

Lent in Word and Symbol

Session Focus

This session engages participants in exploring the meaning of Lent through the symbols and Scriptures which are part of this holy season. We will examine the images and words which help us enter more deeply into Jesus' journey to the Cross. Hopefully all will experience a renewed or new appreciation of symbols and of God's word as they relate to the 40 days of Lent.

Learning Objectives

The "Lent in Word and Symbol" preparation program guides learners of all ages to...

- develop a deeper understanding of the Lenten lectionary and symbols
- develop an appreciation for the meaning of Lent in their lives
- participate more actively and meaningfully in the Lenten season

Session Overview

Part 1. (5 minutes)

Gathering

Part 2. (20 minutes)

All Ages Learning: Remembering Past Lents

Part 3. (90 minutes)

In Depth Learning Experience

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Group Format: Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (20 minutes)

Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (10 minutes)

Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group

- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing as the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there's a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Prayer table
- Purple tablecloth (or one with purple in the pattern)
- Lectionary or Bible
- Sacramentary
- Thick white candle
- Clear glass bowl with water

- Small clear bowl with olive oil
- Loaf of bread (unsliced) on a plate
- Clear glass with wine
- Cross (not a crucifix)
- Palms and ashes
- Thorns

Note: For the Age Group format, all the age groups will need their own symbols for this learning program. You will need one table of symbols for the families with children, another for the adolescents, and another for the adults.

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Bible

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Children's Bible
- Sheets of newsprint, markers for each person, masking tape
- White paper and pens/pencils
- If you choose the children's drawing activity, you will need strips of paper, crayons, marking pens, and children's Bibles or copies of the Lenten Gospel stories
- If you choose the children's symbol creation activity you will need an unlined 3x5 or 4x6 file card and 12" colored ribbon (purple) for each person and creative art supplies (e.g., a variety of photo-filled magazines, construction paper, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, tape, pipe cleaners, etc.), children's Bibles or copies of the Lenten Gospel stories

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (10 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Ask people to make a nametag.
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, using the words below or your own words.

In this session, we will be exploring the meaning of Lent through the symbols and Scriptures which are part of this holy season. We will examine the images and words which help us enter more deeply into Jesus' journey to the Cross.

Present an overview and the schedule of the program.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3), organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Set up the prayer table with the symbols listed under Materials Needed.

Gather

God our Father, you so loved us that you sent your Son into the world to redeem us. As we approach the holy season of Lent, we are reminded that Jesus suffered and died for each one of us. Help us to be grateful for his sacrifice and his love as we explore the symbols of Lent. Help us to follow in Jesus' footsteps as we offer up the sacrifices in our own lives. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

Listen

Joel 2:12-19

Respond

Leader: Lord Jesus, help us to walk with you on your journey to the cross.

All: Hear our humble prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Give us humble hearts and gentle tongues.

All: Hear our humble prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Help us offer up our sufferings for others as you offered yours for us.

All: Hear our humble prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Make us peacemakers and lovers of your Word.

All: Hear our humble prayer, O Lord.

Go Forth

We thank you, O God, for this Lenten season, which gives us the opportunity to enter into Jesus' passion and death so that we can share in his Resurrection. Help us listen to your Word and use the symbols of Lent to walk with Jesus once again as he offers his entire life for us. We ask this humbly in his name. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience (15-20 minutes)

Share the following in these or your own words:

As we begin our exploration of the symbols and Scriptures of Lent, let's see how much you recall from years past. In your table groups, share the answers to the following questions:

- What color do you associate with Lent? Why?
- What Bible passage stands out most to you regarding Jesus' passion and death?
- Why do we receive ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent?
- Of the following, with which person who was part of Jesus' passion do you most identify?
Why?
 - Peter
 - Mary
 - Simon of Cyrene
 - Judas
 - Pilate
 - Veronica
- What image symbolizes the journey of Lent for you?

Invite participants to share any insights with their table group. Have them share the symbol which speaks to them the most and helps them enter into the spirit of Lent.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experiences (90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experiences

Families with Children Learning Experiences

- Activity 1. Introduction to the Lenten Symbols
- Activity 2. Lenten Symbol Exploration: Creating Lenten Symbols
- Activity 3. Words and Music in the Lenten Season

Activity 1. Introduction to the Lenten Symbols

Materials Needed

- Prayer table with purple tablecloth, Bible or Lectionary, lighted candle, bowl of water, small bowl of olive oil, loaf of bread (unsliced), glass of wine, cross, palms and ashes
- Handout #2

Preparation

Design a chart like the one below on newsprint or poster board. In column one, write the symbols of Lent. Leave room under each symbol so that you will have room to write a summary of the responses from the participants in columns two and three.

