

INTRODUCTION

This past year has been a time to look at practically everything differently. So isn't it time we looked at Lent a little differently too? If you've always thought of Lent only as a time for ashes and giving up chocolate, it's time to change that. Let's look at Lent as a time to break away from routines and do what God calls us to do all year: pray, turn away from sin, and share our blessings with others. A time to cast off what is physically and spiritually unhealthy. A time to look differently at the world, and become more attuned to God's presence and Christ's saving, enduring, powerful love for us. A time to rethink what it means for us to hope. This little booklet can help. Every day, you'll find a quote from the day's Mass reading, a short reflection for you, an even shorter prayer to say with your family, and an activity to do together. It's all meant to deepen your family's experience of Lent so that you can experience Easter with more joy, peace, and hope than ever.

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Some assembly needed

*Gather the people, notify the congregation;
assemble the elders, gather the children. » JOEL 2:16*

Every imaginable type of “gather the people” changed drastically over the past year, yet we managed somehow. We humans have a knack for adjusting to life’s curve balls, but it can come with a price: difficult choices, sacrifices, and loss. Now, as we begin Lent in 2021, we continue to gather—with our children, our elders, and our congregations—in new and different ways. Perhaps, in our new assemblies, we will hear fresh, new voices we hadn’t heard before. Perhaps these new gatherings will help a loved one tune in to the voice we’ve been praying they’ll hear: the loving voice of God. What a reason for hope!

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ Have one person read the prayer aloud; the rest of the family can respond after each line: *It is well with my soul.*

Lord, gather us together during these 40 days of Lent.

Gather us, in peace like a river, and in sorrows deep as the sea.

Gather us, Lord, all of our days. With you, Lord, all will be well.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Search YouTube for a recording of the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul.” (Catholic artist Audrey Assad has a beautiful version.) Play it for your family after dinner tonight.

Baby steps

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” » LUKE 9:23

“It’s quite an adjustment,” a visitor remarked on that day long ago when we brought our newborn home. *Adjustment?* Adjustments are baby-proofing the toilet covers and re-evaluating your insurance coverage. When a child enters your world, everything turns upside down. During these beginning days of Lent, think back on your first days as a parent. (If you’re a new parent right now, God bless you!) Now, Christ calls you and your family to a new journey. He might call you to make some adjustments, or even some big life changes this year. But you’ve already done so much as a parent—you’ve got this! Let Jesus be with you every single day as you take up your cross.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Teach us, Lord.*

Teach us to follow you in our prayer.

Teach us to follow you in our loving actions.

Teach us to follow you in our sacrifices.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Draw an outline of a cross on a sheet of paper. Write Jesus’ name at the top, with each family member’s name beneath. Invite everyone to write or draw their Lenten plans for prayer and sacrifices. Place your family cross somewhere visible as a Lenten reminder.

Len-tiv-ities

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish...sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless...

» ISAIAH 58:6–7

When my kids were little, I filled these 40 days with activities: pancake races on Mardi Gras, Friday night fish fries, resurrection gardens in March. With the exception of the pancake races—always a hit because they involved eating and running at the same time—my boys didn’t get into the activities until the first Sunday we served breakfast at a homeless shelter. There we were reminded that real people—with names and life stories—do not have the same blessings and benefits we’ve been given. That perspective has shaped my kids’ practice of faith and given them an awareness of others that they still have today. Fun family activities are important, but at some point we have to get out and walk the path. That’s where we truly meet God—in all of his children.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line:

Help us help others, Lord.

Thank you, Lord, for our blessings. (Name some together.)

Show us ways we can share our blessings with others.

Show us who needs our help.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Invite everyone to brainstorm ideas for how your family can help others during Lent. Together, decide which ideas are workable, and commit to doing them together this Lent.

