

Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life

Small Group Guide: “Celebrating Life”

(LifelongFaith Associates)

Preparation

1. Materials

- Each person will need a Bible.
- The following handouts are included with this session:
 1. *Celebrations in Our Lives*
 2. *Creating Your Own Ritual*
 3. *Developing a Daily Rituals Plan*
 4. *Developing a Yearly Rituals Plan*
- You may want to assemble a packet of rituals for the participants using the three “Celebrating Life Home Activities” materials: Daily Rituals, Milestone Rituals, and Through the Year Rituals
- Develop a display table of ritual and celebration resources that individuals and families can use in their daily lives. Review the Resource List included with this document.
- Develop a prayer table for all to see with the major symbols of Christian celebrations. Place a tablecloth on the table (perhaps in color representing the liturgical season) and a lighted candle, cross, bowl of water, small bowl of olive oil, loaf of bread (unsliced), glass of wine, ring (wedding ring), etc.

2. Celebrating Life Montage

In Advance:

- Ask the participants to bring photos of one or two important (recent) family celebrations to be used in creating a “celebrating life montage.” Tell people to bring copies of photos.
- Purchase one or more rolls of paper table covering (or poster paper on a roll), glue and/or tape, and markers. You will also need masking tape to hang the montage.
- Set-up a number of tables with paper, glue or tape, and markers.

At the Session:

- As the participants arrive, have each household attach their photos to the roll of paper, write the name of each family celebrations with their family name, and then draw a circle around the photos and name for each celebration.
- Before you begin the program, hang the montage for all to see. Provide a few minutes for people to view the montage.

3. Prepare Three Ritual Experiences: Daily, Seasonal, and Milestone

The “Living” section in the “Celebrating Life” chapter (pages 2.9–2.15) serves as a guide for helping people celebrate rituals for each daily, the seasons of the church year, and transitions and milestones. The goal of this part of the learning design is to give people direct experiences of ritual celebrations and the opportunity to create their own ritual celebration.

Three types of ritual celebrations are presented on pages 2.9–2.13: **daily ritual**, **seasonal ritual** (liturgical year or calendar year), and **life transition and milestone**. During the small group session participants are going to experience each of these rituals.

- **Opening Ritual Celebration.** Begin the session by celebrating a simple ritual: *daily ritual*, *seasonal ritual* (liturgical year or calendar year), or *life transition and milestone*. For example if you are beginning your program with a meal, conduct a table ritual before or after the meal (see the table rituals in the Home Activities section).
- **Part 4. Living: Application of the Christian Practice to Daily Life.** Prepare two more rituals for Part 4 of the learning experience, so that the participants will have experience all three types of rituals.

There are a variety of daily, milestone, and yearly rituals included in the Home Activities section that you use or adapt. Two good sources for a variety of rituals are: *Celebrate Life: Rituals for Home and Church* by Peter Young (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999) and *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families* by Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998). See the list of ritual resources at the end of this document for further assistance.

Be sure that all three ritual experiences model the key elements of a celebration that are presented in this session: symbol(s), Scripture reading, prayer or blessing, music to sing or listen to, and decoration of the environment.

4. Prepare Resources for Creating a Ritual Celebration

Using the process on page 2.15 in *Living Well*, the group is going to create a ritual celebration. To prepare for this experience:

- Choose an occasion or event in advance that will apply to your participants. Keep this simple.
- Collect the resources that you will need in advance.
- Prepare materials that the participants will need, e.g., a Bible, a hymnal or song list on the theme of your celebration.
- Prepare a list of potential Scripture readings that people can use in creating their ritual for the occasion or event that you have selected.
- Participants can use the handout, *Creating Your Own Ritual*, to record their work.

Small Group Plan

Opening Ritual Experience

Part 1. *Yearning*: Stories of Celebrating Life

Begin the session by reading or presenting the opening stories about celebrating life on pages 2.2–2.5 in *Living Well*: “The Red Tree,” “The Big Boy Bed,” “Graduation and Beyond,” and “Walking with Mary and Joseph.” Use a different reader for each story.

How do these stories reflect your experiences with celebrating life? Share your reflections with your small group.

Part 2. *Reflecting*: Rituals in Our Lives

The handout, *Prayer in Our Lives*, gives you an opportunity to name your current experience of praying by using the following six questions. Take a few minutes to complete the worksheet. (The complete set of questions is found on page 10.4 in *Living Well*.)

The handout, *Celebrating Rituals in Our Lives*, gives you an opportunity to name your experience of celebrating life through rituals using Take a few minutes to complete the worksheet. (The questions are found on page 2.6 in *Living Well*.)

1. What celebrations were important to you as were growing up? Which of these would you like to pass on to your children, and how can you do this?
2. What are some of the celebrations that you and your family practice today – in your daily life, on a seasonal basis, or on special occasions?
3. How do you and your family celebrate holidays and holy days today?
4. How do you and your family experience God through celebrations?

To prepare for the group sharing identify the story of one celebration from question #1 and one from question #2 that you want to share with the group. Share your two stories with your group. This is a storytelling experience so be sure to give people time to share their stories without interruptions or discussion.

Conclude by sharing reflections to question #4 as a group.

Part 3. *Exploring*: The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

The Exploring section of the “Celebrating Life” chapter on pages 2.7–2.8 in *Living Well* presents several examples of celebrating rituals in the Bible, centered around five Scripture passages.

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4-7, 10-13 (A time to...)
2. Deuteronomy 30:19-20 (Choose life)
3. Leviticus 16:29-34 (Day of Atonement)
4. John 2:1-11 (Wedding Feast at Cana)
5. Luke 15:22-24 (Prodigal Son)

Begin by taking time to read pages 2.7–2.8 and the five Scripture passages.

Think about your responses to the three questions below and when everyone is ready share your responses, question-by-question. Begin with question #1, then move on to #2, and conclude with #3.

1. What insights about celebrating life did you gain from the biblical examples?
2. Can you think of other examples of celebrations in the Bible?
3. How do you see God at work through these biblical celebrations? How do people experience God through these celebrations?

Part 4. *Living*: Application of the Christian Practice to Daily Life

The “Living” section in the “Celebrating Life” chapter (pages 2.9–2.15) serves as a guide for helping you celebrate rituals for each daily, the seasons of the church year, and transitions and milestones. Three types of ritual celebrations are presented on pages 2.9–2.13: **daily ritual**, **seasonal ritual** (liturgical year or calendar year), and **life transition and milestone**.

Part 1. Experiencing Ritual Celebrations

In the Opening Ritual Experience you celebrated one of the three types of rituals: daily, seasonal, or milestone. Begin by reading the Introduction and then select the ritual you celebrated at the opening the session and read about and discuss that ritual. Then move on to the other two types of rituals

Introduction

- Read the introduction to rituals on page 2.9 of *Living Well*.

Daily Rituals

- Read about Daily Rituals on page 2.10 of *Living Well*.
- Experience a Daily Ritual celebration together.
- Conclude by reviewing other types of Daily Rituals on page 2.11 *Living Well*.

Seasonal Rituals

- Read about the variety of Seasonal Rituals on pages 2.12–2.13 in *Living Well*.
- Experience a Seasonal Ritual celebration.

Milestone Rituals

- Read about the variety of Transition and Milestone Rituals on page 2.13 in *Living Well*.
- Experience a Transition and Milestone Ritual.

Part 2. Creating a Ritual Celebration

Together as a group you are going to create a ritual celebration using the ideas in the *Living Well* book. Use the handout, *Creating Your Own Ritual*, to record your work.

1. Begin by reading “Creating Your Own Rituals” and “Designing a Celebration” on pages 2.14–2.15 of *Living Well*.
2. Identify the occasion or event that you have chosen.
3. Identify a central symbol for the celebration.
4. Select an appropriate Scripture reading that expresses the meaning of the event or occasion.

5. Find or write a short prayer or blessing for the celebration.
6. Select music to sing or listen to that reflects the celebration.
7. Include any ritual actions or movement (gestures, hugs, blessing signs) appropriate for their celebration.
8. Develop ideas for decorating the environment for the celebration (artwork, photos, candles).

Part 3. Reflecting on the Experience

Reflect on your experience of the ritual celebrations using the questions below and share your insights with your group.

- What did you learn about the Christian practice of Celebrating Life from this experience?
- How did you feel God's presence through these ritual celebrations?
- Which ritual celebrations do you see yourself or family using at home?
- How can you use what you learned about creating your own ritual in your own life?

Part 4. Developing a Rituals Plan (*Living Well* pages 2.10–2.12)

Daily Plan

Take a few minutes to create a daily rituals plan using the worksheet, *Developing a Daily Rituals Plan*, and the ideas in *Living Well*:

1. Add all of the daily rituals of faith already present in your household now to your plan.
2. Identify new daily rituals you want to begin in your household and add them to your plan.

Yearly Rituals Plan

Take a few minutes to create a daily rituals plan using the worksheet, *Developing a Daily Rituals Plan*, and the ideas in *Living Well*. Review the two tasks:

1. Add all of your ritual celebrations to the calendar: church year seasonal celebrations, calendar year seasons, and milestones celebrations.
2. Identify new ritual celebrations that you would like to add to your yearly plan and write those in the appropriate month. Underline the new ritual celebrations.

After everyone has created their daily and annual plan, share with their group two daily rituals you are practice and one new ritual you want to practice. Then share two yearly rituals you practice and one new ritual you want to practice .

Put your plans on the refrigerator or prominent place in the house as a reminder of the types of rituals that you are going to celebrate.

Part 5. *Praying*: Prayer for the Practice

Conclude by celebrating the ritual that you have created in this session.

Celebrations in Our Life

What celebrations were important to you as were growing up? Which of these would you like to pass on to your children?

What are some of the celebrations that you and your family practice today—in your daily life, on a seasonal basis, or on special occasions?

How do you and your family celebrate holidays and holy days?

How do you and your family experience God through your celebrations?

Creating Your Own Ritual

- 1. Choose an occasion or event.**
- 2. Identify a central symbol for the ritual celebration (e.g., water, oil, cross, artwork, bread, candle).**
- 3. Select an appropriate Scripture reading that expresses the meaning of your ritual celebration.**
- 4. Find or create an opening prayer and blessing for your ritual celebration.**
- 5. Select music to sing or listen to that reflects the ritual celebration.**
- 6. Include any ritual actions or movement appropriate for your ritual celebration (e.g., gestures, hugs, blessing signs, anointing).**
- 7. Decorate your environment for the celebration (e.g., artwork, photos, candles).**
- 8. Involve each family member in at least one element of the ritual celebration.**
- 9. Celebrate!**

Developing a Daily Rituals Plan

- Add all of the daily rituals of faith already present in your household now to your plan.
- Identify new daily rituals you want to begin in your household and add them to your plan.

Sunday	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	

Developing a Yearly Rituals Plan

- Add all of your ritual celebrations to the calendar: church year seasonal celebrations, calendar year seasons, and milestones celebrations.
- Identify new ritual celebrations that you would like to add to your yearly plan and write those in the appropriate month. Underline the new ritual celebrations.

January	
February	
March	
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	
December	

Resources for Developing the Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

At Home with God: Family Devotions for the School Year. Anne Broyles, Marilyn Brown Oden, Elizabeth Lynd Escamilla, Paul Lynd Escamilla. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002.

Many of today's families struggle in nurturing their children in the Christian faith beyond attending church services. Finding time at home to talk together about faith can be challenging when so much else demands attention. *At Home with God* gives families with school-age children (ages 6 to 11) solid spiritual help. Designed to bring a family together in worship at home for 10 to 15 minutes each day, the devotions require little to no advance preparation and speak to families large and small. You'll find pages for the days from September through May: daily devotions based on specific scriptures, prayers and litanies to say and learn together, stories and activities to share, songs to sing with familiar melodies, colorful illustrations and symbols to direct young readers, and articles to help adult family members prepare.

Bless This House: Prayers for Families and Children. Gregory Wolfe, Suzanne M. Wolfe. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

An excellent foundation for all families desiring to begin, renew, or deepen their spiritual journey together, *Bless This House* features dozens of prayers appropriate for both everyday and special events, including mealtimes, bedtime, holidays, and religious celebrations, as well as prayers for siblings, pets, and the ill or dying. With wisdom and practical advice, parents Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe provide helpful suggestions for introducing the concept of prayer to young minds and dealing with potential obstacles like boredom or short attention spans. Teaching our children to pray opens the door for their spiritual development, but just as importantly, it becomes a path to spiritual renewal for parents as well. Chapters include: *The Earthy Spirituality of Family Life*, *How and Why We Pray*, *The Soul in Paraphrase: Stages in Your Child's Prayer Life (and Yours)*, *Praying Together as a Family: A How-To Guide*, and *The Prayers* (dozens of prayers to pray alone or with your family).

The Blessing Candles: 58 Simple Mealtime Prayer-Celebrations. Gaynell Bordes Cronin and Jack Rathschmidt. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000.

Each of the 58 prayer-celebrations include a gathering prayer, the lighting of two candles, a reading and a prayerful response to it, reflection questions and a sending prayer. These mealtime rituals are organized into several categories: *Blessings for Everyday*, *Blessings for Special Needs*, *Blessings for Special Occasions*, and *Blessings for the Year*.

The Book of New Family Traditions – How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Everyday. Meg Cox. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2003.

Overcoat Day. Welcome Summer Party. Monthly Pizza Blast. Bus Stop Party. These are just some of the enjoyable and inventive new traditions you'll find in *The Book of New Family Traditions*. Life isn't like it used to be, and we need to invent new traditions for today's families. Meg Cox guides you through the simple steps that help families fully cherish all of those special moments and milestones, help heal the wounds of trauma and loss, and strengthen that indomitable spirit of identity within a family. With *The Book of New Family Traditions*, your family can create the kind of celebrations that lead to everlasting happy memories. When author Meg Cox became a mother in 1994, she started a personal quest to find inspiring, contemporary family rituals. She sought rituals that were simple but profound, practical and yet lots of fun. Using her skills as a journalist, she spent more than three years interviewing diverse families all over the country and compiling a collection of inventive new traditions. In

this book you'll find fresh ways of commemorating established holidays like Thanksgiving and July 4, Passover and Easter, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. You will also find original observances for birthdays, bedtime and dinnertime, not to mention a whole compendium of unexpected traditions: sports rituals, pet rituals, homework rituals, vacation rituals and family meetings, among others. The *Book of New Family Traditions* provides a wealth of fun, easy and creative new celebrations for your family for every occasion.

Celebrate Life: Rituals for Home and Church. Peter Young. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999.

This book offers meaningful celebrations to help families deepen their sense of God's empowering presence and strengthen the relationship between one's own family and the larger family of faith. This guide for family worship offers rituals for times of growth, new life, significant change, uncertainty, loss, separation, and more; and rituals for milestones and other special times in life.

Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families. Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998.

This easy-to-use, hands-on resource includes a variety of rituals, prayers, and liturgies throughout the liturgical year, organized into Prayers for Daily Life, Seasonal Celebrations, and Life Transitions. The book helps families connect their everyday lives with their faith.

Celebrating Faith: Year-Round Activities for Catholic Families. Mary Cronk Farrell. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005.

This book seeks to provide you with practical help in teaching your children Christian values and fostering faith in everyday family life. Chapters offer ways to celebrate the Church's liturgical year, as well as secular holidays. You will find simple explanations of the Church seasons and major holy days. Scripture readings, simple prayers, rituals and activities are suggested throughout, as well as true stories from family life meant to inspire, encourage and offer food for thought. Mary Cronk Farrell outlines her chapters by season, beginning with the New Year and ending with Christmas. For each holiday, season, milestone or celebration, she provides family-friendly activities and reflections for parents to share their Catholic faith with their young children. Mary invites her readers to be creative and inventive by using each activity or reflection as a stepping-stone to integrate the Catholic faith into their own family traditions, rituals and experiences. Included are prayers, activities and reflections for: Holy Days, Secular Holidays, National Holidays, Family Milestones, Seasons, Meal Time, Story Time, and Get-Together-as-a-Family Time.

