae is Latin for shadows and the service includes a gradual extinguishing of candles. In Roman Catholic and some other churches there is an **Easter Vigil** between sunset on Holy Saturday and dawn on Easter Sunday which is considered the first official celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

Telling the Story to Children

Teaching children about Christmas is fun and easy compared to the challenge of teaching them about Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. Memories of the little baby born in Bethlehem are still fresh in their minds when the season of Lent begins; how do we explain that the little baby grew up to suffer and die? In a society of instant gratification and “it’s all about me,” a season which emphasizes repentance and sacrifice can be a hard sell. It may be tempting to de-emphasize Lent, teach about Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday and forget the rest but we’re doing our children a disservice when we take that route. The joy of Easter can’t be fully experienced without some knowledge of what happened on Good Friday, and learning about Lent and that we should look beyond ourselves and our needs is a valuable lesson.

It’s important to be aware of what is age-appropriate for children and be conscious of each child’s particular sensitivities and level of understanding. Children younger than three can be told that Jesus is alive and with us today. For preschool children, a simple explanation that Jesus died on a cross, was buried in a tomb, and then rose on Easter Sunday is sufficient. Younger elementary children can hear stories from the gospels without going into too much detail. Older elementary children can be exposed to more particulars of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Whatever we teach our children about the events leading up to Jesus’ death, it’s important to always include the story of Jesus’ resurrection and what it means for us today.

There are many good Easter books and videos for children but always preview them first to make sure they match your beliefs, are not too violent, and include the resurrection as well as Jesus’ death.

When questions arise, answer them honestly. Don’t be afraid to tell the children that you struggle with some of their same concerns. For younger children, a simple explanation such as telling them that Jesus died for us so that we could be together with him in heaven is usually sufficient.

In observing the season of Lent, it’s best to inspire, not require. Some children may find the practice of giving up a favorite food or TV show meaningful; others may prefer to add something, such as collecting money for the poor or being kind to others. Share with them how you observe Lent and what practices you find meaningful and invite them to decide what they would like to do.