Symbols	Where we find this Symbol during Lent	Meaning for Us
Ashes		
Desert		
Light and fire		
Water		
Palm Tree		
Oil		
Shared meal		
Bread		
Wine		
Cross		
Thorns		

Create a similar chart on newsprint or poster board which includes the symbols, the Gospel stories connected to the symbols, and the meaning of the symbols. (Lenten Symbols include ashes, desert, light and fire, water, palm tree, oil, shared meal, bread, wine, cross, and thorns. Use Handout #2 as your guide.)

Activity

Begin this session by introducing the importance of symbols. Adapt the following information to the needs of your group.

Briefly put, a symbol is something that stands for and reminds us of something else. A symbol is a sign that embodies what it is intended to signify. It is almost synonymous with sacrament. It is a sign which is intimately connected to that which it signifies.

The liturgical celebration involves signs and symbols relating to creation (candles, water, fire), human life (washing, anointing, breaking bread), and the history of salvation (the rites of Passover). Integrated into the world of faith and taken up by the power of the Holy Spirit, these cosmic elements, human rituals, and gestures of remembrance of God become the bearers of the saving and sanctifying action of Christ.

The symbols of the sacraments are all expressions of human intimacy—a bath, a meal, an embrace, a laying on of hands, a touch, a rubbing with oil. They do for us what words alone or abstract thought cannot do. They put the coming of God in our lives into body language. The symbolic acts at the heart of the sacraments help us break open and share with one another the common human experiences which reveal God’s presence to us.

The waters of Baptism symbolize life and death, washing and cleansing, the mystery of new life out of death. The bread and wine of Eucharist are symbolic of God’s care, nourishment, love, nurture, and sacrifice for us; and of our care, sharing, love, nurture, nourishment, and sacrifice for one another.

Symbols speak to us of our identity as Christians. For example, the symbol of light has its genesis in Christ, Light of the World. Since we are to walk as children of the Light, light identifies us and we become its reality—we become light, we become bread, etc.

If symbols were to speak, they would say: “I am...” rather than “I am like...” Symbols in the sacramental sense are the reality they express. Eucharist in the form of bread and wine is the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Using the first chart prepared ahead of time, ask the participants to help you determine the meaning of each symbol on the table. Focusing their attention on the table with the symbols, ask these questions:

- What does this (symbol) do for you or your family (e.g., light, water, oil, bread, shared meal)?
- What do you think of or what do you see when I say (symbol)? What do you feel?
- Who uses this (symbol) and what do you think it means to them?

Conclude by saying (in your own words):

It is probably clear from the variety of responses to the activity that symbols do not have a meaning by themselves. We bring experience and meaning to symbols. None of the objects by themselves can be a symbol unless we participate in that meaning through our own understanding and connection to events in our lives.

Symbols remind us of stories—events which have been significant in some way for us. Some symbols are better at recalling a variety of stories than others. Those stories take on larger significance if they remind us of common stories.

Taking each symbol, one at a time, ask the participants to help you answer the questions:

- When or where do you see this symbol at church?
- When do we use this symbol at church?

Use the information on Handout #2: *Lent in Word and Symbol* to explain to the participants when and where we use each symbol during Lent. Give them examples of where the symbol is found in the Gospel story and in the ritual action during the liturgy. Then briefly present the meaning of the symbol.

Activity 2: Creating Lenten Symbols

Preparation

- Unlined 3x5 or 4x6 file card and 12" colored ribbon (purple) for each person
- Creative art supplies (e.g., a variety of photo-filled magazines, construction paper, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, tape, pipe cleaners, etc.)
- Family or Children's Bibles or copies of the Lenten Gospel stories
- Handout #2

Activity

Ask the participants to select one Lenten symbol that they think is most important for Lent or that teaches us the most about Lent (symbols: ashes, desert, light and fire, water, palm tree, oil, shared meal, bread, wine, cross, thorns). Using a variety of creative art supplies, have participants create their own Lent symbol. They can use pipe cleaners to shape a symbol, or paper and crayons/markers to draw a symbol, or cut out pictures from magazines, etc. Invite them to draw, glue, or attach the symbols to one side of the file card. Encourage parents to help younger children with their symbols.

Now ask families to read the Bible references for their symbols. Then have them write a short quote or prayer (inspired by the Gospel story) on the other side of the file card. Finally, have them attach the colored ribbon to the file card so they can tie their Lenten symbol to their bed, lamp, etc. Remind them to read their Gospel passage or prayer regularly during Lent.

Close by inviting each person to share his or her Lenten symbol with their table group. (If there is time, ask them to share their Scripture quote or prayer with the group.)

Activity 3: Words and Music in the Lenten Season

Preparation

Organize a presentation by the parish music director or other musician on the use of music and lyrics to enter more deeply into the Lenten season. This program is best done in church where the musician has access to an organ or piano.

