

MAKE ROOM: A CHILD'S GUIDE TO LENT AND EASTER

A DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE
BY LAURA ALARY

A Season of Transformation: A Message to Grownups

Before Jesus began his ministry, he went out into the desert for forty days and forty nights. The desert was lonely and strange, a place of confusing thoughts and hard choices. But Jesus knew he needed time and space to figure out what he should do and which way he should go. The desert was a place to get ready for the journey that lay ahead.

This time in the life of Jesus sets the pattern for the season we know as Lent—the forty days of preparation leading up to Easter. For those who follow Jesus, Lent is a kind of wilderness: space and time to step out of the stream of ordinary life and practice silence and listening, a time for hard questions, a time to wonder who we are and who God wants us to become.

In the northern hemisphere, the season of Lent coincides with the final weeks of winter and the awakening of spring. These changes in the natural world, like the story of Jesus, point to a mystery: *new life cannot happen without radical change.*

When I was a child, I caught glimpses of this mystery in small moments like when the first crocuses peeked through the melting snow. I marveled at how those papery bulbs we poked into the soil in autumn had become something completely different. Jesus connected his own story with the cycles of the natural world. A seed dropped into the earth is just a seed, he said, unless it breaks open and changes. Only then can it become the plant it is meant to be. (John 12:24)

When we say that Lent is a time to get ready for Easter, we mean that Lent is about the *transformation* that always comes before new life. It is a time for cleaning, scouring, weeding, shedding, and breaking open to the possibility of something new and wonderful.

The *whole story* of Jesus is about transformation: not just his time in the desert, or his dying and rising, but also the stories he told that opened minds and hearts, and the loving actions that changed so many lives. Although we sometimes think of Lent in terms of limits and rules—giving things up—the story of Jesus invites us to think of this season as a time to explore the spaciousness, openness, freedom, and expansiveness of divine love.

The fruits of this season are many: simplicity, attentiveness, hospitality, compassion, and openness of mind and heart. I hope this Activity Guide helps you use *Make Room* to cultivate these qualities in the children you love.

MAKING TIME: BEING WITH GOD

Growing anything takes time. When we plant seeds, we wait for them to sprout. Digging them up because we're excited does not help them grow! When we bake bread, we wait for the yeast to proof and the dough to rise. When we make new friends, we spend time together to help grow the friendship. Growing as a follower of Jesus is no different. It takes time to become the people God made us to be. One of the ways Jesus kept growing was by making time to be with God and listen for God's voice inside him. We can do this too.

Get Started: Read the *Making Time* section of *Make Room*

Things to Talk About:

- **Where do you go when you want to be alone?** Is this the same place you go to when you want to think or pray or listen for God's voice? What makes this place special to you?
- **How do you feel about silence?** Do you find it easy to be quiet? Or is it difficult? Do you like to be in a quiet space? Or do you prefer sounds around you? Would you want to be alone in the desert for forty days and forty nights? Why or why not?
- **This part of the book talks about different ways of praying** (singing, listening to music, praying with colors). Are any of these methods new to you? How do you pray? What new ways could you try during this season of Lent?

