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Bring Lent to Life

Activities & Reflections for Your Family

Kathleen M. Basi



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First Edition

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How to Use This Book

The section titled “Getting Ready” introduces two activities that anchor the season and provide us with a visible measure of our progress toward Easter: the Easter Tree—a bare tree to which we will add leaves and flowers as the season progresses—and Sunday Love Letters.

Following those pages, we begin a week-by-week breakdown of the season of Lent. Each week we will zero in on one aspect of our Lenten journey.

- From Ash Wednesday throughout the first week of Lent, we will explore the three pillars of Lenten observance: **fasting, almsgiving, and prayer**.
- In the second week, we will talk about **baptism and the RCIA**.
- In week three, we'll do some spiritual spring cleaning and focus on **reconciliation and repentance**.
- Week four we devote to the journey from death to life, which is echoed in the **renewal** of nature all around us.
- In week five, we will begin our countdown to Easter, walking step by step through the **passion**, using the tradition of “Easter story eggs.”
- Finally, we arrive at **Holy Week** and the great Triduum celebration that culminates in Easter, the most important day of the year.

Each week begins with general information on the topic to help parents “unpack” our faith in preparation for sharing it with our children. This is followed by specific reflections for

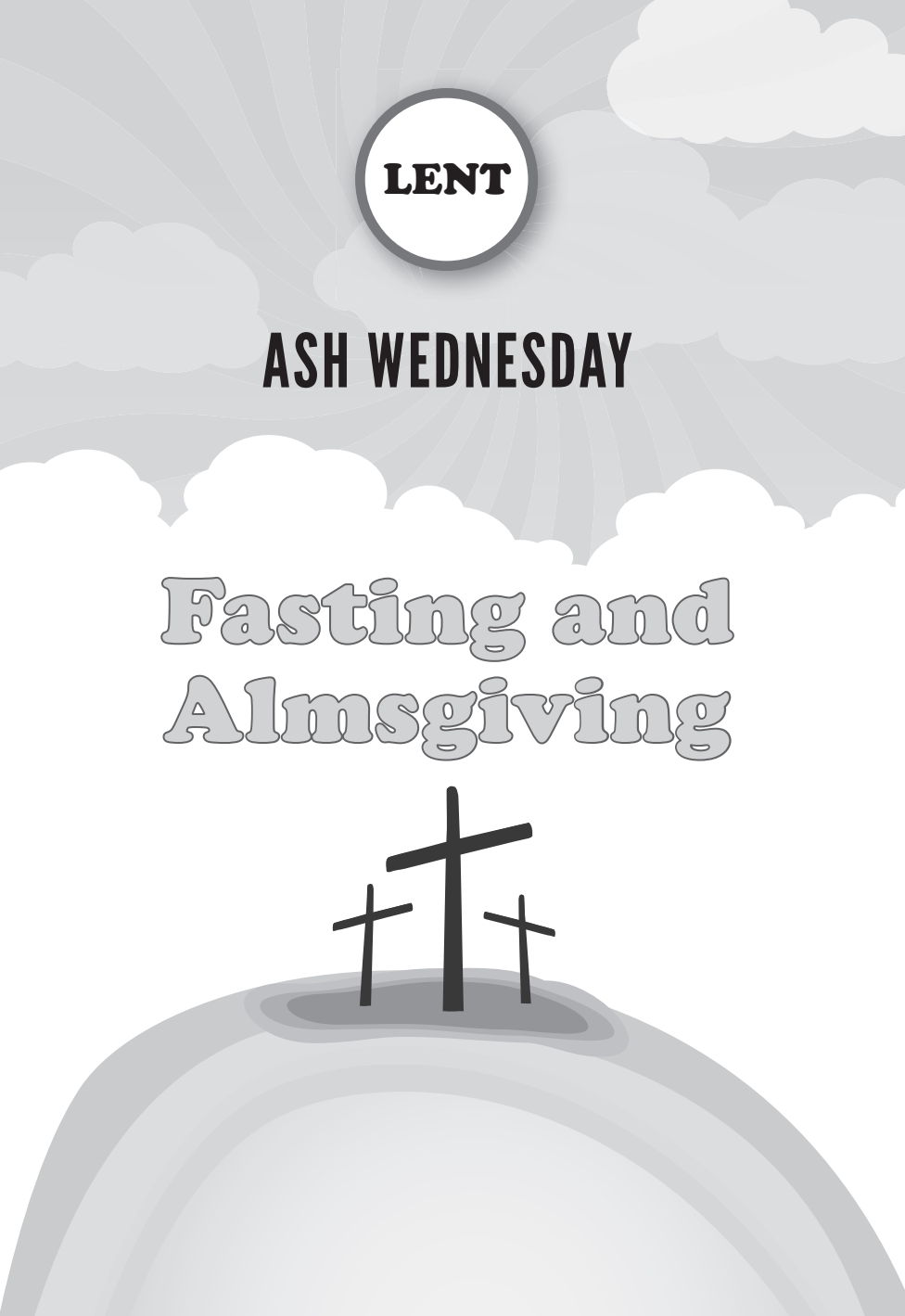
both adults and children. Periodically, you will find sections to read to your children. These are set off for easy identification.