Celebrating Passages in the Church – Reflections and Resources. Hugh W. Sanborn, editor. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999.

The milestones that mark the journey between life and death once were affirmed by ceremonies in the church. Today only a few of the old liturgies remain, and congregations miss the chance to celebrate and commemorate life's passages together. Each chapter includes an essay that explore the theory and theology behind the rite and a sample service or materials for a service that can be adapted to specific situations. The following milestones are included in the book: birth, transition from infancy to childhood, growing toward committed discipleship, coming of age, believer's baptism, marriage, divorce, women entering midlife, men at midlife, later maturity, leaving a home, and dying.

FaithTalk: Four Keys. Bloomington, MN: The Youth and Family Institute, 2008. [www.tyfi.org]

These brand new FaithTalk® cards will inspire your family to live out The Institute's Four Key faith practices every day! Designed to keep your faith active and alive, each discussion card poses a question focusing on one of these four areas of spiritual development: 1) Caring

Conversation: Sharing Our Stories, 2) Devotions: Identifying God's Presence in All of Life, 3) Rituals and Traditions: Living Out Our Beliefs, 4) Service: Actions that Honor Our Values by Caring for Our Neighbor. The packaging allows the cards to be "set up" on your table, truly making it a centerpiece for encouraging and growing faith in the home. .

Family Prayer for Family Times: Traditions, Celebrations & Rituals. Kathleen Chesto. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995

This is not just a book of prayers, but rather a family primer for beginning a lifelong habit of prayer. In a perfect blend of the traditional and the contemporary, Kathleen Chesto shows Catholic families how to begin prayer habits that can enrich their lives and yet be passed on for generations. Chesto believes in celebrating the spiritual aspects of everyday events: The first day of school... Learning to ride a bike... Getting a driver's license... A new baby in the family... She also offers prayers for celebrating the great feasts of the church year: Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Woven throughout are familiar prayers like the rosary, the stations, the Angelus, and novenas – prayers that parents remember from childhood and want to share now with their families.

For Everything a Season: 75 Blessings for Daily Life. The Nilsen Family. Kristi Ylvisaker, Illustrator. Des Moines: Zion Publishing, 1999.

How often have the major changes in your life just passed you by? This resource helps highlight the personal milestones in your life by using simple rituals. Inside, you will find blessings for birthdays, the new school year, adolescent body changes, getting a driver's license, graduation, a new home, death of a pet, etc. Each ritual has a welcome, prayer, time for reflection, suggested ritual action such as lighting a candle or passing a blessing cup, and a closing blessing. Unleash the power of blessings in your life.

Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children. Elizabeth Caldwell. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007 (revised edition).

Churches often assume that parents know what to do with their children in regard to nurturing them in a life of faith after baptism or dedication. Elizabeth Caldwell addresses this important need by offering parents and educators insights and ideas for nurturing the faith of children and creating a faithful ecology at home, at church, and in the world. Chapters include: Making a Home for Faith, Parenting for Faith Expression, Imprints of Faith, When Your Child Asks, and A Faithful Ecology.

Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share. Susan R. Garrett and Amy Plantinga Pauw. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002.

This daybook engages the family in exploring the Bible, while helping children develop a strong pattern of daily devotions and prayer. The authors combine biblical teaching with engaging stories that children can identify with, as well as thoughts for personal application. The book draws from most books of the Bible, and includes both the best-loved Bible verses and the harder-to-understand passages. The 366 entries emphasize the seasons of the church year and correlate to the secular calendar as well.

Marking Time: Christian Rituals for All Our Days. Linda Witte Henke. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001.

Extraordinary life changes are frequently signaled by such ordinary experiences as the birth of a child, a child's first day of school, a teenager's acquisition of adult driving privileges, a career change, moving into a new home, and retirement from one's life work. *Marking Time* provides readers with simple rituals that invite mindful, in-the-moment reflection on the significant moments in life and helps to frame them within the perspective of Christian faith and values.

Encompassing a broad range of life-cycle experiences from birth to death, Linda Witte Henke offers readers fully developed rituals suitable for reproduction and immediate use. Each rite includes an introduction with directions for preparation and use of the ritual, making the book useful even for those who have never participated in or led a ritual before. *Marking Time* includes ceremonies to mark important life events, such as pregnancy, the first day of school, children leaving home, and marriage, plus rites that mark the more difficult times, such as the death of a pet, times of unemployment, suffering due to natural disasters, the moving of a loved-one to an assisted-care residence, and many others.

Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation. The Youth & Family Institute. Bloomington, MN: The Youth and Family Institute, 2008. [www.tyfi.org]

Life is full of meaningful moments. Celebrating these milestones helps bring God's presence into the home and the rituals of daily life into the congregation. The Milestones Ministry Manual offers an easy-to-implement model so that congregations, households and individuals can participate in a way of life that marks special moments as "God moments," and honors them as part of the journey of faith. The ideas and suggestions in this manual are based on the real-life experiences of leaders who have successfully implemented Milestones Ministry into their congregations and daily lives. Milestones featured in this manual include: Receiving a FaithChest®; Anniversary of Baptism; Prayer; Welcoming Young Children to Worship; Entering Sunday School; Kids and Money; Blessing of the Backpacks; First Communion; Bible Presentation and Adventure; First Time Campers; My Body, God's Gift; Middle School; Entering Confirmation; Confirmation; Driver's License; and High School Graduation.

To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration. Gertrud Mueller Nelson. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.

In a book that draws from history, psychology, spirituality, and a deep knowledge and love of ritual—plus stories of family traditions that warm the heart and inspire—Gertrud Mueller Nelson gives us a map of how and when to celebrate. We learn each step from Advent, a time of darkness and longing, to the joyous Christmas season with its 12 days that lead to Epiphany. *To Dance with God* follows the entire liturgical year, also encompassing Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other holy days.

Transforming Rituals: Daily Practices for Changing Lives. Roy M. Oswald with Jean Morris Trumbauer. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999.

Today's rapid, deep, and pervasive changes in North American culture present myriad challenges for faith communities now and in the years ahead. Oswald explores the use of rituals as spiritually healing practices for the home, congregation, and broader community. He teaches congregational leaders how individuals and groups can use familiar new rituals to name, evaluate, live out, celebrate, and grow through change. Roy Oswald teaches us to bring more than words to experiences too deep for words. Mining the meanings of change, Roy shows us how rituals can chart our course across the map of life's transitions, as we find our way through endings, waiting times, and new beginnings—toward transformation. Here is a practical encyclopedia of lessons for church leaders on rituals ('habit made holy'): discovering the sacred in individuals' and families' daily lives; reclaiming community life after school shootings and plant closings; blessing everything from church meetings to miscarriages to pets. If you complain, 'Where in my busy schedule could I find time to observe rituals?' Roy will show you, 'You already do!'

VeggieTales Family Devotional. Cindy Kenney and Doug Peterson. Franklin, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2005. [www.bigidea.com]

The *VeggieTales Family Devotional* contains 52 devotionals organized into seven parts: The Faith Connection, The Communication Connection, The Love Connection, The Trust Connection, The Time Connection, The Joy Connection, and Holiday Lessons. Each devotion includes a Veggie story, a Bible story, discussion questions, guided prayers, family activity, and a “think-link-act” connection to help everyone find a practical way to apply God’s messages to their lives.

Celebrating Life Home Activities: Daily Rituals

Bedtime Rituals

In every culture, parents create bedtime rituals for babies and young children to ease separation from the parent and the passage from the waking state to the sleeping state. Such rituals may include a playful bathing, a bedtime snack, telling or reading a story, saying prayers, singing songs, holding and cuddling. The familiar repetition of such bedtime rituals marks and defines the parent-child relationship as one where comfort, reliability, and safety are available.

Make-Up Time

The world is imperfect; families fight. But it really is a good idea not to go to bed mad. Try to make sure that wrongs between family members are righted before everyone goes to sleep. Talk together about what went wrong and what might help. If you don't feel you can say it, write a note to apologize, or make a gesture that clearly says you want to start over. If the bad feelings have to do with someone not present, it may help to talk out loud, to say what's in your heart and on your mind, as though the person were there.

Bedtime Talks

Take time for a little chat every evening. Invite children to tell what they did during the day, their excitements and disappointments. Talk about anything that's troubling them, or something they want to do. Keep the lines of communication open. Make this a relaxed time so that there is not that feeling of being rushed. Make it a privilege and a delight to be together.

First Prayer

When teaching your child to pray, hold the child on your lap (facing forward). Be sure that you are relaxed and serene and able to communicate lovingly. Ideal places are in front of a fireplace, a quiet garden or wherever there are not too many distractions. Perhaps you might consider a special space where you and your child have had enjoyable times together.

Bedtime Blessings

A Parent's Prayer for a Child

Lord, bless this child.

As you have filled his/her day with sights and sounds, activities and relationships, bless his/her night with restful sleep and pleasant dreams.

May he/she be strengthened by tonight's sleep for the new life and growth that tomorrow are sure to bring.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

A Bedtime Prayer for Parents

Thank you, God for the gifts of daytime:
For the sun that warms,
For the breeze that cools,
And for the rain that refreshes.

Thank you, too, for family and friends
For work and for relaxation,
For the comfort of daily routine,
And for the challenge of new ideas and relationships.

With daytime at a close, we thank you too for the gifts of night time:
For shadows that dance in the light,
And stars that glow in the darkest night.

For the chance to rest and to prepare ourselves
For another day of comfort and challenge.

Thank you God, for today and for tonight. Amen

Rituals for Leaving and Returning

Family members develop ritualized ways of saying good-bye when they leave each other to go to work or school, and of saying hello when they greet each other again after being apart. Such rituals of leaving and returning mark the boundary between home and the outside world, provide a bridge between life inside the family and life outside the family, and work to tell family members who they are to each other. When families have established rituals for leaving and returning, members are aware of comings and goings. They know who is home and who is not. In such families, there is a healthy balance between individual and family needs.

Short and Simple Rituals

Simple rituals like a hello and a hug good-bye can provide an opening and a place to notice changes in one another that might be otherwise missed. An after-school snack or a repeated phrase with special meaning only within the family are bonders that make members feel like they are loved and appreciated for who they are. For those parents who must travel because of their work, leave a notebook with a message for each day away, including what you are doing that day, where you will be, and what you miss about the child each day. Leaving little notes in unusual places for family members keeps them connected, too.

Morning Departure

Each day before the family departs to their various destinations say good-bye and hug one another. As the children get older, they will probably be uncomfortable doing this in front of their friends so make a point of saying good-bye in the house. Incorporate a simple blessing, like:

*May God be with you in everything you do today.
May your day be blessed with new life, new learning, and the company of friends.*

The First Day of School

The Jar of Knowledge

Start a “Jar of Knowledge” at the beginning of every year. After every school day, your child writes down one thing he or she learned. This can be anything. Remember, learning takes place in so many ways. At the end of the each school semester, take out all the pieces of paper and take turns reading them aloud.

Breakfast at

Have everyone in the family meet at a local restaurant, coffee shop or fast food restaurant for this early morning send-off. Make it a special occasion.

Back to School Prayer

Ever-living and ever-loving God, be with us today as we start a new school year.

Help us to learn more about ourselves, about the gifts you have given us and how we can use them to help others grow.

Help us to learn more about the people who share this world with us. May we grow in appreciation of how special they are, and of how your love is reflected through them.

Help us to learn more about the world in which we live. May we see our connectedness with all of creation and learn what we can do to build a world where the world’s goodness is shared by all.

We ask this with confidence in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Through the School Year

Open House

Get excited about the opportunity to visit your child’s classroom. Tell your child this is an important evening. When you return, make sure to tell your child about your visit and all the good things about her school and classroom.

Report Card Day

This is the night to have a consolation/congratulation cake for dessert. Make it half of one kind, and half of another, to represent the triumphs and the regrets that report cards bring. About regrets: The person most invested in the child’s doing well is the child him/herself. Your task is to emphasize what your child did right. That is not to say that you ignore bad grades. Children want to know how you feel when they bring home their report cards. But try to comment on “bad” grades in a positive way: acknowledge them, but say that you believe your child has learned something nonetheless and can do better next time. Good grades are their own reward.

School Plays and Concerts

It's truly important that school plays and concerts be attended. Invite grandparents and others you think might enjoy the event. Dress up. Videotape or photograph the event until your child's embarrassment level prohibits this. Keep the programs in the scrapbook or frame them to hand in your child's room.

Last Day of School

Dinner Out

Make this a special time to celebrate the school year. Pick as nice a restaurant you can afford, and dress accordingly. At dessert time, present your children with a gift for their good work. It should reflect some aspect of their academic year.

End of School Party

Have an "End of School" party that is appropriate to the child's age. Try to include adults and friends that have been important to your child during the school year.

End of School Prayer

We give you thanks, loving God, for the gifts we have been given. May we continue to share these gifts with one another and with the world around us. Keep us open to the new possibilities for growth and recreation that the summer provides. May we see in all creation a reminder of your constant love for us. Amen

Back to School Blessing

Have each family member bring to the center table a symbol for the beginning of the school year. This may include pencils, a new binder, new clothes or shoes, an alarm clock, etc. What symbolizes the change from summer vacation to starting a new school year?

All family members gather around the symbols.

Reader 1

Lord, give me wisdom and knowledge.

Reader 2

Learning...for some of us, so easy, so filled with rewards, for others, so difficult, so filled with frustration. Help us, God, to give one another the space and time each needs to grow. Lord, you are the source of all knowledge. Keep us focused on you this year as we study, grow, learn and live together. Help us understand that all study is a prayer and part of the way we seek you.

Litany

Family members recite a litany such as the following. Adapt the litany for your family.

Response: We thank you, Lord.

For the symbols gathered on this table...

For paper...

For backpacks...

For pens and pencils...

For lunch boxes...

For gym clothes...

Etc.

All: We thank you, Lord.

Response: Guide us, O Lord.

In the work we will do this school-year...

As we study...

As we listen...

As we read...

As we create...

As we solve...

As we research...

As we write...

As we struggle...

As we question...

As we explore...

As we exercise...

As we practice...

As we play...

Etc.

All: Guide us, O Lord.

Response: Bless us, Lord.

With patience...

With perseverance...
With discipline...
With creativity...
With trust...
With honesty...
With courage...
With kindness...
With success...
With peacefulness...
With responsibility...
With confidence...
With enthusiasm...
Etc.

All: Bless us, Lord.

Reader 2

Lord, we thank you for the symbols gathered on this table and for the good things you will bless us with throughout this school year. We ask your blessing on each of us. Keep us mindful of our journey of faith as a family. Bring us back to this space often, even everyday, to take a moment to recognize your gracious activity in our lives.

All Amen

Mealtime Blessings

Loving Father, we thank You for the family gathered around the table, the friends who extend your goodness, the food which nourishes our bodies and the Faith that strengthens our souls. Keep us ever mindful of these blessings, and may this food inspire us to bring these blessings to those who go without family, friends, food and faith. We ask all of this through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Father Leo E. Patalinghug, *Grace Before Meals*)

Lord God and Giver of All Good Gifts, we are grateful as we pause before this meal, for all the blessings of life that You give to us.
Daily, we are fed with good things, nourished by friendship and care, feasted with forgiveness and understanding.
And so, mindful of Your continuous care, we pause to be grateful for the blessings of this table.
(*Pause for silent reflection*)
May Your presence be the “extra” taste to this meal which we eat in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen

The day is coming to a close, and, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we pause to break bread together.
May our eyes be opened, and, in this act of common sharing, may we see the risen Lord in one another.
May we see the Lord of Life in our food, our conversation and lives shared in common.
May these gifts strengthen us to continue your work in our world.
May the blessing of God, His peace and love, rest upon our table. Amen

We thank you, our God, for the food you have given us.
Make our sharing this bread together lead to a renewal of our communion with you, with one another, and with all creatures.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Lord, you feed every living thing.
We have eaten together at this table; keep us in your love.
Give us true concern for the least of our sisters and brothers, so that as we gladly share our food with them, we may also sit down together with them at the table of the kingdom of God.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Lord, you have fed us from your gifts and favors; fill us with your mercy, for you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen

Celebrating a Family Meal

Materials

- Your family should first determine the type of meal at which they would enjoy celebrating. Would they like to dress up the best china, have breakfast, plan a picnic, or order a pizza?
- The meal's menu should be determined ahead of time with each family member having input. Everyone should have preparation, cooking and/or cleaning task(s).
- Each family member should bring an object for the table that symbolizes the family. These symbols could be photos from the last vacation, a family Bible, a plate to symbolize hospitality, an item from a favorite family hobby, or a candle to symbolize warmth and closeness.
- An uncut loaf of bread or large roll.