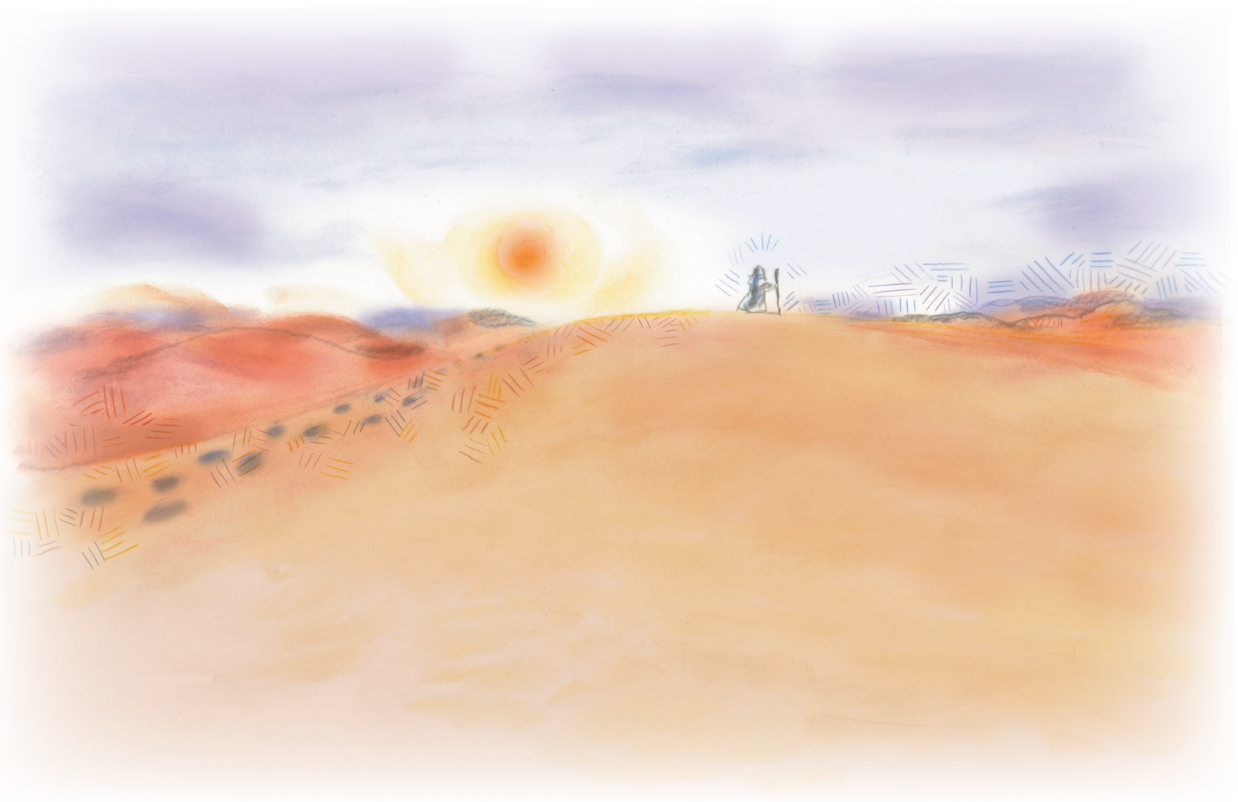
Things to Do:

- **Try to simplify your bedroom or living space.** Remove some artwork or ornaments. Put away some posters or toys for a few weeks. Notice how the change feels.
- **Create a simple space for prayer.** It could be a small table or even a space on a dresser. Decorate it with a Lenten symbol (for example, a bowl filled with sand or stones, a vase with a bare branch, a purple paper chain, or a cross).
- **Make a paper chain to count the days.** Cut forty strips of purple paper (each about an inch wide and nine inches long). You can number them from one to forty or leave them plain. Staple or glue them into a chain and hang it in your home. You can remove one link each day to count the days. You could also write a short blessing on each slip of paper before you make the chain and leave the whole thing up throughout the season. Sundays are considered little Easters so are not part of the forty days of Lent. If you like, you can add a white or gold link to your chain for each Sunday.
- **Try swapping screen time for reading aloud.** Go to the library and choose a few books especially for Lent. Choose a time when everyone can be present, cuddle up, and read!
- **Explore different forms of prayer.** Here are a few ideas, and some books that can help you: Draw or paint your prayers (*Praying in Color: Kids' Edition* by Sybil MacBeth, Paraclete Press, 2009); write a letter to God (*Writing to God: Kids' Edition* by Rachel G. Hackenberg, Paraclete Press, 2012); try the ancient practice of centering prayer (*Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children* by Frank X. Jelenek, Paraclete Press, 2013).
- **Examen Jar:** This is a simple version of the Ignatian practice of the daily examen—a way of paying attention to the presence of God throughout the day. You will need a large glass jar or bowl, and two smaller dishes,

one filled with green marbles or glass stones, the other with purple. After supper or before bed, gather everyone together to think about the day. Invite each member of the family to choose a green stone for a moment when God felt very close, or when they felt peaceful, or happy. Talk about the moment, then put the stone in the big jar. Choose a purple stone for a moment in the day that was hard, or when God seemed far away. Tell about the moment, then put the stone in the big jar. As the days pass and the jar fills up with stones, remember that God's love is big enough to hold all our feelings.