Activity

Guide participants through the Lenten season by using the following process, repeating it for each Sunday of Lent:

1. Begin with a reading from the Lectionary (Old Testament or Gospel reading).
2. Share a brief reflection on the reading. Use a Lectionary commentary.
3. Connect the Lectionary reading to one or more of the symbols of Lent.
4. Invite the participants in small groups to share a reflection on the reading using a question such as:
 - What does the reading say to us about the meaning of Lent?
 - What are the implications of this reading for our experience of Lent and our lives?
5. Conclude by singing a Lenten hymn from the hymns that will be sung during the Lenten season.

Adolescent & Adult Learning Experiences

Learning Experiences

- Activity 1. Introduction to the Lenten Symbols
- Activity 2. Lenten Symbol Exploration: Symbols in Lenten Liturgies
- Activity 3. Words and Music in the Lenten Season

Activity 1. Introduction to the Lenten Symbols

See Activity 1 under Families with Children Learning Experiences for this activity.

Activity 2: Symbols in Lenten Liturgies

Preparation

Decide if you want to explore just the Lenten liturgies or if you want to explore the Triduum symbols as well. Adjust the handout accordingly.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1, #2, and #3
- Copies of the Lent and Holy Week readings (a missalette or worship guide will have the readings)
- Newsprint and markers

Activity

Distribute Handout #1. Ask the participants to complete only the column that says “Meaning to Me.” Ask each person to identify the meaning of each symbol for him or her.

Invite them to share the meaning of each symbol with their table group. Ask the groups not to discuss the symbols, but to listen attentively to each person’s reflections. Ask the groups to move through each symbol one-by-one, noting similarities and differences among the responses.

Conclude by saying (in your own words):

It is probably clear from the variety of responses to the activity that symbols do not have a meaning by themselves. We bring experience and meaning to symbols. None of the objects by themselves can be a symbol unless we participate in that meaning through our own understanding and connection to events in our lives.

Symbols remind us of stories—events which have been significant in some way for us. Some symbols are better at recalling a variety of stories than others. Those stories take on larger significance if they remind us of common stories.

Organize the participants into nine work groups with at least two people and no more than four people in each group. Assign each work group one of the following liturgies from Lent and Holy Week. Make the Easter Vigil the largest team (four to six people). If you have less than eighteen people, combine the First and Third, and the Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent.

- Ash Wednesday
- First Sunday of Lent
- Third Sunday of Lent (Lectionary reading from John's Gospel)
- Fourth Sunday of Lent (Lectionary reading from John's Gospel)
- Fifth Sunday of Lent (Lectionary reading from John's Gospel)
- Palm Sunday (Processional Readings, not the Passion)
- Holy Thursday
- Good Friday
- Easter Vigil

Distribute copies of Handout #3 to all of the participants. Distribute a sheet of newsprint and marking pens to each team. Guide the groups through the following process.

Step One: Ask the participants to read the Scripture readings for their assigned liturgy and to review the outline of the ritual where appropriate.

Step Two: Ask the teams to identify what symbol(s) emerge out of the readings and ritual actions and how the symbol(s) are used. Ask them to write their responses on the newsprint sheet.

Step Three Ask the teams to determine what the symbol(s) mean for us and what the symbol(s) teach us about the meaning of Lent. Ask the teams to write their responses on the newsprint sheet.

After the teams have finished their work, ask each group to share their report with the large group. Proceed in the order of the liturgies (as listed above).

Distribute Handout #2 to each participant. Using the handout, provide a "tour of Lent" for the participants. Use the reports from the teams in your presentation. Invite questions and reflections as you move through the Lenten liturgies. Encourage participants to read and reflect on the Scriptures for Lent over the next weeks, using Handout #3 as their guide.

Activity 3: Words and Music in the Lenten Season

See Activity 3 under Families with Children Learning Experiences for this activity.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20-25 minutes)

Invite the participants to gather in intergenerational groups. Use the following questions to encourage sharing of the participants' learning about the words and symbols of Lent.

Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about the Lent—the Scripture readings, the symbols, the rituals.

- What new insights did you gain into the Lenten season?
- What will you look for when you participate in the Lenten Season in the parish community?
- What is the most important “lesson” you have learned?
- How can the Lenten season help you to grow as a Christian?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (5 minutes)

Close by inviting the participants to renew their baptismal promises. Introduce the closing prayer by saying...

Lent is a time when we prepare to renew our Baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil. The themes of water and light permeate the Lenten season. Let's close this session by renewing our Baptismal promises together. In the early days of the Church, just before people were immersed in the baptismal waters, they turned to the west (the place of sin and darkness) and renounced Satan and evil. Then they turned to the east (the place of the rising sun which stands for the risen *Christ*) and professed their faith. Our prayer begins with everyone standing and facing west. Take turns reading each statement and responding together.

Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children?
We do.

Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?
We do.

Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?
We do.

All turn and face east.

Do you believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?
We do.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?
We do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?
We do.

This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.

Through our baptism we became joined with Christ, and members of the Church. As we strive to live as Christians, let us together ask for God's guidance as we share the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Our Father....

Each person should now come to the prayer table of symbols and trace the sign of the cross on his or her forehead, using water from the bowl.