Environment

Have everyone gather when no one will be interrupted. Arrange the symbolic objects as a centerpiece or on a table next to the dinner table.

Opening Blessing

If your family prays a special Grace before eating, please use it. Otherwise, pray this prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for allowing us to come together as a family. Please help sustain our lives and love by blessing this food. We ask this through, Jesus our brother. Amen.

Activity

When everyone is finished eating the main meal, clear the table, and spread all of the objects out in the middle. Each person should share what object they brought and why they chose it. When everyone is finished, did anyone notice any common threads? Is there any object that you would all agree best symbolizes your family?

The Leader should now turn everyone's attention to the loaf of bread explaining how Christians for generations have broken bread together as a sign of their fidelity and love, and how today it is a symbol of our Christian faith. The leader should break off a piece of the bread thanking God for something about the family. Do not eat the bread. Each family member in turn should do the same. The bread can be consumed when all have prayed.

The Leader should ask everyone to thank each other for the time spent together. Ask each member to share one thing they learned about the family or family members today.

Have dessert!

Closing Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for nourishing our body and soul through this meal and discussion. We are grateful to be part of the larger Christian family. We ask your blessings on our family as we seek to grow closer to You through our love for each other. We ask this through Jesus our brother. Amen.

Suggestions for Action

1. Sundae-making or another "fun eating" activity can be substituted for a meal.
2. This activity can be adapted to extended family reunions or gatherings by having each family bring an object to symbolize the larger family.
3. This activity could be held once a year to recap the year's activities and growth. Have each family member bring a symbol of the year.

Celebrating Life Home Activities: Milestone Rituals

Welcoming a New Baby

Wallpaper Secrets

If you plan to put up new wallpaper, why not hide things on pieces of paper behind it: good wishes, a poem you like, a copy of your favorite lullaby, etc. Hide anything whose spirit you wish to be ever-present in the room.

A Mother's Story

A mother's own story of her labor and delivery can be something both her and the child will cherish. Write it as soon after the experience as possible. Include what the day was like before you went to the hospital -- weather conditions, news of the day, etc. Invite the new father to do the same.

Homecoming Outfit

There is the tradition in some families that when a new baby comes home, he or she is dressed in an heirloom daygown passed down through the generations. The child's initials are embroidered on the back of the daygown and put away for the next child, the next generation.

Homecoming

After the baby crosses the threshold into his or her home, everyone in the family is invited to sit together quietly in one large room. The baby is passed around to each family member, held and admired. The family member prays a silent prayer and then says aloud whatever he or she wishes to share. Keep this as a serious and treasured moment.

Heirloom

If a Christening dress gets too delicate to be worn any longer, consider framing it.

Create a Book of Blessings

Invite friends and family to contribute words of welcome, support, and/or hopes and dreams for the baby. Contributions can be as long or short as they desire, funny or serious. Make the book available to well-wishers. The Book could be a gift to the child when he/she is older as a source of joy, support, and inspiration.

Christian Giveaways

An alternative to cigars and suckers, pass out bookmarks, pencil, pins, or stickers that can be found in Christian bookstores.

Do it with Creation/Make a Donation

Buy a plant (like ivy), or plant a tree that can grow along with the child. Make a donation of money or time to some worthy cause in the baby's name.

Make a Banner

A welcome baby banner can be made easily by cutting out symbols and the baby's name from colored felt and gluing them onto a large piece of felt of contrasting color. The banner may be displayed on the front door and then put up in the baby's room.

Create a Photo or Video Story

Take pictures or video during the baptism in order to create a photo/video story of the event. Children love pictures of themselves, so the story can be an excellent baptism teaching tool when they are older. You may want to include a written description to accompany the photos including who attended, the readings, baby's reaction, etc. With the video, you may want to videotape a commentary on the events or interviews with family members. Memory fades as the years pass.

Create a Book of Blessings

Invite friends and family to contribute words of welcome, support, and/or hopes and dreams for the child. Contributions can be as long or short as they desire, funny or serious. Posting or reading contributions at a post-baptism party allows family or friends who are not able to attend the baptism to share in the celebration. The Book could be a gift to the child when he or she is older as a source of joy, support, and inspiration.

Birthday Rituals

Baptismal Anniversaries and Name Days

Many families celebrate baptismal anniversaries and name days by marking the time on their calendar and remembering to light the child's baptismal candle and have a special dinner. On name days, the life of the patron saint is read. This is a good practice since everyone needs heroes/heroines, and good ones are hard to come by these days. What more suitable ones can we propose to children than those who have served God so faithfully?

Ritualizing Birthdays

- Family members awaken the birthday person with a lighted candle and serenade him/her with "Happy Birthday." For the rest of the day the birthday person has no chores to do and is served whatever he/she wants for any of the meals. In this way the birthday person feels special and family relationships are affirmed.
- Families wrap presents in three or four layers of paper or boxes before the opener finally gets to the present.
- Families set up treasure hunts for the presents complete with clues.
- Families allow the birthday person to pick the menu for the birthday meal.
- Families have a special "birthday plate" that is placed on the table to remind everyone of the specialness of the person.
- The day after the birthday, the birthday person is allowed to have a piece of cake for breakfast.
- Single adults invite their friends to a birthday gathering and ask them to bring or do something that was particularly celebrated in their own family around birthdays.
- When separated and divorced parents have worked out a cooperative relationship, the party is done together. When the two parents live in two locations, two parties might be given in the different locations or one might be a family party and the other a party with the child's friends. Some families choose to plan only one party with one parent.
- Purchase a book with blank pages and paste in photographs for each birthday. Write the important events that happened in the child's past year.

Generational Connections

- Give gifts to parents to acknowledge your gratefulness to them for the gift of life. Thank them for their love and care. Prepare a book of photographs with captions from a trip taken earlier, and/or a copybook with short stories and songs sung by the parent(s).
- Create a video or PowerPoint presentation from photographs and/or video the party so it can be shared later with other generations.
- Make a cake for your parents on the birthday of one of your siblings when he/she is far away.

- Audio or video tape everyone's voice in the family and ask each member how they feel and what was significant about the past year.
- Get together on the deceased person's birthday to exchange gifts that remind family members of the deceased person, gifts the deceased would have picked out or made for others.
- If you recall a particularly unhappy birthday, especially one that feels like it marked a turning point for you, such as a childhood birthday that became fused with a parental divorce or was ruined by parental alcoholism, you may want to consider ways to redo that birthday in your adult life. In other words, throw a party for yourself. Use this ritual to close off old hurts and orient yourself to new possibilities.
- Make a surprise birthday hat. Each family members could choose and design a symbol or word phrase that would tell of their wish for the birthday person for the year. Place symbols/words on the hat. Give everyone a bell to ring. Stand around the lighted birthday cake. In ceremony, place birthday hat on family member and pray:

We thank God for _____ and for his/her presence in our family. As we place this hat on his/her head, we ask God for a special blessing upon _____ for the coming year.

- If your family has one primary ritual maker for birthdays, (often times this is the mother), try thinking of ways to put a different structure in place for celebrating his/her day.

Birthday Celebration

Opening Prayer

Sign yourself with the Sign of the Cross and recite this prayer.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God, (I/We) come today to give thanks to you for creating the life of (name). I/We ask your blessing on (name), that he/she may continue to honor and praise you by using the gifts and talents you have given him/her. We ask that (name) continue to grow in age, wisdom and grace – as Jesus grew.

Scripture Reading

Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Letter of Paul to the Colossians.)

Closing Prayer

Through Baptism, (name) entered God's special life of love. On this special day of remembrance we ask that (name)

may be faithful to God's love and trust;

may make good choices in life;

may continue to grow in age, in wisdom and in grace as Jesus grew.

Candle Lighting

Let this light symbolize the light of Christ renewing the life of _____ (name)

Wedding Anniversary

Use this ritual to celebrate a wedding anniversary, either privately or in the company of friends and family.

Both Partners

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer of Blessing and Thanksgiving

Recite together.

Blessed be the God who has been faithful to us in our journey as married partners and who has shared his mercy with us. We thank you for allowing each of us to be your special gift to the other

Scripture Reading

Read together.

Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over the wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (Corinthians 13:4-8)

Spend a few minutes in quiet reflection on God's Word reflecting on the quality of love shared in the marriage relationship and asking God to strengthen the bond between you.

Renewal of the Marriage Vows

Partners stand, face each other and each holds the hand of the other as he/she takes a turn in the renewal of vows.

I, (Name), again pledge my love to you, (Name), my wife/husband.
I promise to be true to you in good times in bad, in sickness and in health.
I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.

Each signs the other with the Sign of the Cross and offers an embrace of peace.

Concluding Prayer

Recite together.

Lord, may we both praise you when we are happy and turn to you in our sorrows.
Lord, may we be glad that you help us in our work and know that you are with us in our need.
Lord, may we pray to you in the community of the Church and be your witnesses in the world.
Lord, may we reach old age in the company of our family and friends and come at last to the
kingdom of heaven.
Amen.

Light Candle

Let this light symbolize our hope in tomorrow and in our eternal life together.

Driver's License Ritual

Personal accomplishments are important for our growth and the acceptance of ourselves as a worthwhile person. When your daughter or son receives a driver's license for the first time, celebrate this proud moment with them. Affirm them in this accomplishment and offer a blessing for their safe driving. You might want to design a certificate of merit and award the certificate in a ceremony, or buy or make a key chain and have a car key made for the chain, or make the favorite dessert of the person being recognized.

Prayer

Lord, keep our (name) safe. Give this new driver protection, good judgment, and guidance through all the roads of life. Watch over (name) on all drives through spring, summer, winter and fall...in good weather and bad. Bless her/him. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Congratulations! and Welcome to the Road!

A Family Graduation Celebration

Graduation from high school is the culmination of so much that is intensely personal, an excellent family tradition is the *personal diploma*. The personal diploma complements the institutional diploma. In contrast to the somber black lettering on white parchment, the family diploma is elaborately decorated with a colorful and intricate border interspersed with symbols of the child's involvement in family, school and community activities. Family members can write the diploma text themselves and design the artwork for the diploma.

The diploma is "conferred" in a special family celebration that incorporates Scripture, prayer and story telling. A reading from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 reminds us there is a time for everything – and that God is with us in all seasons, including times of family change.

The prayers used during the service express the family's thanks and hopes for the graduate. Use the following prayer or create one of your own:

Prayer for the Graduate

(Name) you are a unique creation, a person blessed by God with life,
a person called, in love, to grow and to share your gifts with others.

We come together today to celebrate your accomplishments, to reflect on who you are for us,
and to share our dreams for your future.

May your graduation day be filled with happiness and joy. We rejoice in who you are for us as a
family, calling to mind especially your gifts of _____ and _____.

*(Family members can be invited to share comments and stories here that speak of the uniqueness and
giftedness of the graduate)*

May God continue to bless you and challenge you.

May you always be surrounded by people who support and love you.

May you grow more fully into the man/woman that God wants you to be, and that the world
so desperately needs.

We ask this today, in hope and expectation that God will continue the great things already
begun in you. Amen.

The family graduation ceremony closes with shared hugs and a special meal

Young Adult Leaving-Home Ritual

One of the most critical changes in any family occurs when a child leaves home. During those times, parent and child are both challenged to develop an adult-to-adult relationship with one another. The parents need to learn how to give their children “permission” to leave and the child needs to learn how to leave. Creating a leaving-home ritual can ease this rite of passage for everyone.

Parents could prepare gifts for the young adult to take to his/her new home. These gifts are not to be bought in a store, but rather are to be something that belongs to them that they believe would help their child adjust to the new situation. The young adult is asked to prepare gifts for his/her family members that belong to him or her but believe that they should remain in the family. Allowing a two-week preparation period to gather these gifts in secret, the gift-giving and receiving ritual is ready to take place. Everyone gathers and family members speak volumes to one another through their gifts.

As an alternative, you might choose to use an album as the central gift, detailing the young person’s life and leaving a section blank to be filled in with future life experiences. Or, you may write special leaving-home documents to mark this passage. You could design a “certificate of leaving home” for your young adult, declaring him or her to be “ready for life in the outside world.”

A Leaving Home Ritual and Blessing

Family Preparation

During the two weeks prior to the young adult's departure, parents and other family members prepare gifts for his or her new home or campus. Do not purchase gifts, but find special items that belong to them that they feel will help the family member adjust to the new situation. Meanwhile, the young adult gathers gifts for family members – things that are his or hers that will remain in the family home. Family members gather their respective gifts in secret.

Ritual and Blessing

Family members bring their gifts to a family gathering at the family table or in the family room, lay their gifts on a table. Place the family Bible on the table, opened to Genesis 12:1-9.

Leader

Our family gathers here today where we always gather – in this place where we share, celebrate, reconcile and grow together. Today we celebrate (name of person), and (his or her) growth in wisdom and grace as (he or she) prepares to move out of this home and into his or her own. Listen now to how the Lord sent Abraham to a new home.

Reading

Genesis 12:1-9

Leader

(Name) has brought many gifts to our life as family, the kind of gifts that (Name) will take from our home to (Place) because these gifts are part of who (Name) is. What are some of these gifts?

Leader asks other family members to name gifts, e.g., laughter, perseverance, wit, creativity, gentleness.

Bless these gifts of (Name). May others you meet experience them as part of the glory of God.

Sharing of the Gifts

Family members share with the person leaving the gifts they have gathered for him or her to take to the new home. This sharing may include why they chose the gifts. Then, the one leaving home, shares the gifts he or she chose to leave with the family and why.

Blessing

Wondrous God, Loving God,
You have blessed us with so many good times
You have seen us through the difficult times.
For all of our days together in this home we give you thanks.
Amen.

A Ritual to Celebrate When a Young Adult Leaves Home to Marry

When a young adult leaves home to start a family of his or her own, a family needs to celebrate this milestone event. Like many life-cycle passages, a child leaving home is an event that carries deeply mixed feelings, including a sense of joy and accomplishment, fear regarding what lies ahead, sadness over the loss of relationships in their present form, and curious anticipation over what life will look like next. What a paradox!

Begin asking yourselves how you intend to mark this transition? What are the necessary symbols and symbolic actions? Who are the people you would like to gather to witness this life-cycle transition? What would you put into a document or a certificate to mark this change?

The following ritual requires preparation. Here is the information you need to have to prepare for the celebration.

- Chose a Scripture Readings. A sibling and/or parents do the reading.
Reading 1: Ephesians 3:14-21 or Colossians 3:12-17
Reading 2: John 17:20-23 or Matthew 5:13-16
- Prepare a homily. Parents, and if they wish, siblings, write the homily. Homily Suggestions:
 - Qualities of child being married
 - Ways this child has impacted the family
 - Forgiveness for hurts committed and for omissions
 - Ask for forgiveness of times parents hurt child
 - Welcome of fiancé(e)
 - Mention this as a time of transition and change. Support and love will follow them as they form their own family.
- Select leaders for the various prayers and intercessions.