Sunday bunch

If you honor it by not following your ways, seeking your own interests, or speaking with malice— then you shall delight in the LORD. » ISAIAH 58:13-14

We honor the Lord's Day by going to Mass. But what about the rest of the day? And what if you have to work on Sundays? Here, the prophet Isaiah gives us some tips. Start with personal interests. Are there any you could replace on Sunday with something you do for God or with your family? Then there's language. Okay, maybe you're not the swearing type. But we can all refuse to accept hurtful, demeaning language on Sundays. That means social media rants, snarky texts, or movies with foul language. What a good example to set for our kids! Just thinking about a day like this sounds peaceful, doesn't it? And in the end, isn't peace what God wants for us?

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *We love you, God.*

Lord, help us show our love by honoring you on your special day.

Help us hear your holy word at Mass.

Help us find peace and rest in you.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Take some time today to make a Sunday plan that works for your family. (That includes getting some rest!) If you have to work, find a way to honor God today, on the eve of the Lord's Day.

Time out

The Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. » MARK 1:12–13

When I feel like I've been left alone with difficulties and struggles, I think of today's gospel. I think of the Holy Spirit literally driving Jesus into the desert in a big Thunderbird convertible like in *Thelma and Louise*. The car stops and Jesus gets out. He stands alone as the Holy Spirit roars away in a cloud of dust. Jesus spent 40 days without human contact. On top of the hunger and loneliness, he was tempted by Satan himself. Once, twice, and a third time—for good measure. Pile on much, God? Jesus knows how it feels to be alone and burdened. When everything falls on your shoulders, think of Jesus walking alone in the desert. Let him walk with you.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Be with us, Lord.*

Lord God, when we feel alone, remind us of your presence.

Remind us of your Church, spread throughout the world.

Remind us of your family—our family. Surround us with your love.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Make the Mass part of your family conversation today. Questions to ask before: Who can we pray for? After: What words stood out in the readings? Why do you think Father talked about... (*fill in the blank*)?

Rocky start

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church...”

» MATTHEW 16:18

Every parent has some idea of what probably went through Peter’s mind on hearing Jesus’ words here. It’s how we felt when we learned we were about to become parents. Most of us felt under-prepared and unworthy. Like Peter, we’ve made mistakes. Yet here we are, the “rocks” for our own families. We might be imperfectly formed, with worn away spots or too-sharp edges. Still, we let Christ build on us. We give our kids Christ’s foundation so that someday, they can be rocks for their families. It doesn’t mean teaching your kids courses in theology. Maybe you have breakfast together after Sunday Mass, or a daily family prayer time. Whatever your traditions are, pray about them today. Ask God to keep strengthening you for this work.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Bless us, O Lord.*

Thank you, God, for every gift.

Help us see your goodness in all you give us.

Help us use these gifts for our good and the good of others.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Start a Lent tradition of giving over one of your daily family meals to Christ. You might listen to a Catholic podcast or music at dinner. You might say a morning offering at breakfast. Find something that feels right for you.

Unaware of prayer

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

» MATTHEW 6:8

I decide to pray during my afternoon walk, but twenty minutes in, my mind wanders. *What do I need at the grocery store? Am I too old to be wearing this nail color?* I try to return to my prayer. Then I pass a grove of sycamores. *Green! Look at those tiny specks of new life along the branches! What a wondrous world!* It’s then that I realize that God has been listening to me the entire time. He’s been with me as I think about my family’s needs. Perhaps he’s reminding me that I think a little too much about vanity. He is definitely there as I marvel at his creation. What about you? Look back on your day. How were you speaking with God today without even knowing it?

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Thank you, God.*

For rain and snow, wind and breeze...

For sun and moon, grass and trees...

For... (Invite everyone to mention something God has created.)

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Tired of winter? Take a late winter “creation walk” together. Invite everyone to notice the ways nature is at rest right now, perhaps beneath snow or wet earth.

