

Lent

Pray, Fast, Love

Lent is the season between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Ash Wednesday is often marked with a worship service to prepare us for the hard season of Lent, when we are reminded of our humanity and our total reliance on God. There are 40 days in Lent not including Sundays, because Sundays remain celebrations of the resurrection throughout the season.

Lent can be tricky to observe with youth, particularly because of its length, it often coincides with spring break, the dates shift from year to year, and mainstream culture doesn't acknowledge it. In addition, Lent tells the sad, hard stories of our faith.

The church encourages spiritual practices or disciplines during Lent such as prayer, Bible studies or devotions, fasting, and worship. Adding spiritual practices during Lent can instill habits of faith that provide an experiential understanding of spiritual truth and nurture the inclination to sustain a Lenten practice throughout the year or for a lifetime. Considering the traditional spiritual practices of Lent, here are some ideas for youth.

Prayer:

- **Illustrate the Stations of the Cross.** This is a traditional Roman Catholic Lenten practice where you view a series of images that depict scenes from the passion narrative of Jesus Christ and you recite a prayer at each station. As an alternative for youth, set up several stations with images created by a variety of artists that illustrate different parts of the passion narrative. As youth walk to each station, also provide a relevant prayer. Have youth pick one part of the story they want to create an image of and write a prayer about. Give them plenty of time and art supplies to draw, paint, or collage that part of the story. Then find a public area in your church—a stairwell, hallway, fellowship hall, classroom, narthex, or sanctuary—to display your youth's artwork and prayers of the passion narrative for others in your congregation to use as a spiritual practice. An excellent alternative is the Illustrated Children's Ministry's "Stations of the Cross Coloring Posters" series created by Presbyterian minister and long-time youth worker, Adam Walker Cleaveland, and the Illustrated Children's Ministry team. Check it out at: store.illustratedchildrensministry.com/products/stations-of-the-cross-coloring-posters

- **Take home a Lenten prayer box.** Get a small purple cloth, a candle, a cross, or other Lenten-themed items for each of your youth's families to take home and turn a space in their home into a prayer space. Provide six Lenten prayers (one for each week)—either all with the box or distributed weekly—for your families to use in their Lenten prayer space.

Bible Studies or Devotions:

- **Read the whole story.** Consider reading an entire Gospel from beginning to end. Consider the Gospel of Mark because it's the shortest.
 - Meet weekly via small groups in person to discuss Jesus' life.
 - Meet weekly via a group text message by having each participant take a turn to share an insight or a question that week and have others respond.
 - Meet via social media (Instagram, Snapchat's "My Story," etc.) by posting a photo each week of one insight or question from that week's reading.
- **Set up a weekly field trip to tell the passion narrative of Jesus Christ.** Pick locations that are relevant for each part of the story and have youth participate in a Bible study on that part of the story in that specific location. (Note: Be sure to call and arrange all locations ahead of time so you have the best and most welcoming experience.) Here are some suggestions:
 - Story: Jesus' trial and conviction; Location: courthouse
 - Story: Jesus carries his cross; Location: lumberyard
 - Story: Jesus meets his mother; Location: maternity or birthing center
 - Story: Jesus falls and Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross; Location: a nursing home or other location where people receive help
 - Story: Jesus is nailed to the cross; Location: a sanctuary, chapel, or other worship space where a large cross is visible. Alternative idea: Make a large wooden cross as a group using two pieces of lumber or branches, hammers and nails, or twine.
 - Story: Jesus dies on the cross and is laid in the tomb; Location: a memorial garden or cemetery (Know your group: If you have a youth with a recent, significant loss, this location could be a trigger for discomfort and would not be appropriate for the young person or the group.)
- **Have youth use a daily Lenten devotion.** An example is the online devotion for youth: www.d365.org.
- **Reenact the passion narrative as a drama.** Write a script, use props, and move through multiple sites on your church campus. Have youth tell the story of Holy Week on Palm Sunday for your congregation.

Fasting:

- **Fast an activity.** Stop doing an activity that takes up time in your week, but doesn't necessarily add value to your week. One idea is to "fast" one television show a week, and then use that extra time to participate in prayer, a prayer hike, Bible study, or devotions.
- **Fast things.** Let go of our material wealth to better understand our own excess. One idea would be to choose three outfits to wear repetitively for an entire week (even if you wash it) to better understand our access to lots of clothing and dependence on fashion in contrast to a global view. Another idea is to fast the use of a car once a week. This could include riding your bike, taking public transportation, or walking to an activity you participate in that is less than three miles one way and where you would usually drive or ride in a car. It will take more planning and time, but use that time to reflect on your neighbors who are required to walk, bike, or rely solely on public transportation.
- **Fast food.** This can be a creative fasting of food. It does not need to be a full fast, but one designed for youth. For example, fast one food you buy and eat in excess every week—like soda, chips, or ice cream—and donate the money you'd spend on it to help hungry people access free meals. Another idea would be to watch the documentary film, *Food, Inc.* (rated PG), discuss the food and agricultural system in the U.S.A, and then let youth brainstorm ideas for fasting during Lent in light of the film.

Worship:

- **Attend an Ash Wednesday service.** As a youth group, attend an evening Ash Wednesday service. Meet beforehand over a meal for conversation about the meaning of the service and the journey of Lent that is about to begin on this day.
- **Make Holy Week worship a priority.** Challenge your youth to make attending and participating in all your church's Holy Week services a priority. Have them participate in leadership (spoken, musical, or greeting) during the services. Go out for a meal or dessert after the services to reflect and discuss.
- **Host Vesper services during Lent.** Offer a short Vesper (evening) service as a spiritual practice throughout Lent. This could be the first part of a midweek program for your youth group, an after-school event with a snack, or a house church service in the late afternoon or early evening at a youth member's home.

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