Celebration When a Child Marries

Opening Prayer

Loving God, you understand the hearts of all your children. Look with love upon us as we come before you, not without concern, but with great joy, for (name) is about to leave our home. As a gift to us, he/she came into our family; as a gift to all he/she shall meet, we send him/her in your care to your greater family, to all your children in our world. We thank you, the Giver, for the hours we have shared together, and for the times of still warmer joy, yet unknown, but sure to come. But this, Gracious One, is the time of action, the day of light for his/her forthcoming marriage. Together, then, we pray now for your child, our son/ daughter (name).

Scripture Readings

Homily

Intercessions

For all parents and children, that they may share in the love of God through their love of each other, we pray...

For all families suffering hurt and rejection, that they may seek forgiveness and once again be connected, we pray...

For the hungry, the homeless, the sick in heart as well as body, that they may find shelter and warmth, we pray...

For [child and fiancé(e)], that they may grow in wisdom and understanding and experience the friendship of each other and Jesus, we pray...

For [fiancé(e)'s family], that the love they share may reflect the love of God, we pray...

Blessing

Father: Lord our God, be with us now as we pray. Look with favor upon this our son/ daughter (name), for whom his/her wedding day will be most special. We, his/her parents, together with all his family, surround him/her with our love and prayer as he/she prepares to marry (name).

Mother: My son/ daughter and child of my womb, your wedding day indeed will be most special to you, one that you will long remember. We, your family, are grateful that we are able to support you with our prayers and love.

Father: Blessed are you, Lord our God, who has graced our son/ daughter with life and health so that he/she might reach this day. You have blessed him/her abundantly over the years and have carefully prepared him/her for this important step in his/her life.

All: Lord our God, bring together and unite all our prayers, our hopes and love into a single blessing for (child) and [fiancé(e)]. May the love they share today be just a shadow of the love they will share in the days to come.

Wedding Blessing

Father or Mother: (Name) and (name), we pray...

That you will treat adversity as a common enemy and will not try to bear it alone and silently;

That you will not strive to be the strongest but to be strong together;

That you will recognize each other's strengths and nourish them;

That you will know each other's weaknesses and never use them;

That your vows will not bind you but bond you;

That you will love and care for your children;
That in the end, you will have known more joy and happiness than you have known pain and sorrow. May your path be smooth and straight.

Mother: As you give this blessing, place your hands on the couple.

(Name of child), may the Lord who gave you into our care and made you a joy to our home, bless and keep you.

[Fiancé(e)'s name], may the Lord, who turns the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, smile on you and be kind to you.

Father: As you give this blessing, place your hands on the couple.

(Name) and (name), may the Lord, who delights in our love for one another, turn toward you and give you peace.

May the God of Love and peace abide in you, guide your steps, and confirm your heart in his love, now and forever. Amen.

Celebrating Retirement: A Family Ritual

Most retirement ceremonies point to the accomplishments of the honoree and look forward to the positive side of retirement. Somewhere -- in the family and/or in the religious community -- there need to be rites that anticipate the joys *and* the sorrows of the next phase of life. Rites are needed that celebrate the new relationship with the rest of the family and community and call attention to family and community responsibilities in this new relationship.

As is the case in all passages, more than the individual is involved. Retirement is not only a passage for the individual but for the surrounding family and community as well. The following celebration offers an opportunity for family and friends to join with the retiree in looking back to the accomplishments of the past and forward to the new opportunities provided by retirement.

Preparation

Prior to the ceremony, invite family and friends of the retiree to gather photos and recall stories (both serious and humorous) that speak of the role he or she has played in the life of his or her family, friends and local community.

Order of Worship

Leader

Dear Friends, we gather today (tonight) to recognize (name) and celebrate an important time of passage in his/her life -- a time of passage through retirement to redirection. As we begin our celebration, let us call to mind God's special presence to us in times of celebration:

Dear God, you are mother and father to all; you defend, nurture, and support us as we seek to serve you. You strengthen us in moments of pain and celebrate with us in times of joy. We thank you in a special way today (tonight) for (name). We recognize the many ways he/she has served you and others in his/her business, professional and family lives. We celebrate (name)'s retirement, confident that it will be for him/her a time of continued growth, service and renewal in faith. Be with us, loving God, in our celebration.

Scripture Reading

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (God is with us in all the seasons of our life)
2Corinthians 9:10-15 (your service brings glory to God)

Invitation to Sharing

Leader

We come together to recognize (Name) -- to toast, roast and boast of what (Name) has been, and continues to be for us. This is a time for sharing stories, both serious and hilarious. I invite you now to share who (Name) is for you and what you have learned about the values that make him/her who he/she is.

Litany of Blessing

Ask all gathered to extend their hands in blessing toward (Name) as the following petitions are read by family and friends. Invite them to respond with a resounding Amen! to each prayer of blessing.

(Name), we thank you for the many ways that you have touched our lives in the past. May your supportive presence be with us for many years to come. **Amen!**

We thank God for the gift you have been to your family. May you continue to share your faith and love with us, reminding us about of who we are as a family and as children of God. **Amen!**

We celebrate together your many accomplishments and contributions to our community. May we continue to be enriched by your experience and knowledge. **Amen!**

We thank God for the direction your life has taken. May God bless you with new directions, new insights, and new opportunities for sharing your gifts with others. **Amen!**

Finally we pledge to you our continued love and support as you enter this time of change and transition. May your troubles be small and your circle of friends large. May you continue to grow in your friendship with God and share God's love with all you meet. **Amen!**

Celebrating Life Home Activities: Through the Year Rituals

New Year Family Blessing

New Year's gatherings are a time for new hopes, promises, and successes: a new beginning to share with family and friends. Gather your family and friends around the table or at the Christmas tree/manger scene and pray for peace. (The calendar of the new year may be held during the blessing.)

Leader

Let us praise the Lord of days and seasons and years, saying:
Glory to God in the highest!

All **And peace to God's people on earth!**

Leader

Our lives are made of days and nights, of seasons and years, for we are part of a universe of suns and moons and planets. We mark ends and we make beginnings and, in all, we praise God for the grace and mercy that fill our days.

Scripture **Genesis 1:14-19**

After a time of silence, family members offer prayers of thanksgiving for the past year, and of intercession for the year to come.

Leader

Let us now pray for God's blessing in the new year.
After a short silence, parents may place their hands on their children in blessing as the leader says:

*Remember us, O God; from age to age be our comforter. You have given us the wonder of time, blessings in days and nights, seasons and years. Bless our children at the turning of the year and fill the months ahead with the bright hope that is ours in the coming of Christ. You are our God, for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Epiphany

The word Epiphany means manifestation or the seeing of Jesus by the three wise men who brought gifts to Jesus in the form of gold (riches), frankincense (incense), and myrrh (sweet-smelling oil).

What gifts can you bring Jesus? The three wise men were guided to Jesus. Afterward they went out to tell the world all that they had seen. As a Christian family, how are you spreading the news of Jesus?

Epiphany Party

An Epiphany Party provides a fun way to celebrate gift giving on epiphany without promoting materialism. An Epiphany Party promotes community sharing and recycling within the context of a fun game. Invite other families to join your family at a particular time. Ask everyone to bring something they no longer want or use that they think someone else might enjoy. Remind them to gift wrap the item.

During the Epiphany Party, place the gifts in the middle of the floor. Invite everyone to form a circle around the gifts. The first person chooses a gift from the center and opens it. The next person may choose any gift from the center or the item already opened. This continues until everyone has had at least three turns (items are often swapped between different people with the person who most wants an item usually ending up with it and everyone ending up with something they like), with the exception that any given item may not be taken away from a person more than twice.

Taking Down the Tree

Make some fun out of this by having a progressive party. Go from one house to the next, un-decorating the tree at each home. Families may agree to have homemade or bought appetizers to offer to their guests. Begin the ritual by gathering around the Christmas tree and thanking God for this tree and all creation.

Rituals to Celebrate Epiphany

One custom for Epiphany in England is to bake a cake into which several symbolic items have been placed. The children may wish to help in the selection of the items. Some suggestions may include a penny (the finder will become rich), a thimble (the finder must work harder), a ring (the finder will be married).

Make a “crown cake” (bundt cake topped with frosting and gum-drop jewels). This will help the family to see that the gifts brought by the Magi (who were astrologers of sorts) were recognizing Christ’s kingship.

An evening re-enactment of the story of the Magi can also be a most enjoyable experience, since children love to dramatize things. To begin the enactment, someone can read the scripture account of Jesus’ manifestation (Matthew 2:1-12). Then have family members assume the roles of Herod, the Magi (it is not necessary to have exactly three, since there probably were not three; they may have been two, six or any number of them). They meet and talk to Herod and finally reach Bethlehem where Mom, Dad and the baby of the family, or a doll, are playing the roles of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. The gifts presented might be resolutions written on paper in boxes beautifully wrapped as gifts. When the dramatization is over, share the Epiphany cake or the Crown cake together

Dia de los Tres Reyes

January sixth, the feast of the Epiphany, is a day many nations use to give gifts. For example, in Latin America, Dia de los Tres Reyes, Three Kings Day, is the time when the Magi are said to return and to give presents to children, as they once did to El Nino Jesus.

Just to be sure that they do not escape notice, many children prepare for this night by writing letters to the Magi, listing their good deeds and suggesting gifts that they hope to receive. When children awaken on the morning of the sixth, they find the straw left the night before by their beds gone and gifts delivered in its place. This, they know, is the work of the Magi and their hungry camels.

Valentine's Day

Joy Jar

Write the name of family members and extended members on small pieces of paper. Put the names in a large jar. Have each person choose a name from the jar. Make a homemade gift for the person whose name you drew from the jar. Exchange gifts on Valentine Day.

Tree of Love

Find a branch outside and put it in a jar, with an inch or so of marbles to stabilize it. Hang hearts from the branch with the name of people and things you love. Mix and match--go right ahead and hang a heart with "Grandma" right next to "strawberry jelly." You might want to start this a week early, and leave paper, pens, scissors, and ribbon out. Your "tree of love" will come into full bloom as family members slowly but surely fill the branches.

14 Reasons Why I Love You

Think of one reason for every day of February leading up to The Day. These can range from the silly to the sublime, for example: "The way you smile at me." "The way you affirm others." "You go to the football games and you don't understand what is going on."

Love Gift Messages

Write notes of "love" to each member of your family. Tell them specifically why you love and appreciate them. Place the notes in their lunch bag, notebook, or briefcase, along with a special valentine treat.

Mardi Gras—Preparing for Lent

On Mardi Gras, preferably in the evening, gather as a family around a place designated for the Lenten prayer space. Together create the prayer space using symbols such as the Bible, cross, purple cloth, candle.

Talking about Lent

Spend some time together talking about Lent. Have family members complete the sentence: *Lent is...* Then share the list below and talk about Lent.

Lent is a season for...

- making time and space to remember what it means to be Christian, by remembering the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in a special way.
- remembering the life and message of Jesus – recommitting to living as followers of Jesus in today’s world.
- giving up the negative in our lives to make room for more positive.
- being open to change of heart and habit – to deepening our relationship with Jesus and with each other.
- taking time out from the usual daily routine to focus on what is most important in our lives.
- acknowledging the parts of our lives that need forgiveness and changing, and working to make them right again.
- clearing out some space in our lives so God can enter and fill it; and taking time to discover where God has always been.

Sharing Stories of Lent

Share stories of Lenten practices in your family.

- What have you done in the past?
- What are the family’s ideas for this Lent?

Our Lenten commitments are not only about sacrifice, but also a way for us to “clear out” some space in our lives that will help us remember what life is really about. It is a season when we focus on “self-discipline” to become better “disciples” in following Jesus. And a time to ask God’s forgiveness for the times we have forgotten or failed to live as Christians.

Making Family Lenten Commitments

Materials needed for this activity:

pieces of paper and pens for each family member, yarn or ribbon

Your family will make a list of the kinds of things the members of the family could “practice” during Lent that would help them become a better Christian. These might be things one would “give up” in order to make time and space to follow Jesus’ example – like giving up a TV show to read the Bible or spend time playing with a younger sibling – or giving up a movie or candy bar in order to donate the money to the rice bowl collection. Or they might be things a person could begin or continue “to do” – such as helping with extra chores without complaining, spending time with an elderly neighbor, welcoming a new student at school, or being more understanding when parents get stressed.

Let a family member record the family group ideas on a sheet of paper. Roll this sheet of paper up as a scroll. Tie with ribbon or yarn.

Making Personal Commitments

Materials needed for this activity:

pieces of paper and pens for each family member, crayons for the children, yarn or ribbon

There are four major areas in our lives that we could choose to focus on during this Lenten season. The areas are: home, school, church and the surrounding community. We are called to be Christian people in all these places by sharing our gifts and being Jesus to others. Ask family members to identify for themselves which of these four areas they want to focus on during this Lenten season. Then ask them to identify what it is they hope to do during Lent to follow Jesus' example better. It may be something that was listed earlier, or something different. Parents will need to guide younger children through thinking about simple, concrete things the children can do in each of the areas identified.

Next, family members write down or draw symbols related to what they are going to focus on during Lent. If they are written statements, they can begin with *During Lent I will...* Younger children can draw simple pictures. Then have family members roll these sheets of paper up as scrolls. Tie with ribbon or yarn.

Family Prayer

Gather the group near the prayer table. Light the candle on the table.

Leader

God, you created us out of love. And you sent your son Jesus who lived, suffered and died for us out of that same love. Our family prepares to begin our Lenten journey. We come to you offering our hopes, our failures and our intentions – knowing that through your love and the example of Jesus we can continue to grow as a family of faith who bring your love to those around us.

Reading

God sent his son to be the savior of the world. We saw his son and are now telling others about him.

We know what love is because Jesus gave his life for us. This is why we must give our lives for each other. If we have all we need and see one of our own people in need, we must have pity on that person, or else we cannot say we love God. Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it. God wants us to have faith in Jesus Christ and to love each other. This is also what Jesus taught us to do. (1 John 4:14, 3:16-18, 23)

Response

Family members quietly put their scrolls with their Lenten commitments in the basket on the prayer space. Be sure the family commitments are also placed in the basket.

Lenten Petitions

Pass the petitions around, allowing those who can read to participate. Continue passing the petitions until they have all been read.

Leader: Jesus, we want to follow your example, but sometimes it's not easy. You said you will always be with us, so we ask you now to be with us during this Lenten season and help us to grow in faith and action as Christians.

Response to the prayer petitions: Help us, Lord.

Reader 1. For the times we make fun of others because they seem different than us – please help us to be accepting of all people. We pray...

Reader 2. For the times we are selfish with our time and possessions – please help us to willingly share what we have with others. We pray...

Reader 3. For the times we argue in our family – please help us to appreciate our parents, brothers and sisters in a loving manner. We pray...

Reader 4. For the times when we forget about you Lord, and think we don't need you – please help us to take time to pray and listen for your guidance. We pray...

Reader 5. For the times we give in to what is wrong because we're afraid to say no – please give us the courage to stand up for what we know is right. We pray...

Reader 6. For the times we are hurt by others, our friends and family – please give us the grace to forgive as you do. We pray...

Reader 7. For the times we fail, and feel too tired to go on – please give us the strength to try again. We pray...

Leader: Jesus, You are our model of love. Help us to share your love in our lives through our families, friends and even the strangers we meet. May our lives be a sign of your love in our world today. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our savior and our friend. Amen.

Sign of Peace

Invite family members to offer each other a sign of peace and support for the Lenten journey they are beginning.

Lenten Scripture Reflections

Week 1	First Letter of John 3:11-18
Week 2	Matthew 25:34-35, 40
Week 3	Luke 6:36-37
Week 4	Matthew 22:36-39
Week 5	John 11:20-27
Week 6	John 13:4-5, 15

Family Mardi Gras Celebration

Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday.” This traditional celebration started as a response to the fasting that Christians do during Lent. As a last fling, therefore, Christians in France, and later in the region around New Orleans, ate freely and partied heartily before beginning their Lenten sacrifices. Today, this custom is celebrated by people in many parts of the world. The three traditional colors of Mardi Gras are green, gold, and purple. Green stands for faith, gold stands for power, and purple stands for justice.

