



OBSERVING LENT: RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

What is Lent?

Lent is a season in the church year. It lasts for six weeks but is 40 days long. (That’s because Sundays are not considered part of Lent. They are feast days—or mini-Easter celebrations!) Lent begins on Wednesday, February 22 (Ash Wednesday) and lasts through Holy Saturday (April 8). Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have observed Lent as a special time to prepare for the death and resurrection of Christ through the spiritual practices of fasting, alms giving, and prayer.

Where did Lent come from?

Christians have formally observed the season of Lent since the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.—that’s longer than Christians have been observing Christmas!

The word “lent” gives us a hint about why Christians have observed this season, and where some of the traditions of Lent come from. The word “lent” comes from an old English word for ‘the spring season.’ This was the time of year when winter stores of food began to run low, but it was still weeks before the first spring crops would be ready to harvest. It was the time of year when cows, pigs, and sheep would be getting ready to give birth to their spring babies, so there was no fresh meat available for people to eat. Above all, it was a time of waiting for the darkness and cold of winter to end, and the warmth and light of spring to arrive. In the ancient and medieval church, the season of Lent helped to sanctify—or make holy—this challenging time of year. Lent became a season of spiritual preparation and discipline. During Lent, Christians are called to reflect on their sin, their need for repentance, and their inability to save themselves. It is a time to repent and believe the gospel.

How do Christians observe Lent?

During the six weeks of Lent, there are three main ways that Christians observe Lent:

- **Fasting:** going a day, or part of a day without food, or giving up a type of food (like dessert or snacks). Fasting reminds us of our total dependence on Jesus—the Bread of Life.
- **Alms Giving:** traditionally, Lent is a time to give to those in need—especially the poor, hungry, and unhoused.
- **Prayer:** making (or continuing) a practice of daily prayer for our families, city, country, and the world

Do Christians need to observe Lent?

The most important thing about observing Lent is that it is optional. Lent is not about a public performance of holiness or designing an exhausting spiritual to-do list. It’s not about adding one more thing to your busy family schedule. Still, observing Lent as a family can be a very meaningful way to help your children prepare for the joy of Easter. Read through the activities in this packet and pick and choose your favorites to create a Lenten observance that works for your family life.

OBSERVING LENT: ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras

Shrove is an old English word which means to confess sins. Mardi Gras means “Fat Tuesday” in French. That’s because traditionally, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday was the last day for feasting before the start of Lent. Pancake suppers were a traditional feast food in the medieval church in England. Why pancakes? Because pancakes require eggs, butter, and white flour—all luxury ingredients for medieval people.

Activity: Pancake Supper

On the night of February 21, have a pancake supper! As you make and eat pancakes with your family, take time to reflect on all the rich blessings God has given you, even during this challenging year.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the start of Lent, the six weeks leading up to Easter. It is a very solemn day in the church year, because it is the day when Christians remember that “the wages of sin is death.”

Traditionally, Ash Wednesday is a day when Christians go to church for a service of confession. In some churches, pastors or priests might make a cross out of ashes on the foreheads of congregants to remind them that “from dust [they] have come, and to dust [they] shall return.” The ashes used on Ash Wednesday typically come from the burnt palm branches that were used on Palm Sunday in the previous year.

Our Ash Wednesday service this year will be at 6:30 PM on Wednesday, February 22nd. It will feature songs, scripture readings, and the receiving of ashes.

LENTEN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Fasting

During Lent, many people choose to fast. Fasting can take a variety of forms—fasting from a particular kind of food, like chocolate, to fasting from an activity, like watching a favorite show. The purpose of fasting is to help us to remember that we are unable to save ourselves—we need Jesus!

How to Fast with Children

1. It is unwise and developmentally inappropriate to expect young children to fast. Instead, talk to your young child about why you have decided to fast (if you are fasting). Invite them to experience fasting through watching your example.
2. Older children may wish to engage in fasting. (Make sure that your child understands that any fast is invitational, not compulsory.) Help your child select an appropriate form of fasting—giving up dessert, not dinner!
3. During the week, talk with your family members about how their fasts are going. Experiences of temptation and failure are instructive—how can we use them to grow closer to Jesus?
4. Remember feast days! Each Sunday in Lent is a feast day, a day to give up your fast in anticipation of Easter when the fast ends once and for all. Find ways to feast with your family each Sunday in Lent—if your child gave up dessert for Lent, make sure to have dessert each Sunday.

Alms Giving

Many, many people are in need in our city and country this year. During Lent, consider some of the ideas below to engage your family in alms giving.

- Rice and Beans Night: Consider having a very simple meal of rice and beans once a week for the six weeks of Lent. Save the money your family would have spent on regular meal and collect it over the six weeks. On Easter, present the savings as an additional tithe to church. Or, as a family, choose an organization to support, such as the Union Gospel Mission here in Portland.
- TV Tithe (also a form of fasting!): For the six weeks of Lent, cancel your subscription to one of the streaming services your family uses. Use the money saved to purchase a share in an animal from Heifer International. Or donate the savings to another worthy cause.

Prayer Ideas

Lent Prayer Chain: This is a great hands-on devotional activity for children to help them understand that Lent is a time of waiting and a time for prayer. Create a paper chain out of purple paper for each day in Lent (with white links for Sundays). Choose a different person, group, or place to pray for on ‘purple days.’ On white days (Sundays) offer prayers of Thanksgiving. (OP Kids has provided these links for you.) Each day of Lent, tear off a link from the chain, pray for the person on the link, and countdown to Easter.

Great Easter Books and Other Resources

For Families with Young Children:

- Humprey’s First Palm Sunday, Carol Heyer. Fun illustrations.
- Don’t Forget to Remember, Ellie Holcomb. Beautiful illustrations!
- SING, Remembering Songs by Ellie Holcomb. A free streaming download available on Amazon Prime.
- Holy Week: An Emotions Primer
- The Easter Cave, Carol Wedeven. Wonderful rhythm, rhyme and soft illustrations teach the full Easter Story.
- Teach Us to Pray: Scripture-Centered Family Worship Throughout the Year, Lora A. Copley and Elizabeth Vander Haagen. An interactive family devotional centered around the church year—great for young kids!

For Families with Elementary-Aged Children:

- The Garden, The Curtain and The Cross, Carl Laferton. The theology of atonement explained in a child-friendly way.
- The Easter Story, Brian Wildsmith. The story of Easter told from the perspective of the donkey that carried Jesus. Gorgeous illustrations!
- The Tale of the Three Trees, Angela Elwell Hunt. A beautiful folk tale about the tree that became the wood for Jesus’ cross.

For Families with Older Children:

- Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, Various Authors. A collection of short devotional readings from great Christian thinkers and authors.
- A Journey through Lent, Tim Keller and David Bisgrove.
- “Holy Week by Art and Image, Story and Song,” Sarah Clarkson. A blog featuring mediations on film, works of art, poetry and more for Holy Week.