At the end of each week are a series of activities ranging from day trips to crafts to cooking, including recipes. The last activities in each week are connected with the Easter Tree. Please remember that it's not necessary to do every activity listed. Lent is a long season, and trying to do something every day will burn out the entire family. Each week, choose a few activities or reflections that are appropriate for your family.

At the end of the book are two appendixes. Appendix A offers suggestions for celebrating major feasts that fall during the season. Appendix B has the patterns needed for the Easter Tree.

Of the two major Christian seasons, Lent/Easter is the one that slips under the secular radar—and that's a good thing. Easter is the most important celebration of the Christian year. But because our culture doesn't really know what to do with it, Lent offers us a yearly opportunity to renew our faith, unencumbered by secular distractions.

This year, let us commit ourselves to embrace the total meaning of Lent in all its beauty. Let us commit ourselves to journey through the desert...and to be renewed.



LENT

ASH WEDNESDAY

**Fasting and
Almsgiving**



A man used to go into his local watering hole every night and order three drinks. When people asked him, “Why do you order three drinks?” he would answer, “Oh, I have two brothers who live far away. When we parted ways, we promised that wherever we were, we would always drink together.”

Then one night the man walked into the bar and ordered only two drinks. Shocked and sympathetic, the locals patted his shoulder and offered their condolences on the loss of his brother.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing like that,” he said cheerfully. “You see, it’s Lent, and I quit drinking.”

When a priest friend of mine heard this story, he laughed for ten minutes. Then he said, “That is a perfect illustration of how *not* to do Lent!”

Isn’t this the temptation we all face? After the excess of Christmas, we have a respite of a few weeks, and then we plunge into the gray, gloomy heart of Lent. We know we’re supposed to give something up...but why, exactly?

For the Children

Jesus spent forty days in the desert, fasting and praying, to help him get ready for his public ministry. We call this a “retreat.” But most of us can’t take that much time to get away and pray. Lent gives us a chance to do a month-long retreat in the middle of our ordinary lives.

Choosing a penance to observe throughout the season keeps us from forgetting that we are on retreat. But faced with the prospect of piling deprivation on top of late-winter blues, it's tempting to make Lenten penance as painless as possible. On the other hand, good old Catholic guilt is always ready to offer the opposite idea: Lent should be good and hard. We *should* be miserable during Lent. Offer it up!

Well, there's value in that. But really, the best path lies somewhere in the middle.

Reflections

Fasting

The problem with simply giving something up is what I call the Mardi Gras syndrome: You're sacrificing sweets for Lent, so the day before Ash Wednesday you have four bowls of ice cream. (There's a reason it's called "fat Tuesday.") And on Easter Sunday you celebrate the end of the fast with two chocolate bunnies, a couple dozen handfuls of jelly beans, three slices of pie, and a cinnamon roll.