During the week before Ash Wednesday remind the family that we are about to start the important penitential season of Lent. As we start to think of things we might want to do or give up during Lent, however, we might also want to celebrate Mardi Gras. Decide what would be a fun splurge for the family to do together on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, i.e. roller skating, ice skating, a party at home, unlimited TV, etc.

Materials

Party paraphernalia, especially using the Mardi Gras colors of gold, green and purple.

Activity

Introduce the session by simply explaining the custom of Mardi Gras. Include an explanation of the Mardi Gras colors, green, gold and purple. The Our Father prayer contains reference to the elements of faith, power, and justice that these colors represent. Say the prayer slowly together and try to identify as you go along phrases that connect with each quality.

Carry out your family treat. Music, balloons, streamers, etc. all add to the festivity. Young children especially enjoy the parade aspects of Mardi Gras. Perhaps resurrect some Halloween costumes, dress up, and parade around the house singing “When the Saints Go Marching In” Add rhythm instruments like cymbals and shakers to make it really raucous. (Our own family often has a grand Bingo game with the winners getting strands of Mardi Gras necklaces or pretend coins. This is usually followed by a decadent desert.)

Ash Wednesday Celebration

Purpose

To identify actions that each family member can take to enter into the sacrificial spirit of Lent.

Materials

Candle, clay or play-doh, and a Bible

Introduction

Create a prayerful atmosphere. Many families sit around a table and light a candle to remind them of God's presence and sing an opening song, or the leader may offer a simple opening prayer.

Reading: Isaiah 58:6-11

If possible, have someone other than the leader do the reading. If the reader is a child, or if participants include young children, you may want to rephrase some of the reading to make it more understandable.

Reflection

Ask the family to take some quiet time to think of two special things each person wants to do during Lent to make themselves a better person and to help them come closer to God. Perhaps one commitment could be something to give up (desserts, TV, video games, an entertainment, etc.) and the other commitment could be something positive to make the world a better place (do a regular favor for a family member, pick up litter daily around the school, donate money to an organization that feeds the hungry, clothes or shelters those in need, do extra praying or spiritual reading, etc.)

Note to Parent: It's often helpful during this quiet time to darken the room and ask participants to raise their hand when they have decided their two commitments. This way, after a reasonable time, if a young child is having a difficulty thinking of something, a parent could quietly advise the child.

Activity

When everyone is ready, the leader explains that commitments are often easy to make but difficult to keep. Bring out the clay. To help us remember our commitments, we're going to form this clay into symbols of our two commitments. Let each person take some clay and gradually form it into symbols of his or her commitments. (For example, if someone is going to give up TV, he or she might mold a TV shape; if someone else plans to say a daily compliment to another family member he or she might make a heart to remind them of the love they are trying to build.)

Discussion

During the molding time encourage informal discussion such as:

- Which is easier for you -- "giving something up" or "doing something positive?" "Giving up" is not just a method of dieting or gaining time but rather a concrete reminder to us of all the people in the world who do not have the material goods, food, homes, peace, etc. that we enjoy. When we feel the urge to break our commitment, it can be a reminder to pray for or act to help these people.

- Can we connect a giving up action with a positive action? For example, giving up desserts could be linked with donating the money saved to a hunger fund. Giving up TV could result in using the time saved to play a family game or read to a child.
- Does our family wish to do a common sacrifice or action during Lent? Perhaps a letter to a prisoner, a visit to a nursing home, attending a religious service together, or making a joint contribution to a charity would be possible.

The leader might also comment about how it feels to be able to shape the clay into a new form. Our actions during Lent are ways that we are shaping ourselves into fuller human beings.

As family members finish their molding ask each person to explain what he or she sculpted and how it connects with their Lenten commitments.

Closing

The leader can offer a spontaneous prayer asking God to help us keep our commitments.

Close by asking each person to find a special place (perhaps a dresser in his or her room) to put their symbol so that it can be seen daily

Lenten Home Cross

Many families have a cross or crucifix which hangs on a wall in their home. On Ash Wednesday, the family can gather to bless this special Home Cross. Place the Home Cross on the table and pray:

We bless this cross again this Ash Wednesday to remind ourselves that we, as family members, are called to learn more about Jesus, to grow in our love for each other, and to help people who are in need. Let our kissing of this cross give us the courage to keep learning, growing in love and helping others during this special season of Lent.

On Good Friday the cross can be placed in a position of prominence in the home as a visual reminder of Jesus' great love for the people of our world.

Lent Table Prayers

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week One

Ash Wednesday	It isn't too late, we can still return to the Lord with all our heart. (see Joel 2:12)
Thursday	If I want to follow you, Lord, I must forget myself and put others first. (see Luke 9:23)
Friday	"Create pure thoughts in me and make me faithful again." (Psalm 51:10)
Saturday	Lord, I hear you say, "Come with me." (see Luke 5:27)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week Two

First Sunday of Lent	We cannot live only on food. We need every word that God has spoken. (see Matthew 4:4)
Monday	You are the Lord, our God. You are holy, and we must be holy too! (see Leviticus 19:2)
Tuesday	Our Father, in heaven, help us to honor your name. (see Matthew 6:9)
Wednesday	"Wash me clean from all of my sin and guilt." (Psalm 51:2)
Thursday	Lord, help me to treat others as I want them to treat me. (see Matthew 7:12)
Friday	"With all my heart, I am waiting, Lord, for you! I trust your promises!" (Psalm 129:5)
Saturday	Help me, Lord, to love my enemies and to pray for those who mistreat me. (see Matthew 5:44)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week Three

Second Sunday of Lent	"Lord, it is good for us to be here!" (Matthew 17:4)
Monday	"Our God, you keep us safe. Now help us! Rescue us." (Psalm 79:9)
Tuesday	O Lord, help me be the servant of others. (see Matthew 23:11)
Wednesday	"You are faithful, and I trust you because you rescued me." (Psalm 31:5)
Thursday	Lord, you bless those who trust in you. (see Jeremiah 17:7)
Friday	I trust you, O Lord, and I remember your miracles and wonders in my life! (see Psalm 105:5)
Saturday	"With all my heart I praise the Lord, and with all that I am I praise his holy name!" (Psalm 103:1)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week Four

Third Sunday of Lent	O Lord, we have heard you ourselves, and we are certain that you are the Savior of the world! (see John 4:42)
Monday	"In my heart, I am thirsty for you the living God. When will I see your face?" (Psalm 42:2)
Tuesday	"Show me your paths and teach me to follow; guide me by your truth and instruct me." (Psalm 25:4)
Wednesday	Help me, oh Lord, to follow your commands, to teach them to my children and to my children's children. (see Deuteronomy 4:9)

Thursday	We worship the Lord with thankful hearts and songs of praise. (see Psalm 95:2)
Friday	Lord, that I may love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. (see Mark 12:30)
Saturday	Lord, our prayer is that we may do our best to know you today. (see Hosea 6:3)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week Five

Fourth Sunday of Lent	“You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.” (Psalm 23:1)
Monday	“I prayed to you, Lord God, and you healed me, saving me from death and the grave.” (Psalm 29:2)
Tuesday	“The Lord all-powerful is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.” (Psalm 46:11)
Wednesday	Lord, you will never forget me. (see Isaiah 49:15)
Thursday	“Remember me, Lord, when you show kindness by saving your people!” (Psalm 106:4)
Friday	Lord, you are there to rescue all who are discouraged and have given up hope. (see Psalm 34:18)
Saturday	“You, God, are my shield, the protector of everyone whose heart is right.” (Psalm 7:10)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Week Six

Fifth Sunday of Lent	Lord, you are the resurrection and the life. (see John 11:25)
Monday	“Lord, your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life.” (Psalm 23:6)
Tuesday	Lord, help me to have faith in you for who you are. (see John 8:24)
Wednesday	Lord, I pray to know the truth, the truth that will set me free. (see John 8:31)
Thursday	“The Lord is our God, bringing justice everywhere on earth.” (Psalm 105:7)
Friday	“I sing praises to you Lord. You rescue the oppressed from the wicked.” (Jeremiah 20:13)
Saturday	You, O Lord, are our God. We are your people. (see Ezekiel 37:27)

Daily Prayers for Lent—Holy Week

Palm Sunday	Hosanna! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (see Mark 11:9-10)
Monday	You, Lord, have called me for the victory of justice. You have grasped me by the hand. (see Isaiah 42:5)
Tuesday	The Lord chose me and gave me a name before I was born. (see Isaiah 49:1)
Wednesday	“I didn’t turn aside when they insulted me and spit in my face.” (Isaiah 50:6)
Holy Thursday	Lord, help me to understand what you have done for me. (see John 13:1-15)
Good Friday	Father, I put my life in your hands. (see Psalm 31)
Holy Saturday	And God saw that it was good. (see Genesis 1)
Easter Sunday	I rejoice in this day that the Lord has made! (see Psalm 118)

Lenten Reflections

John 2:13-25: Jesus knows what is in our hearts.

In Jerusalem during Passover many people put their faith in Jesus, because they saw him work miracles. But Jesus knew what was in their hearts, and he would not let them have power over him.

Do you know anybody who can look right through you, into your heart? Parents sometimes seem to have this uncanny ability: they can read the honesty (or lack of) on a child's face or see through the put-on cheerfulness to the hurt within. Husbands and wives, or best friends have this ability too. Jesus knows us even better than parents, husbands, wives or friends. He knows us inside and out. He knows what is in our hearts.

- Jesus knows what is in our hearts. How do we feel about that today? Is there anything we need to do to set our hearts right with Jesus?
- Each family member can create a simple prayer symbol—a heart with the words “Jesus, you know what is in my heart.” Individuals place their hearts where they will see them regularly.
- Using the prayer symbols created above, pause during the day to say, “Jesus, you know what is in my heart.”

Luke 13:1-9: Turning back to God.

We can really make a mess of things sometimes, can't we? Hurt happens. Feelings of love and harmony and all those good things can be in short supply. Jesus has a solution for us sinners. “Turn back to God.” We need to become more God-focused. This might require forgiveness, being sorry, changing our behavior, willing to love when there is no feeling of love.

- See if your family can come up with Scripture stories of people who turned away from God but then turned back to God (the prodigal son). How about people you know or have heard about, who were walking away from God but then returned to God? Share a story.
- Ask for forgiveness from someone who you have turned away from.
- Forgiving God, we are grateful that there is always the opportunity to turn back to you, when we lose our way and drift apart from you, you wait for us to come back to your love. Give us the strength to let go of our pride when we sin, and to turn back to you. Amen.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2: Be reconciled through Christ.

What if... the solicitor on the phone or at the door offered you “peace and forgiveness, no strings attached.” We’d probably hesitate before hanging up or shutting the door – or we might think, “Yeah, right.” The fact is, Jesus is at the door, he’s on the phone, he’s offering us peace and forgiveness. Do we hang up, do we shut the door?

- Check the schedule at your parish to see when the Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated. Put it on your family calendar.
- Reach out in forgiveness and reconciliation to a family member.
- Take some quiet moments to examine the areas of your life where you need Jesus’ peace and forgiveness.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18: Lenten Practices

Show-offs can be really annoying, can’t they? And we think, “Oh, how foolish they are.” Of course it’s not possible that we flaunt our good deeds, is it? No, only other people do that. Well, apparently, the Jesus who knows us so well also knows that our tendency might be to show off – to make sure everyone knows how holy and righteous we are. He assures us that this is really a lousy use of our energy, that quiet devotion and sacrifice are more pleasing to God than showy demonstrations.

- Which Lenten practices is your family observing? How are you being faithful to these practices?
- Do a quiet act of kindness for another person today.
- Lord, may we be steadfast and faithful in our Lenten practice. (Family members name things they are doing for Lent.) Through the grace of your son, and the power of your Spirit, give us the energy and the perseverance to stick with our Lenten commitments. Amen.

Luke 9:22-25: Take Up Your Cross

How hard it is to forget about ourselves! Particularly in a culture which screams the opposite in so many ways. We being to feel entitled to what we want, to the detriment of others. Jesus preaches about losing ourselves, becoming as nothing. It takes this gutsy kind of living to carry the cross with him.

- What does Jesus mean when he says we have to forget about ourselves? What does he mean when he says we have to take up our crosses each day and follow him? What cross do we carry?
- A person in your family, at school, at work or in your community might be carrying a particularly heavy cross right now. Figure out a way you can help.
- Place a family cross in a prayer place in the center of your home. Every time you notice the cross today pray, “Jesus, be with me as I carry my cross and as I help others carry theirs. Amen.”

Isaiah 58:1-9: Fasting that Pleases God

In the Scripture reading, Isaiah is clear that the Lord has little time for acts of worship that are empty. Why fast for a day if you're only going to think about yourself? Why give alms if you're going to abuse your workers? If our worship is real, we can't help but be in the business of removing chains of oppression, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked.

- How well does our family worship the Lord?
- Re-read Isaiah 58:6-7. Choose a way to do one of the things which Isaiah suggests.
- Lord, teach us what it really means to worship you. Help this family's light shine like the dawning sun because of how we reach out to those in need. Amen.

Matthew 25:31-46: For the Least Among Us

Jesus tells us that he is in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned. The least loveable among us – that is where Jesus is. And he is rather clear – “feed me, clothe me, visit me. . . and the reign of God will be yours.”

- In our community, where are the hungry, the naked, the most forgotten? How can we reach out to them?
- Choose one simple way your family will reach out to a forgotten person today (i.e., pack a lunch and give it to the homeless person who stands at the intersection, purchase a children's game and drop it off at the nearest family shelter).
- Lord, today we lift up to you the lonely and most forgotten people in our community. Through our actions and our prayers may they experience your love and care. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18: Letting Go of Hatred

So much of how we are supposed to live is easier said than done, isn't it? We really want to hold onto that grudge sometimes. We really want to hang onto our anger and return hurt for hurt. Yet when we hold on to grudges, to anger, when our energy is focused on revenge, our hearts cannot be at peace in Jesus. He pulls us towards him. He says, “Let go.”

- What is a grudge? Why do we hold grudges? How does it feel?
- Choose to let go of a grudge today, to let go of anger, or to abandon a plan for revenge.
- Dear Jesus, we offer to you all of our struggles in trying to love each other well. Help us to let go of hurts and of anger, and to hold onto the peace and forgiveness you offer. Amen.

Matthew 6:7-15: Prayer

The Christian family is the first place of education in prayer. The home is where children learn to pray, where they learn to persevere in prayer. At home, prayer awakens the family to Christ's presence.

- What is our family's definition of prayer? Based on this definition, how good are we at being pray-ers?
- Choose a time to pray together as a family every day. Try to persevere with your prayer time in the home.
- Light a candle. Slowly pray the Our Father. Offer each other God's peace.

Matthew 7:7-12: Are We Guilty of Meager Expectations?

Do we have meager expectations of what Jesus can do in our lives? What if we truly believed and trusted in these verses of Scripture? Do we believe in a Lord who wants everything that is good for us? Do we believe in a Lord who waits for us to ask, who hopes that we will seek him, who stands at the door to open it if only we would knock?

- What have we asked the Lord for recently? How has Jesus answered our prayers? What doors can Jesus open for us today?
- Write a family prayer based on this formula:
Lord, we ask for (name what family members ask for),
Lord, we seek (name what family members seek),
Lord, open the door of (name a virtue such as love, peace, forgiveness) for us. Amen.
- Pray the prayer your family wrote.

Matthew 5:12: Treating Others Well

This advice: "Treat others as you want them to treat you" is so simple, so rationale, so right. Then why is it so hard? If only these words could be before us always – such as when we are yelling angry words, losing our patience, gossiping, posed in stony silence . . . all the times when we dish out what we ourselves hate to take.

- Talk about some ways the family can concentrate on "treating others as you want them to treat you."
- Determine a code word or phrase with which family members can gently and with kindness remind each other about the way we should treat each other. What changes do we notice around our home?
- In silence, recall the experiences of your day, particularly your actions and attitudes towards others. Ask Jesus' forgiveness for the time you did not treat others well today.

