

Lent Activities for the Family

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Miiko Gibson

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www.MiikoGibson.com

Introduction

Lent is the 40 days, not counting Sundays, before Easter. The first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday gets its name from the practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of the faithful as a sign of repentance. The ashes used are gathered after the palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday are burned.

For some Christians, Lent is traditionally a period of fasting and repentance in preparation for Easter. Many churches however do not observe Lent significantly. Few people nowadays fast for the whole of Lent, although some do still fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and many believers give up certain foods or alcohol as a form of self-discipline.

Why is it called Lent?

Lent is an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning to lengthen. The Anglo-Saxon Lent is observed in spring when the days begin to get longer.

Why 40 Days?

When you read your Bible you can't help but be impressed by the significance of the number 40 whether it is 40 days or 40 years.

Here are some examples:

- * In Genesis, the flood which destroyed the earth was brought about by 40 days and nights of rain.
- * Moses was 40 years as a shepherd before he saw the burning bush.
- * Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.
- * The Israelites wandered the desert of 40 years before reaching the Promised Land.
- * Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. Most Christians regard Jesus' time in the wilderness as the key event for the duration of Lent.

Why is Sunday not included in the forty days of Lent?

From about 325 AD, it began to be common for people to fast for forty days following the model of Jesus. Fasting then was rigidly observed and meant only one meal a day. Meat and fish were totally forbidden. The forty days were continuous, but because Sundays could never be fast days the forty days were extended. Adding four days onto Lent made the beginning Ash Wednesday.

Sunday was not considered a fast day because Sunday is a weekly reminder of Jesus' resurrection during which the Holy Communion was celebrated. He said "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?"
(Mark 2:19, NIV)

Do note that eastern churches count the 40 days differently. They include Sundays and they start Lent on the Monday of the 7th week before Easter and end it on the Friday 9 days before Easter. Eastern churches call this period the 'Great Lent'.

Should we observe Lent?

Like the observation of the Advent, Lent is more a tradition of the Roman Catholic and other liturgical churches. There is no command, inference or example in Scripture that institutes such a practice. Most Protestant and non-liturgical churches celebrate Easter, but they don't observe Lent. What about you? Should you?

For many of us, Easter, unlike Christmas, just sneaks upon us. Good Friday is not a public holiday here in the States. Even if our church observes Palm Sunday, the next time the church meets is Easter Sunday. Good Friday is almost glossed over if the family doesn't make an effort to think about it!

My Family

My home church does not observe Lent or even Palm Sunday. But in our family, we like to use Lent for spiritual reflection and contemplation. It is also a great time to take out all our Easter-related tapes, videos, books and DVDs and enjoy them individually or as a family. We do fun 'almost spring' activities, engage in discussion points and sing passion hymns. We might do an Easter Unit/Integrated Study, an Easter Lapbook, prepare Resurrection Eggs, or whatever catches my (the homeschool mom) fancy for that particular year. We have regular devotions in the evening but during the Holy Week (the last week Jesus was on earth), my husband always does some kind of Easter devotions with us.

To ensure that my children are as excited about Easter as Christmas, I've come up with a Lenten Tree Chart (see last page) for them to countdown the days leading to Easter.

For myself, I want to use Lent to focus less on my physical needs and more on my spiritual needs. My own observation of Lent is not based on any hard and fast rules or traditions of men. It is just a **personal decision** to examine my heart and life, something I should do periodically anyway. What better time than Lent? Perhaps my meditation will lead me to appreciate more the suffering and death of my dear Lord and Savior, and may I be able to like David cry out, "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:9-10).

The Lenten Tree Chart

I hope this chart and the suggested activities (most are very simple and short, and won't take much of your time) will excite your family this Easter season. I have also included some practices that will encourage your children to exercise self-discipline and Christian love. Such practices are marked with an asterisk.

Please don't see all these activities and practices as another thing to add to your already full schedule. Let them bless and not burden you. If you miss a day, or if you are starting after Ash Wednesday, it's all right. Just make it up the next day or give the missed fruit another color. Please also feel free to write out your own activities. It's your family and you know your children best.

Lenten Tree Chart and Suggested Lent Activities and Practices

1. Print out the Lenten Tree on card-stock for each member of the family.
2. Print and cut out the 40 suggested activity strips. I've included more than 40 as some might not work for your family.
3. Put all the strips in some kind of container (pretty spring bowl, hat, etc.). If some ideas need extra preparation, see that you have all the materials before including the strips in the bowl.
4. On the evening before Ash Wednesday (February 24th in 2009) a family member draws one strip of paper. Mom will take note of the activity in question and do the necessary preparations if need be. On Ash Wednesday, when the activity is done, each child colors a fruit on the Lenten Tree. The next evening, another member of the family draws another strip of paper for the next day's activity and so on. On Sunday, each child could color a leaf before going to church.
5. The last fruit to be colored is the Saturday before Easter. On Easter the child could color the empty tomb.