Things to Read:

- *The Examen Book: Exploring Every Day with God* by Paul Mitchell and Katie Mitchell Broussard (Loyola Press, 2022)
- *All the Faces of Me* by Laura Alary (Owlkids Books, 2024)
- *Candle Walk: A Bedtime Prayer to God* by Karin Holsinger Sherman (Church Publishing, 2019)
- *Sing, Wrestle, Spin: Prayers for Active Kids* by Jennifer Grant (Church Publishing, 2022) [for older children or grownups]



MAKING SPACE: LETTING GO

Growing means change—and change is hard. If you have ever moved to a new home, you know how hard it is to say goodbye to familiar people and places. Some changes are beyond our control; we learn to live with them as best we can. Other changes we choose because we trust they will be good for us. One example is letting go of things we no longer need. These could be physical things, such as clothes we have outgrown or toys we don't play with anymore. We can also choose to let go of harmful habits, ideas, or attitudes. Getting rid of what is no longer useful helps us grow and become the people we are meant to be.

Get Started: Read the *Making Space* section of *Make Room*

Things to Talk About:

- **How do you feel about change?** Is it scary? Or exciting? A bit of both? Can you think of changes in your life that you chose? Others you did not choose? Can you think of any good things that grew from the changes?
- **Do you imagine it was hard for Jesus to leave his home and family?** Why do you think he did it? Have you ever had to let go of something or someone special to you?
- **Jesus uses the images of a mustard seed and yeast** to help people understand what the Kingdom of God is like. How is a mustard seed like the Kingdom of God? How is yeast like the Kingdom of God? Can you come up with your own images or word pictures to describe what the Kingdom of God is like?

Things to Do:

- **Go through your room or play space** and pick out some toys, games, clothes, and books you no longer use. Put them in a box and give them to someone who will enjoy them. Does your room feel more spacious? How do you feel?
- **As a family, clean out your pantry or kitchen cupboards.** Get rid of any food that has spoiled. Make a game out of creating meals from whatever is in the fridge. See how many dishes you can dream up without having to shop for more groceries!
- **Take part in a neighborhood cleanup.** Find a local group doing this work and join in to help pick up garbage that is a danger to our animal kin. They need safe spaces too.
- **Try eating meatless meals one night a week.** Look through some recipe books and find new recipes to try. Make a batch of simple soup to share.
- **Make pretzels!** You can use frozen pizza dough and bake them in the oven. Or you can make them from scratch using a soft pretzel recipe (there are many available online). Be sure to take time to watch the yeast grow. It's amazing!
- **Try a simple activity that involves transformation through getting rid of something:**
 1. Polish silver (rubbing off the tarnish shows the beauty of the metal).
 2. Deadhead or prune plants (makes them grow fuller and stronger).
 3. Refinish a piece of furniture or sand small pieces of wood (rubbing off the rough edges makes the wood smooth and beautiful).

4. Tumble rocks (a good quality rock tumbler is expensive, but the image of turning rough rock into beautiful smooth stones is powerful).
5. Go for a shoreline walk and look for beach glass (talk about how the sharp edges of the glass are worn away by waves, sand, and stones).

Things to Read:

- *A Stone is a Story* by Leslie Barnard Booth and Marc Martin (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2023)
- *Pockets Full of Sea Glass* by Alma Fullerton (Acorn Press, 2023)
- *Growing God* by Karen Kiefer and Kathy De Wit (Paraclete Press, 2024)
- *Brother Giovanni's Little Reward: How the Pretzel Was Born* by Anna Egan Smucker and Amanda Hall (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2015)
- *The Good for Nothing Tree* by Amy-Jill Levine, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Annie Bowler (Flyaway Books, 2022)



MAKING ROOM: HOSPITALITY

We all tend to cling to what we know—familiar people and places (even food!). But new experiences can be fun and exciting and fun, and they can help us understand other people better. Jesus often shared meals with people who were considered strangers or outsiders. They welcomed him into their homes, and he welcomed them into his circle of friends. Part of following Jesus is making room for people the way he did. Sometimes this means inviting new people into our familiar spaces. It can also mean hearing stories about people whose lives are very different from our own. When we listen to someone else's story, we see the world through their eyes. That helps us understand and care.

Get Started: Read the *Making Room* section from *Make Room*

Things to Talk About:

- **From what you know about Jesus, do you think you would have wanted to be close to him?** Why or why not? What would you have wanted from him?
- **Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a great feast.** Have you ever been part of a special meal? What did you eat? Who was invited? Where did you share it? Who did the cooking and cleaning up? Do you think your special meal was like the Kingdom of God? In what ways?
- **Have you ever been a guest in the home of someone you didn't know very well?** How did that feel? What did your hosts do to make you feel welcome? How could you help welcome other people to your home, church, school, or other special places?