Matthew 5:20-26: Making Things Right with People in Your Life

Lent is a time of spiritual housecleaning. A part of this cleaning is setting things right with the people in our lives.

- Describe what it is like in your family when you are all getting along well with each other. Who do you need to make peace with in your family?
- Today, make peace with the person or persons in your family who you haven't been getting along with well lately.
- Lord, make me a channel of your peace. Where there is division and hatred, may I sow love, where there is injury, help me to forgive, where I cause pain, help me to be truly sorry. I look to you, merciful Jesus, for strength and compassion as I set things right with the people in my life. Amen.

Matthew 5:43-48: Love My Enemies?

Who are my enemies? The list, long or short, demands my attention. Love is what Jesus requires of me – love for those on that list. Love and prayer for those who mistreat me.

- Why does Jesus want us to love our enemies? What is difficult about what he asks us to do – that is, love our enemies and pray for those who mistreat us?
- Make a commitment to reach out to the one person who you haven't been getting along with well lately. Say a prayer for someone who has hurt you.
- Holy God, help us to re-build the bridges of peace and love between each other, even our enemies. May our home be a model of reconciliation, of compassion, of mercy. We ask this through Jesus, our model. Amen.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32: Celebrating Reconciliation

Notice the reaction of the father when the prodigal son returns. He orders party supplies immediately! Once the preparations have started, he waits with open arms to welcome his son to the celebration. How Jesus celebrates when we return to him!

- Share stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. Focus on the celebration. How has your family celebrated reconciliation lately?
- Forgiveness is something to celebrate! Participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation together. Mark the occasion with a special meal or time of family togetherness.
- Jesus, for your gift of forgiveness, I am always grateful. May this gift be a big part of my life. I celebrate in your arms. Amen.

John 4:5-42: Lord, Show Myself to Me

A lot of Samaritans in that town put their faith in Jesus because the woman had said, “This man told me everything I have ever done.” The story of the woman at the well is one of the most awesome teachings about faith and discipleship. Watch what Jesus does – he draws the woman out of herself, looks into her soul, and he shows the woman who she really is and who she can be. Once she tastes the living water Jesus offers, she can’t help but share her discovery with others.

- Talk about the symbol of water. How is water used in your home?
- Name what would happen if the water was turned off for a day, a week, a month. How is Jesus “living water?” Is this “living water” a part of your home? Is it turned on?
- Quench the “thirst” of someone you know. Choose an action that will bring Jesus to him or her.
- Pray for people and situations thirsting for the love of Jesus. After each prayer respond with: “Jesus, who gives us living water, hear our prayer.”

Mark 12:28-34: Love of God and Love of Neighbor

These two commandments are our framework for living. They are a criteria for the choices we make, an assessment tool for our actions and attitudes. They are the two habits of highly effective Christians.

- Using a sheet of paper divided into two columns, brainstorm two lists. Title one column: “Love God.” In this column name lots of ways to love God. Title the other column “Love Neighbor as Self.” In this column, name lots of ways to love our neighbor.
- Circle several ideas from each column. Turn these ideas into action this week.
- Lord, grant that today I may love you and my neighbor a little more fully than yesterday. Amen.

Luke 18:9-14: Humility

Humility isn’t about wallowing in our inadequacies and putting ourselves down. It is about knowing the truth about ourselves, knowing both the gifts with which the Lord has blessed us, and knowing that these gifts are not ours but God’s.

- Talk about what humility is. When was the last time you publicly recognized someone else for something he or she did well?
- How is Jesus a model of humility? Find a passage in the Gospels when he recognizes his father.
- Jesus always points us to God, his father. He put God first and died on the cross for us. Decide on a way to put Jesus first in your life this week.
- Jesus, give us a humble Spirit, to always acknowledge you as our Lord and our God. Amen.

John 9:1-41: The Light of Faith

A little spit and sand to make mud, and Jesus cures a man of his blindness. So now this man can see, physically see. But this Gospel is about a lot more than 20/20 vision. It is about faith, and Jesus as the light...it is about the spiritual ability to see Jesus for who he is – to see with the eyes of faith.

- Who wears glasses in your family? What is it like for those with poor eyesight when they don't have their glasses or contacts on? Can they see well? How and what does Jesus want us to see? What kind of blindness does he want to cure in us?
- Eyes of faith can see the need for Jesus in the world. Put on the eyes of faith. What do you see? What need can you take care of today, for Jesus?
- Spend five to ten minutes in reflection: Light a candle. Play quiet instrumental music. Repeat: "Jesus, you bring light where there is darkness."

John 11:1-45: Resurrection

Lazarus was dead, and through the power of Jesus he walked out of his own tomb. Imagine that. But Lazarus would die again someday. His resurrection wasn't forever...yet. In other words, he was resurrected back to life as we know it. What Jesus did with Lazarus was a preview of coming attractions – resurrection of the body to life everlasting, to life in eternity with God. Lazarus' resurrection was a sign that eternity with God would be an option.

- What is Jesus showing us by how he brought Lazarus back to life? What does Jesus promise us, if we choose him?
- Write a note to a family member or a friend who has experienced the death of a loved one recently. Share the message of eternal life through pictures and words.
- "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who come to me, even though they die, shall live."

John 8:12-20: Jesus Is the Light of the World

It's bad enough to be walking in the dark, literally. It's hard to get from one place to another without being able to see where we are going. The same principle applies to the spiritual journey. And Jesus lights up that journey for us. With him, we don't have to walk in the dark.

- Take turns blindfolding each other and challenging each other to get from one end of the room to the other. Talk about the images of darkness and light. How does the light of Jesus guide us everyday? What does his light make possible in our lives? How does his light make a difference?
- Take a moment to complete this one sentence for each member of your family, "You show me the light of Jesus by . . ."
- Light of Christ, shine! Enter all of the dark areas of my life. May your light lead me to God. Amen.

John 8:51-59: “I am.”

We use the verb “to be” all the time. “I am, you are, we will be” and so forth. Our “to be’s” are always followed by something else like “I am tired” or “you are lovely.” God’s “to be” requires nothing else, no descriptor – because God “is.” Try thinking about that...try praying about that.

- Ask each family member to describe himself or herself by filling in the blank: “I am...” Then ask family members to describe each other by filling in the blank: “You are...” Finally, together, fill in the blank for your family: “We are ...” How would God respond if we asked God to fill in the blank: “I am...” Do you think God would fill in the blank? Did God fill in the blank for Abraham?
- Look for an opportunity to share something about who God is with someone else. Tell someone about God’s all encompassing kind of love.
- Let God’s words, “I am,” be the focus of your prayer and reflection today.

John 13:21-33, 36-38: Betrayal

We have a problem with Judas. He turned Jesus in, after all! Our righteous indignation screams “How could he have done that? What was he thinking? What a loser!” So we judge Judas rather than consider our own failures to be faithful and trustworthy...because if we did examine our own motives and actions, we might seem too much like him.

- What does it mean to betray someone? How does this happen?
- What are some examples of betrayal in our lives, in our world?
- Do we ever betray Jesus? How?
- Set out to repair a relationship in your life which has been damaged by betrayal.
- Jesus, help me to be honest in my relationships, help me to be true to you. Amen.

John 12:20-33: Dying to Self

Seeds are hard. They feel hard. Especially seeds such as a grain of wheat. The grain must fall to the ground and enter the darkness of the soil in order for its hard shell to break, and for the seed to become more than just a seed. We can hardly see the grain of wheat, it is as nothing, that is until the wheat bursts forth.

- Buy a few grains of wheat at a health food store. Pass them around. Feel them. What do they feel like? Jesus compares us to a grain of wheat. What does he mean?
- Do something today that requires real sacrifice, that requires you to die to yourself.
- Place the grains of wheat at your family table today. Pray together:
Help us, Lord Jesus, to be as these grains of wheat which fall to the ground, die and burst forth with abundant life. May we allow you to break through our shells so that we will bear much fruit for you in this world. Amen.

Philippians 3:8-14: Our Resurrection from the Dead

Knowing Christ and following in his footsteps is a tall order. Suffering and death are a part of the package. But the return for our investment into a life focused on Jesus Christ is our own resurrection from the dead.

- Every time we do something which is Christ-like, we make a sort of deposit into the “eternal life bank.” What kind of deposits have we made lately?
- Suffer for Christ today. Hold your tongue when someone ridicules you. Stand up for what you believe in even if you are the only one.
- Shut your eyes and see Christ’s footsteps in front of you. What is your next step?

John 8:1-11: Accusations and Judgments

We are not unlike the people in this Gospel – we stand ready to hurl stones at others, accusing and judging them, many times without knowing the full story, and certainly most of the time without considering our own faults and failings. Once again, Jesus goes straight to the heart of the matter: “Go ahead, throw the first stone!”

- Talk about the Gospel passage. When are we like the people in the Gospel? When do we try to hurt people by pointing our fingers at all the things they do wrong?
- Ask someone you have hurt by judging or accusing them for their forgiveness. Share with another person your struggles to be faithful to the Gospel.
- Find a stone the size of your fist. Place it where you will see it today. Pray, “Lord, I am sorry for my sins.”

Matthew 18:21-35: Forgiving—Over and Over and Over Again

Another toughie. One-time forgiveness just isn’t going to do it. What this means is that if someone hurts me, not just once but over and over and over again, my only response (or at least the right response) is forgiveness – again and again and again and again. Whoa.

- Talk about the things that we do over and over and over again that hurt each other. Talk about what it takes for us to forgive each other over and over and over again. What keeps us from forgiving this much?
- Write 70 x 7 on a piece of paper. Post it on the refrigerator. Let it remind us to keep forgiving, over and over and over again.
- Pray the Our Father together. Pay particular attention to the words about forgiveness.

Luke 23:1-49: To Be with Jesus

Imagine being there and watching this scene – the exchange between the penitent thief and Jesus. What an awesome witness of one whose desire is to be with Jesus. Jesus responds to the thief’s desire: “Come – paradise is for you!” And isn’t that our destiny as well? Is it our desire?

- Take on the roles of the people at the foot of the cross. You hear the exchange between Jesus and the “good” thief hanging next to him. What are you and those around you talking about?
- Find someone to share with or write in a journal. Talk or write about your desire to be with Jesus. Decide on something you can do to be a person not only heading for Jesus, but leading others to him as well.
- Lord Jesus, give me the desire, everyday, to be with you. Amen.

John 13:1-15: The One Who Serves.

He knelt down on the floor, rolled up his sleeves and washed a lot of what must have been very dirty feet. The apostles didn’t wear sneakers, or loafers ...Hollywood portrays them in sandals. Their feet could not have been very clean – enough to convince me that Jesus’ action was one of service.

- Do you think the apostles understood what Jesus did for them when he washed their feet? How do we follow Jesus’ example to serve one another?
- Decide on an ongoing family service project and participate in it together.
- Lord, when you washed your apostles feet, you were showing us what we should do – place ourselves in service to each other. Help us find ways to reach out to those who can benefit from the gifts of service this family has to offer others. Amen.

John 18:1-19:42: The Passion

One of the soldiers stuck his spear into Jesus’ side, and blood and water came out. We know this is true because it was told by someone who saw it happen. Now you can have faith too.

We watch, we listen, we touch, we feel. Are we bit players, “extras” in this high drama, or are we the main characters? Do we see ourselves among the mobs in Jerusalem...in the Garden of Gethsemene... in the temple precincts...in the Roman procurator’s palace...on the road to Calvary...at the foot of the cross. Do we see ourselves in Jesus’ eyes as he dies for us?

- Read the Passion of Jesus together as a family. With which part or person can you relate today?
- Identify the places in your community and in the world where suffering and death is a common scene. How can your family help?
- Dear Jesus, by your most holy cross, you have redeemed the world. Amen.

Easter

Easter Eggs

Jesus, who is the source of new life for Christians, burst forth from the seemingly lifeless tomb on Easter morning. As a way of proclaiming their belief in Jesus' resurrection, Christians began the practice of giving one another eggs on Easter Sunday.

To convey the joy and beauty of Easter, they carefully painted and decorated the eggs they shared. In fact, in some ethnic cultures decorating eggs has become a prized art form, passed on from generation to generation. Decorating eggs on Holy Saturday is a wonderful Easter tradition in which even young children can take part.

Before the egg-decorating process begins:

- Read the Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection from your family bible or a children's Bible.
- Explain the beliefs that underlie the practice of egg decorating: Jesus rose from the dead; Jesus is new life for us and for our world.
- Note that the bright colors and designs on the egg show our joy in Jesus' resurrection.

After the eggs have been decorated, bless them for use by your family and friends:

- Place the eggs in a decorative basket or bowl.
- Put them on the table with a lighted candle and a Bible opened to the account of Jesus' resurrection.
- All extend their hands over the eggs as one member of the household prays the blessing:
We praise you, O God, for these signs of life, our Easter eggs. We thank you for the bright, bursting forth of Christ our Lord. Amen. Alleluia!

Family Easter Water

In the liturgy of Holy Saturday night, the presider solemnly blesses the Easter water, which will be used during the service for baptisms. Families can take home a small container of this holy water to be used during the Easter season and the year for family blessings on persons, house and rooms, and on Easter symbols such as eggs, pastry, baskets, meals. Each sprinkling signifies that all of our life is being baptized or being made holy by the presence of Christ to us. During the year, parents can sign their children with a blessing using the holy water before tucking them into bed.

Family Paschal Candle

Burn a large white candle in your home at Eastertime, just as the Easter candle lights the sanctuary at church during Eastertime. Decorate it with the traditional symbols that are on the Paschal Candle, or any Christian or springtime symbols the family would like to have on their candle. The Paschal Candle is inscribed with an alpha (the first letter of the Greek alphabet) and an omega (the last letter) with a cross in between. The four quarters of the cross are identified with the numerals of the current year.

Put your candle in a prominent place and you will have your very own Paschal Candle to remind you that Christ is our light.

Blessing

After the candle is decorated and put in place, the following blessing can be prayed while all family members extend their hands over the candle:

Loving God, we ask your blessing on this symbol of Christ our Light. May it be a constant reminder to all of us that we, too, are to bring the Light of Christ to others by our lives of justice and kindness. Amen

During Easter Season

During the seven weeks of Easter, the Pascal candle will be lit in Church to remind the community that the Risen Lord is in their midst. The family may also light the Christ candle (used during the Christmas season) as a reminder of this mystery. The family lights the candle whenever members gather for meals as a reminder that we come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread (see Luke 24:13-35).

Place the Christ candle in the center of the table. As a family member lights the candle, all members of the family say:

*Dying you destroyed our death.
Rising you restored our life.
Lord Jesus, come to this home so that we may continue to grow in our love for each other.*

Using the Easter water, family members bless each other on the forehead with the sign of the Cross. This water is a sign of our baptismal covenant with God and each other. Through the waters of baptism, we are reminded that we have been given God's Spirit and through the Spirit have the power to love as the Lord has loved us.

For the next seven weeks, invite family members to select a phrase from scripture that will be said each day. Each week a new phrase will be selected and used for the week. Say this phrase together around the candle.

Peace be with you. (John. 20: 19)

Know that I am with you always. (Mt. 28: 20)

As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (John. 20: 21)

Do not persist in your unbelief but believe. (John. 20: 27)

Follow me. (John. 21: 19)

... what I have I give to you. (Acts 3: 6)

We are of one heart and one mind. (Acts 4: 32)

Table Prayers for the Easter Season

Easter

Leader We bless ourselves with the sign of our faith.
All In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
A family member lights the candle.
All Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life.
Lord Jesus, come to this home so that we may continue to grow in our love for each other.