49 Activities and Practices for Lent

1. Practice the traditional Easter greeting: "Christ is risen!" and the response: "He is risen indeed!"
2. Make hot cross buns. This was traditionally served on Good Friday. Sing the nursery rhyme "Hot Cross Bun."
3. Each child sends a card or letter to someone. * Homemade is better. Mom sends one too.
4. In Greece, Christians celebrate Easter with a festive outdoor banquet. If the day is warm enough, eat lunch outdoors. Use this idea for another day if the weather doesn't co-operate.
5. God's holiness is preminent and transcending. Explain *repentance* in terms of understanding God's holiness and seeing yourself through His eyes. Emphasize God's loving desire to redeem sinners. *For young children teach them to say "Excuse me" or "I'm sorry" each time they make a mistake or do something wrong. Make that fun by lightly knocking into them and gasping, "Oh, excuse me!" Or spill some water and say, "I'm sorry!" Use role-play to get across the message.*
6. Explain the word *alleluia*, which comes from a Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase meaning "Praise the Lord" - a call to worship. Sing a favorite praise song or hymn.

7. Jewish families typically cleaned before the Passover celebration. Spend 15 minutes cleaning all windows or glass surfaces in the house.
8. Make homemade pretzels, which originated as a Lenten treat. Their twisted shape suggested arms crossed in prayer.
9. Read Isaiah 53:2-8. Depending on the maturity and readiness child, describe Jesus' sufferings on the cross.
10. Define *atonement*, helping your kids understand the ideas of making amends or repaying a debt that is owed. *For young children role-play the parable of the ungrateful debtor.*
11. Take a nature walk and collect items that could remind you of the life of Jesus. For example, two sticks could be put together as a cross, a thorn could represent the crown on Jesus' head and a stone could remind the children of the big stone that rolled in front of Jesus' tomb.
12. Explain "fasting" and "abstinence" and how some Christians do both during Lent. Ask if anyone would like to forgo something for the day (coffee for mom, something sweet for the children).
13. Sacrifice something nice for someone in the family. *
14. Pick out some old but presentable clothes to donate to someone or the thrift store.*

15. Do one hard thing.*

16. Practice giving one another a foot-wash. Talk a bit about Maundy Thursday when Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and commanded them to love one another. The word *maundy* comes from a root word meaning "mandate" or "command." Look up John 13:34-35 to discover the "new commandment" Jesus gives.

17. Make Easter cards to give or send to some folks.

18. Sing "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" or a favorite praise song.

19. The name *Good Friday* probably evolved from the phrase "God's Friday." Talk about why the day Christ died is ultimately very good because all of us need to be redeemed. We need a Savior.

20. We can have "new life" in Jesus! Do something crafty like make a tissue or coffee filter butterfly. Or draw a butterfly and paint or color it. Look up 2 Corinthians 5:17.

21. The gift of Immanuel, which we celebrate at Christmas, finds its ultimate expression in Christ's sacrifice. Make cross-shaped paper bookmarks as gifts.

22. Pray for missionaries in persecuted churches around the world. **Voice of the Martyrs** (<http://www.persecution.com/>) is a good ministry to look into if you are not familiar with it.

23. Read an Easter-related book together. (It is a good idea to put ALL your Easter-related books, tapes, DVDs and videos in a basket).
24. Read the Passover story. Read or summarize Exodus 12:1-42 to give an older child a context for the Passover celebration that Jesus observed the last week before His death. Explain Christ's death as the ultimate sacrifice for sin and discuss the significance of God giving up his firstborn Son.
25. Until A.D. 70, the Jewish people sacrificed lambs and other "clean" animals as an acknowledgment of their sins. Talk about if God wants people to sacrifice lambs today. Why or why not? Explain or discuss how every Jewish sacrifice foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus Christ made. He shed his own blood and died on the cross for our sins. Read Hebrews 9:22b. *If you just have younger children, do the craft (#26) instead.*
26. Help your child understand why Jesus was called "the Lamb of God" (His role as the unblemished sacrifice: Ex. 12:21-24; John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7-8). With your child, make a lamb. Glue cotton balls to a small paper plate, then add pink and black construction-paper eyes, ears, muzzle, nose and hooves.
27. Watch an Easter-related movie.
28. Discuss and agree how as a family, you can "give up something" and give the money (which would have gone towards its purchase) to a charity or a benevolent fund.
29. Bring spring into the house (a pot of daffodils, crocuses, lilies, etc.) and admire God's creation.