Kind of misses the point of the fast, don't you think?

Fasting should change us in some way—move us to a place of greater holiness. It shouldn't be something we do to torment ourselves for a while, only to revert to our former selves when it's all over.

I believe it's time to think beyond the ordinary Lenten penance. Why not give up a specific sin instead? In many ways,

sin is a habit, a pattern of behavior. Selfishness, irritability, unkind words, gossip, gluttony—each of us struggles with the same sins again and again. Instead of choosing a specific item to forgo, why not choose one sin particularly troublesome to you and spend Lent focused on breaking its power over you?

This can be a great exercise for kids too, although they may need help, and that help must be given carefully. It's important that we, the parents, not tell children what sins we think they need to address. True conversion happens from the inside out; it cannot be imposed by authority, however loving.

Penance, when heartfelt, is frequently a very private action and very difficult for people to share, even with those closest to them. Respect this. If a child is unwilling to share what he or she is giving up, that's OK. As a parent, it's tempting to feel that we must know everything our children are up to. But it's also possible that a child (especially in the teen years) may want to be free of a habitual sin but is too afraid to admit it to his or her parents for fear of punishment. If your children are sincere enough to choose to work on something for Lent, rejoice, and allow them the freedom to make good choices of their own volition.

It's also important to add that there is nothing wrong with giving up something physical—a literal fast. A family that fasts from an item has a chance to grow in faith and in community. Our family, for instance, gives up sweets every Lent. That is a tradition, and a hard one. That is all we have asked of our small children. But older children can and should choose a Lenten penance unique to their own needs. As you pray and discern your penance in the days and weeks leading up to Ash Wednesday, be sure to encourage your children to do likewise.

Almsgiving

So you've chosen something to give up. Done, ready for Lent! Not so fast. We've forgotten an important point: Lent is not just about fasting. It's also about almsgiving.

Fasting offers us a slowed pace, one that helps us really be aware of how many blessings we take for granted. When we acknowledge the extent of the bounty we have been given, charity flows naturally. Almsgiving is the best way of showing gratitude for all God has given us. It also mirrors Christ's sacrifice in some small way. While fasting is about giving something up, almsgiving is about *doing* something.

Prayer with fasting is good. Almsgiving with righteousness is better than wealth with wickedness.

TOBIT 12:8

Almsgiving, in its most literal sense, means charity. The world is full of those who need charity, and there are plenty of ways to help meet those needs. Around 13,000 parishes in America participate each year in Catholic Relief Services' Operation Rice Bowl. In this program, families simplify their meals and donate the savings to the hungry.

When I was growing up, every night during Lent my mother would put a quarter under each family member's plate. These quarters were squeezed from the family's grocery budget. Every night after the meal prayer, we placed the coins in the rice bowl, giving us a tactile connection to the act of almsgiving. At the end of the season, we put those coins in an envelope and dropped them in the collection basket at church.

Another possibility would be to collect money in a jar on the table and then carry it to a local food pantry or shelter. This brings the lesson closer to home and gives the family a chance to interact directly with those less fortunate.

Feeding the hungry is a terrific Lenten practice. But almsgiving is more than just money. As the prophet Isaiah puts it:

Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose:

releasing those bound unjustly,

untying the thongs of the yoke;

Setting free the oppressed,

breaking off every yoke?

Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry,

bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house;

Clothing the naked when you see them,

and not turning your back on your own flesh?

ISAIAH 58:6-7

Perhaps this year you can find a new way to serve the needy: volunteer at a soup kitchen, a food bank, or a secondhand clothing store. Work with a local St. Vincent De Paul chapter. Or perhaps you can start even closer to home.

Lent is about right relationship with God. What better way to grow closer to God than getting into right relationship with those closest to you? Use this time to renew relationships with loved ones: spouse, parent, sibling, child. In choosing your Lenten penance and discipline, find a way to serve, to heal broken relationships, to die to self. Is there some act of service you can perform quietly, without fanfare or fuss, for someone you love? Young siblings who fight over toys can vow to yield;

a spouse can commit to acts of service he or she wouldn't ordinarily perform.