First Week of Easter

Reader "Praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is so good, and by raising Jesus from death, he has given us new life and a hope that lives on." (1Peter 1:3)
Leader Glorious God, the darkness of Lent is over, and the light of Easter shines on us. We praise you because you have shown us your power in the resurrection. We rejoice in you because you have refreshed us in the waters of baptism. We glorify you because you have given us hope for eternal life. We love you because you have loved us.
Blessing over the Food Loving God, bless those who gather around this table. Help us to spread the light of your son, Jesus, to those who are hungry today. Amen.

Second Week of Easter

Reader You are my Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)
Leader Reassuring God, When we hear about the Resurrection, we are like the disciples. We believe. But when we feel pain and when we see suffering, we are like Thomas. We have doubts, we wonder where you are. Give new life to our faith. Help this family to trust in you. Help us to hear those who give witness to your love. Help us to believe in the Resurrection and become your presence for others.
Blessing over the Food Loving God, bless those who gather around this table. Help us to reach out to the pain and suffering we see around us. Amen.

Third Week of Easter

Reader After Jesus sat down to eat, he took some bread. He blessed it and broke it. Then he gave it to them. At once they knew who he was, but he disappeared." (Luke 24:30-31)
Leader Dear God, the disciples did not recognize Jesus when they walked with him. How could they be so blind? They knew him. They had seen him with their own eyes. Sometimes I am blind. I know Jesus, but I fail to see him. Help me to see with the eyes of faith. Help me to recognize Jesus in my friends, my family, my co-workers.
Blessing over the Food Loving God, bless us that we may recognize you. Bless too, this food that it may nourish us to recognize you in the stranger, in the lonely, in the forgotten. May we reach out to them in love and service. Amen.

Fourth Week of Easter

Reader "I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest." (John 10:10)
Leader Dear Jesus, you are the gate and you are the shepherd. What does that mean? It means that we come to new life through you. You are the one that we must follow. Find us when we are lost. Help us to hear your voice and to follow you. Help us to understand how much you love us. Bring us to new life.

Blessing over
the Food

Wondrous God, you guide us always in the ways of love. You gently care for us and encourage us to follow your son, Jesus. Bless those who gather around our table. Help each one of us hear your voice and follow you. Help us too, to hear your voice in the hungry people of our community and world, and to reach out to them in love and service. Bring us all to new life. Amen.

Fifth Week of Easter

Reader "Have faith in me when I say that the Father is one with me and that I am one with the Father. Or else have faith in me simply because of the things I do. I tell you for certain that if you have faith in me, you will do the same things that I am doing."
(John 14:11-12)

Leader Dear Jesus, you tell us that you are "the way, the truth, and the life." Help us to choose the roads in our lives that will lead to you. Help us to pursue truthfulness, help us to do all that is life-giving. Bless our faith in you. Oh, how we want to do as you do!

Blessing over
the Food

Dear Jesus, you say that if we have faith in you we will do the same things that you do. You forgave, you reached out to the lonely, the poor, the forgotten, the hungry. You brought peace to people's lives. Bless us that we too may do as you do. Bless this food that it strengthen us to be your presence in the world. Amen.

Sixth Week of Easter

Reader "If you love me, you will do as I command. Then I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will help you and always be with you. The Spirit will show you what is true." (John 14:15-17)

Leader Dear Jesus, you prepared the disciples for the day you would leave. You promised to send them a helper. All you asked of them was that they remain faithful to you. All you ask of us is to remain faithful to you. Help us to understand all of what that means. Help us to be faithful in our work and our play. Help us to be faithful when we are with others and when we are alone. Let us never doubt your love for us.

Blessing over
the Food

Holy God, your Spirit brings light to our world. Your Spirit renews and energizes us to carry on the work of your son in our family, in our neighborhood and in our world. Bless us as we gather to share food and companionship. Bless us for the work we continue to do in our faithfulness to your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Seventh Week of Easter

Reader "Eternal life is to know you, the one true God, and to know Jesus Christ, the one you sent." (John 17:3)

Leader Dear Jesus, you are one with your Father, and you tell us that we are one in you and the Father. You point us to the type of relationship we are to have with each other – "then they will be one with each other, just as you and I are one." Help us to bring glory to you by the life our family lives, together.

Blessing over
the Food

Loving Lord, we belong to you. Bless our efforts to be a family of faith, bless our efforts to love as you love. Bless this food to strengthen us to live as one. Amen.

Week of Pentecost Sunday

- Reader “On the day of Pentecost all the Lord’s followers were together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind! It filled the house where they were meeting.” (Acts 2:1-2)
- Leader Dear God, you promised to send the world a savior, and you sent Jesus. Jesus promised to send the disciples a helper, and he sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues to be with us today. Thank you for keeping your promises. Help us to keep our promise to be faithful to you. Let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit working within us. Help us to recognize our gifts and to use them to serve you.
- Blessing over
the Food Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Holy God, send the blessing of your Spirit upon us as we break bread together. Strengthen and empower us to go forth from this table ready to praise and serve your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Blessing for Mothers

Thanksgiving

*A son or daughter leads the family in the following litany.
The children respond to each prayer with **I say thank you.***

Dearest mother, for saying yes to my life and for offering me the chance to live and grow...
For the times when I just needed someone to talk to, and you were there...
For the times when no one believed in me, and you stood firmly by me...
For the times when you did so much for me, and expected so little or nothing in return...
For the times when I messed up, and you graciously embraced and forgave me...
For the times when I was sick, and you gave me your special, loving and motherly care...

Affirmation

Take a moment to tell your mother about one of her qualities which you admire.

Blessing

Leader *(son or daughter)*

Lord God, bless our mother this day with all good things: health, joy, love, and laughter. Keep her in your care and protect her from all which is harmful. And grant her peace and justice all her days.

All Amen.

Offer your mother your blessing by signing her with the sign of the cross on her forehead. You may also ask her to bless you in the same way.

Blessing for Fathers

Thanksgiving

A son or daughter leads the family in the following litany.

*The children respond to each prayer with **Hear us God, our Father.***

Lord, may our dad experience your love for him in new and deeper ways this Father's Day...

May he always be aware of how deeply his children love him...

May we always have memories of shared love with dad...

May we always give thanks for the times when we needed someone to talk to and he was there...

May we always give thanks for the times he stood firmly by us when no one believed in us...

May we always walk proudly with our father in times of prosperity and in times of need, and humbly support him as he has supported us...

Affirmation

Take a moment to tell your father about one of his qualities which you admire.

Blessing

Leader *(son or daughter)*

Lord God, bless our father this day with all good things: health, joy, love, and laughter. Keep him in your care and protect him from all which is harmful. This Father's Day may we give thanks for all he has done for us. May we learn to love and appreciate our father more and more each day.

All Amen.

Offer your father your blessing by signing him with the sign of the cross on his forehead. You may also ask your father to bless you in the same way.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving Dinner Place Cards

Before the meal, place cards are made with each person's name on the front of a folded card that is blank on the inside. Additional decorations or meaning of the name may be used to make each one special. After the meal, while people are still seated, the place cards are passed around and everyone writes one sentence expressing thankfulness for each person except their own. After all the writing is done, a leader reads the writing on each card (covering the name) and the group tries to guess who the card belongs to. This creates not only great affirmation for one another, but lots of fun, especially for the children.

Blessings Basket

Start the tradition of the "Blessings Basket." At the conclusion of the Thanksgiving meal, set a large basket in the middle of the table. From then on until Christmas, add gifts to the Blessings Basket for a needy family.

The Thanksgiving Box

A cardboard box is decorated with words of thanksgiving ("Thank you, Lord," "The _____ Family Thanksgiving Box," etc.). A slot is cut out in the top big enough to slip index cards or note paper through. On Thanksgiving day after the traditional meal, while still gathered, time is spent sharing what each person is most thankful for. The box is shown to the family members and placed in a special place. Throughout the year, anyone may write what they are thankful for and slip it into the box. The next Thanksgiving, after the meal, the box is opened and the cards are passed out to be read. Everyone is given the opportunity to guess who wrote it and when. Close the time together giving thanks for the past year.

Thanksgiving Ideas

The purpose of Thanksgiving Day is to *giving thanks*. Thanksgiving is not about things. It's about God's presence within our lives. We have been blessed with a faith that assures us that God's love for us is unconditional, ever-present, ever-faithful. Now if that isn't enough to be thankful for... That is the message for adults and children. So we might ask "When have I most recently felt God's presence?" If God is goodness, then when was the last time one of your children felt a sense of joy, comfort, goodness.

When we reflect on the pain of personal tragedies, community and national disasters, some may feel it even meaningless to talk about giving thanks. But we have all experienced the hope and cooperation that comes out of disaster. Neighbors helping neighbors is an example of the God acting deep within the hearts of His creation.

We celebrate thanksgiving not only to praise a God who is ever present but because as a people we need to. Thanksgiving is a value that gives us the opportunity to nurture a healthy attitude towards life and others. We "do thanksgiving" to help us focus on the meaning of a giftedness, love and family. It creates within us and our children grateful hearts. We focus on what we have rather than what we don't have. And in our consumer-age what a refreshing thought for adults and children alike. So how might we choose to slow the pace and truly give thanks?

- **Set the family table.**
If your family is like many American families, it may be a rare experience for the family to even gather at a table at the same time. Let this table be dressed with a sense of celebration. Let the setting time, itself, be a ritual. Use this opportunity to teach older family members how to set for a special setting. Your actions are already saying to them that this meal truly is significant.
- **Have the little ones create the center piece.**
Some are already coming home with wonderful turkeys, and the like, that have been made at pre-school. What an honor for them if it becomes the center of the family's gathering.
- **Pray a special blessing on each other.**
Begin with something like... "May God Bless you, _____, for the laughter you bring to our home..."
- **Include in your meal preparation, a dish that could be taken to a soup kitchen.**
Be sure that the family members are in on its preparation and delivery.
- **Invite a neighbor, without family, to share in your family celebration.**
Have the kids do the inviting.
- **Consider a Thanksgiving Prayer that would require a slip of paper for each family member.**
Write your name on the top of the paper. Pass it to the next person that he or she could write a sentence or two as to why he or she is thankful for them. Fold the paper in such a way to cover the sentence, but leaving the name exposed. Pass it on to the next family member. This would continue until the paper come back to its owner. Allow time for each person to read his/her own, and then share that with the family. You may even want to consider a slip of paper with God's name on it. Or just go around the table identifying people in their lives each is thankful for. And end it with a big Amen.
- **Pray a Psalm before your meal.**
The Psalms contain some wonderful prayers of thanks and praise. You may want to look them over. Take a close look at Psalm 66 or 138 for starters.
- **Be sure that the nightly prayer includes a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.**
By our nature, we seem to always ask for help, patience, and things from God. Perhaps this thanksgiving we will remember to thank and model that for our children. Thanksgiving, then is not one day in our calendar year but becomes for us a way of life.

A Thanksgiving Prayer

The family and guests stand or sit around the table upon which there is an unlighted candle.

Opening Prayer

We come to our table to welcome this feast of Thanksgiving with joy and with gladness. We have prepared this feast with good food and drink. We have gathered together and come around this table to feast and to celebrate the many things for which we are grateful.

Light the candle.

Giving Thanks

Each person is asked to state one thing that he or she is thankful for this Thanksgiving.

"I am thankful for _____."

Blessing

The final prayer is read by family members -- each reading one paragraph until the prayer is completed.

Lord of all blessings, from you has come a full harvest of gifts to us.
With our uplifted hearts, we come today around this table to give thanks to you.

We are grateful for the gifts of our lives.
We are grateful for the family and friends you have given us.
We remember and give thanks for all of them today.

On this Thanksgiving Day,
we thank you for showing us how to return thanks
by lives of service, by acts of hospitality, by kindness to others, and by concern for each other.

We are most grateful, today, for the way you, our loving God, have become visible to us -- in one another, in our families, in our friends, and in the marvels of creation itself.

Come, Lord of Gifts. Bless our table and all the food of this feast.
Let us thank the Lord today and all days.
Amen

Advent

Your Coming was Special!

Children enjoy listening to stories about themselves. This Advent, tell them about their advent, their coming. Bring out some of the tiny clothes and toys you had for each of your children. Talk about how you made them or who gave them to you, how everybody cared about the baby and looked forward to the new boy or girl.

Share their baby books, the photos taken in the hospital and during the first months. Remember all the details! This time spent together will remind the child how big a part of your lives he/she was and is today. Remember to tell them how Mary and Joseph must have looked forward to the coming of Jesus.

Sharing Your Light

Light is often used as a symbol of hope. Place a candle in a special place in your home. Each day, light it and tell about a special person in your life who has brought or brings you happiness and hope. Conclude with the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, God, we look forward to the coming of Your Son. We rejoice in His peace. We rejoice in His justice. We rejoice in His love. He will lead us out of darkness into the light. May we live our lives in His light and love. AMEN.

Sing an appropriate Christmas carol that has special meaning for your family.

Table Prayer During Advent

Light the Advent Candle(s) and pray:

Blessed are you, Lord, God, of all creation: in the darkness and in the light. Blessed are you in this food and in our sharing. Blessed are you as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ. Come Lord, Jesus!

A Family Advent Calendar

A family Advent calendar helps people keep track of the days leading up to Christmas. It serves as a daily reminder that the birth of Jesus is the reason behind the season and helps family members pause for a few minutes each day to think about the importance of Jesus in their life and in the life of the world.

Advent calendars can be purchased in most card shops and religious bookstores. An even better approach, however, is to involve the whole family in making an Advent calendar of your own.

Using poster board and construction paper, magazine photos and whatever else strikes your fancy, create a picture of a family home, a neighborhood scene or a Christmas creche. Behind the doors, shutters and other possible hiding places in your picture (under a nest in the tree or rock in yard) draw or paste pictures or symbols that carry a special Advent message for your family. Tape construction paper shutters over the windows and doors so they can be opened easily to reveal your message. Make sure there is a message (and hiding place) for each of the days between the first Sunday of Advent and Christmas day. Put a Number over each hiding place, starting at the highest number, and working down gradually to your Christmas message.

Each message should help your family in their preparation for Christmas. Be creative in deciding what messages you will use in your Advent calendar. If possible, divide up the messages among family members so that every day's message is a surprise for someone in the family. Messages can include:

- Simple scripture passages, e.g. 1 John 3:11 (This is the message taught from the beginning: We must love one another) or Matthew 5:14, 16 (You are the light of the world; your light must shine before others so they see the good things you do and praise your God in heaven).
- A family-enriching, Christmas preparation activities, like making dough ornaments together for the Christmas tree, deciding on a special gift you can buy as a family for a child from a poor family, or reading together a children's picture book on the birth of Jesus.
- A faith question to discuss together, e.g. why is Christmas so special, or what does Santa have to do with Jesus?
- A family, fun-time suggestion, e.g. sing the Fa La La song together, call grandma and tell her how much you love her, hug each other two or three times.

Put your advent calendar in a prominent place in your home. Choose a regular time during the day when you can all be together to uncover your message. Light a candle and say a simple prayer before your "grand opening."

A simple prayer like the following is appropriate for families with young children:

Thank you, Jesus, for loving us.

As we get ready to celebrate your birth on Christmas day, help us to share our love even more with each other. Amen!

The Jesse Tree

The Jesse Tree is a small evergreen tree or just a leafless branch on which symbols are placed which represent those people who helped prepare the way for the Messiah, or who were part of Christ's genealogy. The symbols start at the bottom of the tree and progress in relative chronological order. These symbols can be made from construction paper, felt, contact or wrapping paper over cardboard forms, or baker's dough. Most importantly, make trimming the Jesse Tree a family ritual.

The **Apple** symbolizes Adam and Eve to whom the promise of the Messiah was first made. This was the beginning of our salvation history.

The **Altar of Sacrifice** symbolizes the story of Abraham and Isaac. God established a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. "I will make my covenant between you and me, and will give you many children," God told Abraham. "I will give you and your children this land in which you live, and I will be your God." This was God's part of the covenant; from the chosen people, God asked only love.