30. Fill a clay pot with soil and grass seeds. Watch the grass sprouts come to life. Explain how Jesus gives us new life.
31. Sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” or “Jesus Loves Me”.
32. If you have older children, discuss why some think Easter is a pagan holiday. I find this article very useful. (<http://www.joyfulheart.com/easter/>)
33. Explain what “betray” means. Who betrayed Jesus? For how much? Discuss how we can be faithful to God on a daily basis. *For younger children, ask them how they can be a faithful sibling or friend.*
34. Make a “He is Risen!” or “Our Redeemer Lives!” poster or banner for the house or as gifts to grandparents.
35. Listen to Handel's “Messiah”. It is a good idea to get your own CD as it is something you and family will want to listen to over and over again.
36. Listen to Woodrow Kroll's [“The Twelve Voices of Easter”](http://www.backtothebible.org/articles-by-woodrow-kroll/the-twelve-voices-of-easter.html) .
(<http://www.backtothebible.org/articles-by-woodrow-kroll/the-twelve-voices-of-easter.html>)

37. Bake something for a shut-in or a needy family. *
38. Act out the “parade” of Palm Sunday as a family. Take turns being the donkey, Jesus and part of the crowd. “Hosanna” means “Save us, we beseech thee.” Remind them that in less than a week, the crowd's sentiments changed.
39. Learn to spell and define “resurrection”. What is the significance of Jesus' resurrection? *Younger children could learn how to spell “Jesus” or “Cross”.*
40. Discuss Jesus' experiences in the garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:36-46. Then read his prayer for all believers including your family in John 17:20-26.
41. Make as many words as you can from “RESURRECTION.” *Younger ones can color a spring or Easter-related picture.*
42. Spend several minutes praying together for friends or family who are unsaved; that they will be open to God's plan of salvation.*
43. If you have a fireplace you might want to scoop up some ashes and put them in a little bowl. Then explain how ashes is one of the symbols of Lent. Explain how people in the Bible used ashes to symbolize repentance and sorrow, humility and purification. Today some Christians mark their foreheads with ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of their willingness to cleanse their heart through prayer, fasting and self-denial.
44. Burn white candles at supper during the season to symbolize how Jesus is the light of the world.

45. Eggs are familiar symbols during Easter, although they are unrelated to the Easter story. They represent new life and have been a symbol of spring since ancient times. Let your children know that Christians have adopted the egg as an Easter symbol because of the relationship between spring and new life in Christ. *For younger children, have an egg and spoon race!*
46. Give up something today. It could be a chocolate bar, time on the computer, the use of the iPod, etc. Read about how Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. *
47. Sand is a Lenten symbol. Place a bowl of sand in a prominent place. Let it remind your family of how God led the people in their journey in the desert and how Jesus faced temptations during the 40 days in the desert. The desert can be a place of retreat where there is freedom from distractions. Each time someone feels tempted, it might be a good idea to return to the bowl of sand and think about how the Lord can help them. *For younger children, do a sand craft if you have the materials.*
48. Do one hard thing.* (I've included more than one of this as doing "a hard thing" is a good thing!)
49. Ask everyone to find something in the house that is purple. When you have a little pile of purple objects, explain how purple is the color of Lent. Purple symbolizes the pain and suffering leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. It is also the color of royalty and symbolizes the kingship of Jesus in our lives. *Younger children might like to wear something purple the whole day.*

Conclusion

The Lenten Tree Chart is just a start! I suggest that you help your family go deeper this Easter!

Holy Week Devotions for the Family will help your family better prepare for Easter. For more information, visit my website, www.MiikoGibson.com and click on “Easter Devotions” on the left bar.

Another idea is to come up with a Lenten Calendar. So instead of picking an activity at random, you plan all your activities for the whole of Lent so there are no surprises.

Since my family is doing the Holy Week Devotions as well as the Lenten Tree Chart, I've come up with a Lenten Calendar for our family so the Holy Week activities coincide with the Lenten Tree activities. Each time we're done with the activity on the calendar, the children will color their fruit on the Lenten Tree.

Feel free to use our Lenten Calendar. You can find this and blank months (to customize your own calendar) in my website under “Easter Devotions”.

I've enjoyed preparing this eBook and I hope it blesses you and your family this blessed season of Lent. Have a wonderful Easter, 2009!

If you have any questions, just email me. **J**

Warmly and in His grace,

Miiko Gibson

miiko@MiikoGibson.com

My Lenten Tree (2009)