Sign of life

“Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.” » LUKE 11:30

The great thing about signs—billboard ads, traffic signals, garage sale posters—is that they work hard to catch our eye with minimal effort from us. We give bonus points to signs that are clever or entertaining. So here comes Jesus talking about the sign of Jonah. This sign is about repentance from sin. What’s clever or catchy about that? And worse, this is the kind of sign that requires work on my part, with no immediate reward. Still, Lent is the time to open our eyes to some of the more challenging signs Jesus wants to show us. What sins do I need to repent of during this season? This is tough work, but it needs to be done, and Jesus is here to help.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Lord, have mercy.*

Loving Father, you are goodness and love.

Father, we are your children. But sometimes we don’t act like you.

When we are unloving or unkind, forgive us. Help us do better.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Find out when the sacrament of reconciliation is offered in your parish and make plans to receive it with your family. (Some of the activities on these pages will help you prepare.)

No Cinderella story

“Now help me, who am alone and have no one but you, O LORD, my God.” » ESTHER C:14

Esther’s story sounds like a fairytale: an exiled orphan marries a king. Yay! But this isn’t that kind of story. Part of the king’s harem, Esther is considered property. As queen, she can be executed simply for approaching her husband uninvited. But when her people are threatened with genocide, Esther prays the words of today’s Scripture before risking execution to stand up for them to the king. So while Esther’s story is challenging to share with young kids, there are lessons here for us about courage and trust in God. Today, let’s ask God for a deeper awareness of those who are persecuted everywhere. Let’s use Esther’s words to wrap them in prayer.

FAMILY PRAYER ▶ All respond after each line: *Help them, Lord.*

Dear God, help us remember those who are alone and forgotten.

Help us stand up for those who have no one to stand up for them.

Help us pray for those who have no one to pray for them.

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Make a Lenten shrine as a reminder to pray for others. It doesn’t have to be fancy. Your kids can draw pictures or write the names of people they wish to pray for and place them at the foot of your family cross.

Age of rage

“And whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.”

» MATTHEW 5:22

Fiery Gehenna might come sooner than we think, because the chance of stroke is known to triple after an angry outburst. Jesus wants his disciples to see that anger is the root of sinful, destructive behavior and they need to get it under control. That’s a good thing to do during Lent. We all get angry sometimes, but if you find yourself more argumentative, easily offended, snappish, feeling victimized, or just in a chronic bad mood, it’s time to examine that. Maybe you’re dealing with extra stress or lack of sleep. Maybe you bear a wound you’re unable to forgive. Maybe you’ve set impossible expectations for yourself (or your kids). Whatever it is, spend time with Jesus confronting your anger. Jesus has some answers for you.

FAMILY PRAYER (Examination of Conscience, part 1) ▶ All respond after each line: *Can I do better?*

Lord God, we ask ourselves if we are doing our best to follow you.

Do I remember that you love me? Do I show you that I love you above all things?

Do I treat my family with respect? Do I listen?

Do I pay attention at Mass?

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Teach an act of contrition, like this: *O God, I am sorry for hurting you and others. Help me do better. I love you.*

The power of quiet

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you....”

» MATTHEW 5:44

It began like most confirmation prep classes. The teens chatted and milled around. Suddenly, one of the boys mentioned the name of a candidate running for local office. “I hate her,” he shouted with a vehemence that shocked everyone into silence. A few heartbeats later, another boy muttered, “Love your enemies, man.” The first teen repeated his statement, a little less loudly. Even more quietly, the other repeated, “Love your enemies.” Then even more quietly, almost a whisper, one of the girls added, “and pray for them too.” I watched in awe as the other students nodded their heads in agreement, and the boy calmed down. I had a lesson prepared. But I was the one who learned something that night.

FAMILY PRAYER (Examination of Conscience, part 2) ▶ All respond after each line: *Can I do better?*

Lord God, we ask ourselves if we are doing our best to follow you.

Am I patient with others? Kind? Do I tell the truth? Play fair?

Forgive others?

Do I appreciate all I have been given? Do I say “thank you”?

FAMILY ACTIVITY ▶ Look at the examination from yesterday and today. Invite everyone to think about how they will do better on one of the points. They can write it down if they wish. (Do not compel anyone to share unless they want to.)