

Observing the Season of Lent in 2011

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes at midnight on Easter morning. It's a time of preparing for Easter by practicing repentance, of recognizing how we can make changes to become more what God created us to be. Lent lasts for the 40 weekdays before Easter. The 6 Sundays that fall within the season are not counted because every Sunday is a little resurrection celebrating Jesus' resurrection.

In Sunday School we'll be looking for ways to help students and their families engage with God at a new level by keeping one or more spiritual discipline. Lenten disciplines aren't the kind of discipline that punishes, but the kind that builds up. They are a type of spiritual training, like strengthening exercises or practicing a musical instrument. Instead of giving something up, the idea is to give ourselves up to something for Lent. The goal is to do something that will remind us of what God values and make us more the people God created us to be.

This year in Sunday School we'll be focusing on three disciplines. See if any of these ideas can be adapted at home for use by your family!

Prayer

-Try saying grace at mealtimes before eating. The goal is to cultivate a sense of gratitude for the gifts of life, including food and everything else that makes life worthwhile. Find a few meals a week that work for your schedule. If you don't have a family grace you enjoy, let each person at the table say one thing they're especially grateful for that day.

-At bedtime, try the traditional practice called examen. It's a simple way to think back over the day and talk to God about it. You can help your preschoolers talk about the things they were glad and sad about. After an adult has offered them up to God a few times, children very quickly want to take over! As they get older they may want to do it privately. Or, older children who know the words can say the Lord's Prayer before going to sleep.

Bible Reading

-Put the Bible out on display where it will be noticed and easily read. At Sunday School we'll be distributing bible stands for families to set up a special spot at home. Maybe you have a family Bible you'd like to display. Be sure to include children's versions so everyone can get in on the reading! You can place your Bible on a purple cloth (to symbolize the season) and set 7 candles (light one each week, the last on Easter), palm branches or a crown of thorns nearby.

-In Sunday School we'll be making bookmarks that list all the places in the Bible you can read about forgiveness. Or, pick another theme depending on the age of your child, such as stories from Jesus' ministry, stories about fishing and boats, parables, or miracles.

Mission Skills

Jesus' two great commandments are to love God and to love people. Prayer and Bible reading help us love God. Trying new ways of loving others is another good way to stretch ourselves spiritually during Lent. Why not try one of these projects at home?

-Go shopping as a family and have kids select items for the food pantry. Our church collects donations and takes food on the first Sunday of every month to the local pantries so kids can bring it with them to church.

-Share what you have. Fix, clean, and package clothes and toys so they'll be nice to get. Add new socks to shoes or fresh underwear to clothes.

-Invite a lonely person to do something fun with your family.

-Surprise someone with a card or baked treat to let them know their work is appreciated.

-Give up desserts for a week. Donate all the money you would have spent to Homes with Hope.

-Take care of animals. See if the Humane Society needs any donations. Set up a bird feeding station for late winter.

-Become better stewards of God's world by recycling and reducing trash at home.

The main thing to remember when trying a Lenten discipline is that the times we slip up or fall off the band wagon are less important than what we gain by keeping the discipline the best we can. Instead of berating ourselves or our children when we miss a day or let something go, focus on sticking with the discipline now, or finding a way to do the missed project tomorrow. The goal is growth not guilt!

Source: Sharing the Easter Faith With Children by Carolyn C. Brown