The **Ark**. The Chosen People were aware of the promise of the Messiah. They were also aware of the covenant of God to Abraham. For many years they kept the covenant faithfully. But as time went on, the people forgot the covenant and returned to evil ways. To remind them of their agreement, God sent a flood that destroyed all except the just man, Noah, and his family.

The **Coat of Many Colors** represents Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, but who, like the Messiah, saved his brothers from death.

The people continued falling in and out of love with their God. To re-establish his covenant, God gave Moses **Tablets** of stone on which were written specific laws of Love.

The **Key and the Crown** represent King David. The prophets foretold that the Messiah would be of the House of David. He would be the key that opened heaven for all humankind.

A **Scroll** represents the numerous prophets who continually reminded the people of Yahweh's covenant with them, and of the promise of the Messiah. It was through the prophets' tradition of constant correction and affirmation that a small remnant of people accepted the Messiah.

The **Shell and Water** represent John the Baptist, the precursor of the Messiah and last of the Messianic prophets. John preached a baptism of repentance to help the people prepare for the Messiah.

St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, is represented by the **Hammer and Square** because he was a carpenter. Sometimes a **Donkey** is used to represent Joseph, because he led the donkey bearing Mary to Bethlehem.

The **Lily** is a symbol for Mary, the Mother of the Messiah.

The **Chi-Rho** is placed at the top of the tree to symbolize the Messiah or the Christ, the fulfillment of the promise and the "Desired one of all." Chi (X) and Rho (P) are the first two Greek letters in the title Christ. (Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title Messiah, meaning the Anointed One.)

Make and hang the symbols, explaining the meaning of each. Conclude the ritual with a prayer of blessing for the tree and the family members. In the weeks that follow before Christmas, as a family, decide to spend time each day discussing the Bible stories that correspond to the symbols on the tree.

Advent Wreath Blessing

All In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader Our help is in the name of the Lord.

All Who made heaven and earth.

Leader

In the short days and long nights of Advent, we realize how we were always waiting for deliverance, always needing salvation by our God. Around this wreath, we shall remember God's promise.

Scripture

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing.

(Alternate readings: Isaiah 63:16-17 or Isaiah 64:2-7)

All Thanks be to God.

Lord's Prayer

Leader

Let us now pray for God's blessing upon us and upon this wreath.

Lord our God, we praise you for your child, Jesus Christ:

the Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples,

the wisdom that teaches and guides us, the Savior of every nation.

Lord God, let your blessing come upon us as we light the candles of this wreath.

May the wreath and its light be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.

May he come quickly and not delay.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All Amen.

Light the first candle.

Leader

Let us bless the Lord.

All Thanks be to God. *(Making the sign of the cross)*

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" or another advent song.

Each day in Advent, perhaps at the evening meal, light the candles: one candle the first week, two the second, and so forth.

Advent Table Prayers

Daily Prayers for Advent—Week One

Sunday	Dear Lord, help me to always be ready. I do not know when you will come. (see Matthew 24:44)
Monday	Holy God, your glory is shelter and protection, you are my shelter from the storm and the rain. (see Isaiah 4:6)
Tuesday	Just as the water fills the sea, the land will be filled with people who know and honor the Lord. (see Isaiah 11:9)
Wednesday	I praise you, Lord. People who have never spoken now speak; you heal the lame, the cripple can walk and the blind can see. (see Matthew 15:31)
Thursday	Lord, my faith in you is firm. Give me perfect peace! (see Isaiah 26:3)
Friday	One thing I ask, Lord: that I may live in your house all my life. (see Psalm 27:4)
Saturday	Loving God, help me to take the gift I have received and give it as a gift. (see Matthew 10:8)

Daily Prayers for Advent—Week Two

Sunday	Wondrous God, you give me the bread that I need and the water for which I thirst. (see Isaiah 30:20)
Monday	Loving God, may your name be blessed forever, as long as the sun remains. (see Psalm 72:17)
Tuesday	I believe that I will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of my God. (see Isaiah 35:2)
Wednesday	“Clear a path in the desert! Make a straight road for the Lord, our God!” (Isaiah 40:3)
Thursday	“With all my heart I praise the Lord, and with all that I am I praise his holy name!” (Psalm 103:1)
Friday	Dear Lord, you are the Lord, my God. You are holding my hand, I am not afraid. You are here to help me. (see Isaiah 41:13)
Saturday	Jesus, you are the light for the world. (see John 8:12)

Daily Prayers for Advent—Week Three

Sunday	Lord God, all powerful, make me strong again. Smile on me and save me! (see Psalm 80:19)
Monday	O Lord, help me to steady my heart and wait for you. Your coming is at hand. (see James 5:7-8)
Tuesday	Lord, show me your paths and teach me to follow you. (see Psalm 25:4)
Wednesday	“I will always praise the Lord.” (Psalm 34:1)
Thursday	“Let peace and justice rule every mountain and hill.” (Psalm 72:3)
Friday	Your promise, O Lord, came true; he is called Emmanuel, God is with us. (see Matthew 1:22-23)
Saturday	O Lord, you have taught me since I was a child and I never stop telling about your marvelous deeds. (see Psalm 71:17)

Daily Prayers for Advent—Week Four

Sunday	Holy Mary, the Lord is with you! (see Luke 1:28)
Monday	Wondrous God, you make my heart glad because I trust you, the only God. (see Psalm 33:21)
Tuesday	I proclaim the greatness of the Lord, my spirit is joyful in God, my savior. (see Luke 1:46)
Wednesday	“I offer you my heart, Lord God, and I trust you.” (Psalm 25:1)
Thursday	“Praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come to save his people!” (Luke 1:67)
Friday	“Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God!” (Luke 2: 14)



Advent Table Prayer—Week One

A family member lights the first candle on the Advent Wreath. Alternate prayer leader and candle lighter throughout the week.

Come, Lord Jesus! Open our minds and hearts and souls as we wait for you to be born anew in our lives and in our family. Help us to experience your love in our family today.

Family members each share one way they have experienced the love of the Lord Jesus in their home today.

As we prepare for the coming of your Son, O God, we give you thanks for the love of your son, Jesus, which we have experienced in our home today.

We give you thanks for this food and drink, signs of your gracious love.

May this meal strengthen us to share your gifts with the hungry

And all who look for your justice and mercy.

Grant this through Christ our Lord,

All: Amen.

Advent Table Prayer—Week Two



A family member lights the first and second candle on the Advent Wreath. Alternate prayer leader and candle lighter throughout the week.

Lord Jesus! Bring peace and healing in our family and our world. May we hear our own prayer “that we may be one.” May we prepare the way for you by being generous and forgiving.

Family members share how they have experienced generosity and forgiveness today.

As we prepare for the coming of your Son, O God, we thank you for the blessing of your generosity and forgiveness.

We give you thanks for this food and drink, signs of your gracious love.

May this meal strengthen us to be generous and forgiving. May it strengthen us

To share our gifts with the hungry and all who look for your justice and mercy.

Grant this through Christ our Lord,

All: Amen.



Advent Table Prayer—Week Three

A family member lights three Advent candles, including the pink or white candle. Alternate prayer leader and candle lighter during the week.

Come, Lord Jesus! Come and stay with our family and friends—and all who are dear to us. May your light shine brightly so we can see you everywhere. Help us to spread your light and joy by giving freely and happily to all we meet.

Family members share how they have seen the light of the Lord Jesus today.

As we prepare for the coming of your Son, O God,
We give you thanks for your light which shines brightly among our family and friends.
We give you thanks for this food and drink, which nourishes us to be your light and
strengthens us to share your gifts with the hungry and all who look for your justice
and mercy.
Grant this through Christ our Lord,

All: Amen.



Advent Table Prayer—Week Four

A family member lights the first and second candle on the Advent Wreath. Alternate prayer leader and candle lighter throughout the week.

Come, Lord Jesus! We hunger, we thirst, we wait for you! Come, Lord Jesus and do not delay!

Family members share a time when they have seen the Lord Jesus present in the home or community today.

As we prepare for the coming of your Son, O God,
We are hungry and thirsty for signs of his love in our lives.
We give you thanks for this season of waiting and hopefulness for Jesus to be even more
present in the life of this family.
We give you thanks for this food and drink, signs of your gracious love.
May this meal strengthen us to love each other and our neighbors as we wait for the
coming of your Son, Jesus.
Grant this through Christ our Lord,

All: Amen.

Christmas

Alternative Gift-Giving

Gather as a family to think about the persons to whom you want to give. Begin by reflecting about your past Christmas celebrations. What is the significance of gift giving in your family? What was it about Christmas and gift giving that each of you found frustrating or troubling? Discuss your feelings with one another. Take control of your spending and ask the important question: Does a meaningful gift have to cost a lot? Solicit ideas from each family member about giving gifts to relatives or friends.

Christmas Card Prayer Link

Use Christmas cards as a link to real people and their needs through the Christmas season and the month of January. Choose one Christmas card each day from those received. Read the whole card aloud and pass it around the family circle. Do this at a regular time like breakfast time, after dinner, or at bedtime. Have a special prayer together for each person in the family that sent the card. Send a postcard to that family to tell them about your Christmas-card prayers and that their card was the one chosen on this day. They will appreciate knowing that your family prayed for them today.

Christmas Traditions

- Start a tree-decorating tradition. Serve the same menu each year as you trim the tree. The children will look forward to it. Every Christmas, ask each family member to choose his/her own tree ornament to hang on the tree which becomes a keepsake in later years.
- Have a party in honor of Jesus whose birth we celebrate. Invite an older person who would otherwise be alone, a young person away from home and special friends who are important to your family's life.
- Gather together all the Christmas paper, ribbon and boxes, tape and string that you want for wrapping packages. The older children can help the younger ones, so everyone can participate. The giving of gifts is beautiful. Remember that Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least important of these, you did it for me!" (Matthew 25:40). What we do for others we are doing for Jesus. Give with open hearts full of love, for it is an extraordinary opportunity. After the packages are all wrapped enjoy a cup of hot cocoa together.
- Set a date with another family to go caroling in the neighborhood or nursing home. Close the evening with refreshments.
- Begin writing Christmas cards early and pray for the special people on your list. Keep the list in a prominent place – on the refrigerator or bulletin board – and mail cards to the people in the parish who may not receive many cards.
- Prepare a meal for a needy family in the parish. Call a few days in advance and then deliver it as a family at meal time.

A Christmas Creche

A Christmas creche is a wonderful visual for children. They can use it to see, touch and talk about the key characters in the Christmas story. Your family creche can be made together, or selected together from the variety of creche sets available for purchase in religious goods stores, Christmas shops and department stores. Many religious goods stores and museum shops now offer creche sets from different parts of the world featuring, for example, clay figures from Mexico, brightly painted wooden characters from El Salvador and sturdy plastic, classical reproductions from Italy and France. Pick a set that fits your tastes and that is large and tough enough to be regularly handled by young children.

Set aside some special time as a family, during Advent or on Christmas eve, to set up your creche. Use the following process or create one of our own.

Read the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem from a children's Bible.

Discuss the story together, trying to breathe life for young children into the characters and events. Ask simple questions like:

- What do you think the city was like that Mary and Joseph were traveling to?
- How did they feel as they walked around looking for a place to stay?
- How did they feel when they finally found one?
- Where do you think the shepherds thought the music was coming from?
- How did they feel when the angel appeared?
- How would you feel if an angel suddenly appeared here!
- Why are we happy that Jesus was born that night?

Choose and arrange the spot where your creche set will be displayed for the Christmas season. Take the creche figures out one at a time, identifying them and the role they play in the Christmas story. Allow children to carefully hold and touch the figures. Decide together where each figure should be placed.

When all the figures are in place, light a candle and have one of the family members read the following prayer:

Lord, bless this creche. Help us always to be like the Christ child who is in love with his God. May the presence of the creche in our home remind us of how much God loves us. May we grow, every day, in love for one another, for our family, for our friends and for all the people of the world.

Close by singing together a Christmas carol like *Silent Night*.

Christmas Tree Blessing

When the tree has been prepared, the family gathers around it. All make the sign of the cross.

Leader

Blessed be the name of the Lord.

All

Now and forever.

Leader

This tree is a blessing to our home. It reminds us of all that is beautiful, all that is filled with the gentleness and the promise of God. It stands in our midst as a tree of light that we might promise such beauty to one another and to our world. It stands like that tree of paradise that God made into the tree of life, the cross of Jesus. Let us listen to the words of the apostle Paul to Titus.

Scripture Reading

Titus 3:4-7

Leader

Now let us pray for God's blessing upon all who gather around this tree.

Lord our God, we praise you for the light of creation: the sun, the moon, and the stars of the night. We praise you for the light of Israel: the Law, the prophets, and the wisdom of the Scriptures. We praise you for Jesus Christ, your Son: he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace, who fills us with the wonder of your love.

Lord God, let your blessing come upon us as we illumine this tree. May the light and cheer it gives be a sign of the joy that fills our hearts. May all who delight in this tree come to the knowledge and joy of salvation. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The lights of the tree are then illuminated.

Manger Scene Blessing

The manger scene has a special place near the Christmas tree or in another place where family members can reflect and pray during the Christmas season. It is blessed each year on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Leader

Our help is in the name of the Lord.

All

Who made heaven and earth.

Leader

We are at the beginning of the days of Christmas. All through the season we will look on these images of sheep and cattle, of shepherds, of Mary and of Joseph and Jesus. Let us listen to the words of the holy gospel according to Luke

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:17

Leader

Pray now for God's blessing as we look on these figures. God of Mary and Joseph, of shepherds and animals, bless us whenever we gaze on this manger scene. Through all the days of Christmas may these figures tell the story of how humans, angels, and animals found the Christ in this poor place. Fill our house with hospitality, joy, gentleness, and thanksgiving and guide our steps in the way of peace. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader

Let us bless the Lord.

All

Thanks be to God.

Christmas Table Blessing

Family and friends gather around the Christmas table, upon which there is an unlighted candle.

Leader

Glory to God in the highest.

All

And peace to God's people on earth.

Leader

As we light our candle on this feast of light may the Spirit of God that shone on the star of Bethlehem grow even brighter in our hearts and home(s) as we live our lives together.

A child lights the candle.

1st Reader

Listen to the words of the holy gospel according to John: And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of God's only Son, full of grace and truth. This is the Word of the Lord.

All

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

Blessing Prayer

The blessing may be read by one person or by a number of persons, each reading a paragraph.

Oh God of gentleness, in love you gather us at this table for our Christmas feast. We rejoice in being together to celebrate our joy in your great gift to us Jesus Christ your Son.

Lord Jesus hold us close to each other, unite us in spirit with those who are distant and with those who have died.

In the peace of this season may the hungry be filled and the homeless sheltered, and may the unremembered be united especially through your love and peace at work in us.

We remember especially those who have loved us in a special way this past year - who have been bearers of Jesus' love to us. *(Names may be said aloud or in silence).*

All

Lord bless our food, our family, our friends. Help us to share our love.

Leader

Glory to God in the highest.

All

And peace to God's people on earth.

Blessing Before or After Opening Gifts

Leader

Lord, we gather today as a family with a past history and a future hope. Be with us as we share our gifts with those we love. May this sharing bring us closer to you and each other. Let us see each other as a special and unique gift and as a sign of your love to this family.

Option 1: Remembering

Leader

Let us pause for a moment in silence to appreciate the Christmas tree and the gifts around it, and to remember a special joyful Christmas memory. If anyone wishes to share this memory, please do so.

Option 2: Appreciating

Leader

We are all gifts to each other. Each person has been given unique gifts by God. Let us call to mind the special gifts that each person here brings to our family. Let us recognize each person by name and tell what gifts they bring to us as a family. *(Allow enough time so that each person is affirmed and appreciated.)*

Blessing

Leader

Gracious God, we praise and thank You for all the many gifts and blessings which you have given us. Today, we especially praise and thank you for Your Word of Love to us, Jesus Christ. Be with our family today and every day, so that we may continue to be a family which always loves, forgives and appreciates one another.

All Amen.