Think this is a cop-out? Think again. This is hard stuff. I'm suggesting that we subordinate our ego, that we empty ourselves as Christ did on the cross. After all, those we interact with every day are the body of Christ, and when we serve them, we serve God.

For the Children

During Lent, we try to get closer to God by doing two things. One is called fasting. Fasting is when we give up something we like, such as candy or TV. Fasting can also be when we give up a sinful habit, like whining or tattling on people.

The other thing we do during Lent is called almsgiving. Even though we're not rich people, we have so much more than we need. We take it for granted sometimes, but there are lots of people in the world who don't have enough. Almsgiving is when we take some of what we have and give it to the poor. During Lent, we are going to eat a little less, a little less fancy, which will save a little money. We'll put this money in a container (rice bowl), and at the end of Lent, we'll give it to people who don't have enough to eat.

Activities

Attend Ash Wednesday Mass as a family. Be sure to explain why we are signed with ashes; don't let this be something you do "just because," something cool and mysterious but ultimately without meaning.

For the Children

Today is Ash Wednesday. It's called that because at church the priest or another minister will draw a cross on our forehead with ashes. The ashes are what is left when last year's Palm Sunday branches were burned. We use them because a long time ago, whenever people were sorry they had hurt God, they would take off their normal clothes and put on sackcloth and sit in ashes. It reminded them—and it reminds us—that God made us out of dust, and when we die, our bodies will become dust again. It is God whom we want to please, and God whom we hurt every time we sin.

Choose a Lenten penance. You will need paper and pencils or crayons, a fireplace or fire pit, and matches.

For the Children

Sin is when we choose to do things God asks us not to do. Sin puts up a wall between us and God. Everybody sins every day. Usually, we commit the same sins over and over. God wants us to love him and to love one another. When we argue with our brother or sister, when we take toys or refuse to share, when we say mean things about people, it makes God unhappy. Can you think of something you do that makes God unhappy? Will you give it up for Lent? Write it down or draw it on a piece of paper.

After everyone in the family has written down what they are going to do for Lent—and remember, family members should have the freedom to keep their goals private—fold the pieces of paper and burn them.

For the Children

Remember how we got ashes on our foreheads to remind us that our sins hurt God? Well, another thing that happens when we burn something is that the ashes blow away in the wind. That's the way God is with our sins: as soon as we let them go, so does he. God forgives us. That's why the prophet Isaiah said, "Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be red like crimson, they may become white as wool" (1:18).

So today we're going to take these pieces of paper and burn them to symbolize our sins burning up, gone forever, once we repent.

Make sacrifice beads. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux had a set of beads on which she counted the sacrifices she offered up to God. "Sacrifice beads" are a string of ten beads, plus an "Our Father bead," which can be used as a rosary as well as counting good deeds. They are small enough to fit in a pocket. Inexpensive sets can be found online by searching for "sacrifice beads" or "Saint Thérèse Beads." If desired, you can also make them as a family craft project (see instructions at <http://thelittleways.com/how-to-make-sacrifice-beads>). This could be a great way to help family members carry out their Lenten commitments.

Make pretzels. If you think fasting is hard on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, take comfort. In the early centuries of the Church, fasting was serious business. In many parts of the world, the

faithful were called to fast from all animal products (including fat, eggs, and milk) for the entire Lenten season. Pretzels—a food made without these ingredients—developed in response. According to one tradition, the shape we know today was meant to symbolize arms crossed in prayer.

Since we are no longer prohibited from eating animal products during Lent, you can choose whatever recipe you like best to make your own pretzels. A simple recipe and directions can be found on page 27.

For the Children

During Lent a long time ago, everyone fasted from meat, eggs, milk, and even butter. It must have been hard to find food that tasted good. A monk came up with a special bread that he twisted into the shape of folded arms, which was how people used to pray. They called this new snack “bracellae,” which means “little arms” in Latin. The Germans turned that name into “bretzel,” which eventually became “pretzel.”

Your Easter Tree

Choose a Lenten “resolution.” Jesus says that any time we serve others, we serve him. Sometimes this is hard to do. There are people we don’t like very much, and sometimes we even have confrontations or arguments with people we love. But Jesus lives in each one of us. He wants us to love one another and serve one another.

Think of someone you have trouble getting along with and resolve to do something small for that person every day during Lent. Children may need help with their resolution. Suggest that they get a classmate’s lunch box for him, make their sister’s bed for her, or clean their room without being asked.

On an Easter Tree leaf, write down the person’s name or draw a picture of him or her. Then write down or draw something you can do for that person. It doesn’t have to be the same thing every day—just something small and quick to show you love the person.

After everyone has chosen a Lenten resolution and drawn a picture on a leaf, have each family member hang his or her leaf on your Easter Tree.

Recipe

Pretzels

Free of dairy and eggs, pretzels originated during the days of stricter Lenten fasts. This recipe accompanies the activity on page 24.

1½ cups warm water

1½ tsp. active dry yeast

2 T. brown sugar

1⅛ tsp. salt

2 T. slightly melted butter (too hot and it will kill the yeast)

4 cups flour

2 cups warm water

2 T. baking soda

Dissolve yeast in 1½ cups warm water. Add brown sugar, salt, and butter to yeast mixture and stir to dissolve.

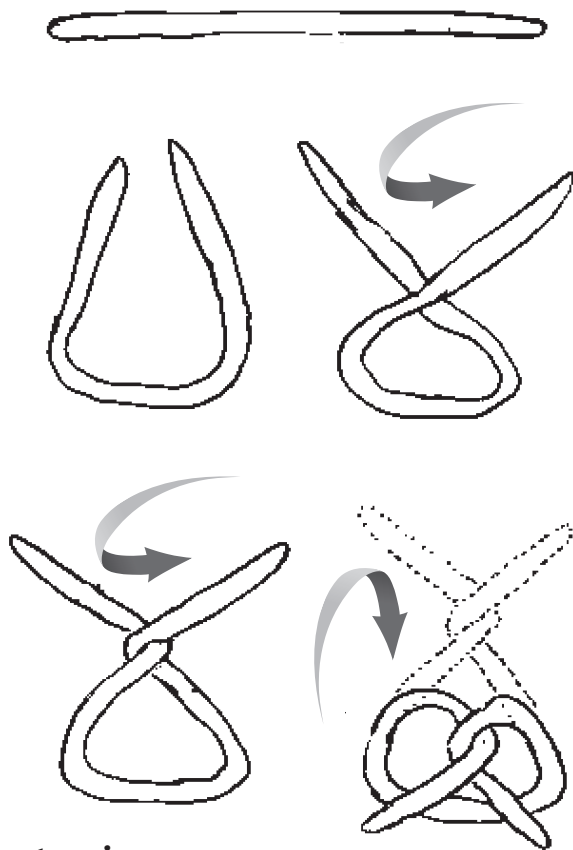
Add flour to mixture; knead dough until smooth and elastic. Let rise for ½ hour.

While dough is rising, prepare a “soda bath”: mix 2 cups warm water with 2 T. baking soda.

When dough is ready, pinch off sections and roll into long ropes about 15 inches long and ½-inch in diameter. Shape into folded arms as shown on page 28. You’ll have to show your children how to fold the first one, but be sure to let them do as much of the work as possible.

Dip pretzels in soda bath. This gives them a glossier texture. (You can also use an egg wash.) Place on a greased baking sheet.

Let the pretzels rise again, but not for too long or they will lose the characteristic holes upon baking. Bake at 450 for 10 minutes.



Pick-a-topping

Melt 4 T. melted butter (to help other toppings stick) and brush over pretzels. Top with or roll in:

- Kosher or sea salt
- Cinnamon sugar (¼ cup sugar, 4 tsp. cinnamon)
- Seeds (sesame, poppy, sunflower)
- Melted cheese and bacon bits
- Icing glaze