Things to Do:

- **Kindness Hearts:** As a symbol of how our acts of kindness fill the heart of God with joy, make a large felt heart with an opening at the top and hang it on your wall. Put a basket of smaller stuffed hearts close to it. At the end of the day, ask everyone in your family to share a story about an act of kindness they experienced that day (something they did, or something that someone did for them). Put a small heart in the big heart for each story and watch it grow. [Note: instead of felt, you could just cut a large heart out of poster board and make small heart shapes out of post-it notes.]
- **Invite neighbors into your home for tea or a simple meal.** Better yet, invite someone you have not yet had a chance to get to know, like someone new to your congregation or community. Think about how Jesus would welcome them and let that inspire you.
- **As a family, make a meal for someone who needs one** (e.g., an elderly person or a family with a new baby) and deliver it in person. To make it extra special, write simple notes of friendship on heart-shaped pieces of paper and tuck them in among the containers.
- **Prayer Cards:** Collect photos of people and places around the world, cut from magazines, or printed from the internet, and glue each one to a small file or recipe card. On the back, write wondering questions: I wonder who this person is? I wonder what this person is feeling right now? I wonder what happened right before this photo was taken? I wonder how this person would be welcomed if they came to my school or church? I wonder what I would say if I met this person? I wonder what they would say to me? Keep the cards in a basket and choose one at a time. Wonder together out loud, then ask God to be close to the person in

the photograph.

- **Ask your local librarian to help you find age-appropriate books** about children who have had to leave their homes and move to new places, or whose lives are very different from your own. Read the books together during story time.
- **Invite someone who has been a refugee**, or who works with refugees, to come to your church and share their stories of leaving home and coming to a new place.

Things to Read:

- *If You See a Bluebird* by Bahram Rahman and Gabrielle Grimard (Pajama Press, 2023)
- *The Birds of Wishbone Street* by Suzanne Del Rizzo (Pajama Press, 2021)
- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson (Penguin, 2016)
- *My Name is Sangoel* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2009)



HOLY WEEK

A note to grownups: The days from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, including Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, run the gamut of human emotions. This week is an opportunity to help children name some of those feelings as they arise in the story of Jesus. When we reach Good Friday, it can be tempting to want to explain the meaning of the cross, or the purpose behind the death of Jesus. For young children, it is enough to know that Jesus died, that those who loved him were very sad, and that through it all God was with him. As children get older, they may wish to explore the different explanations and interpretations of the cross found in the Bible and in later writings. For now, why not make space for them to do what the first disciples did: move through Holy Week day by day, feel the emotions, and wonder about it all.

Get Started: Read the *Holy Week* section in *Make Room*

Things to Talk About:

- **This part of Make Room reminds us that Holy Week is filled with stories about Jesus.** Which stories does the book tell? How does each story feel to you? What feelings do you have as you listen? If you painted a picture of each story, which colors would you choose, and why?
- **Although we call the day Jesus died “Good Friday,” it was a very sad day for Jesus and those who loved him.** What do you do when you are very sad? Do you try to make yourself feel less sad? Or do you look for ways to show your sadness (for example, through words or pictures or movement)?
- **Holy Saturday is the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.** This is an in-between day of waiting. Good Friday is over, but it is not Easter yet. Have you ever had an in-between time like this? A time when you had been through something hard or sad, and were waiting to feel better? To be happy again?

Things to Do:

When Jesus died, his friends cried. Crying when we are sad is good for our minds and bodies. Showing our sadness, by ourselves or together, is called *lament*. Many cultures have different ways to lament. Sometimes sad feelings are sung through words and music. Many of the psalms in the Bible are laments. Holy Week is a good time to try out some lament practices, like these:

- **Songs of Lament:** Listen to lament songs from different places around the world (you could start with McCrimmon’s lament played on bagpipes and then search for others). Or write your own song or poem about sadness and how it feels in your body.
- **Torn paper prayer collage:** In some places and times, people expressed grief by tearing their clothing. Ripping apart the threads that were woven together helped show how grief feels—like something special has been torn apart. You can show your sadness by tearing paper or scrap cloth. Start with paper from magazines that are going to be recycled. Think of something that you are sad about. It could be something in your own life, or something you have heard about. It could be part of the story of Jesus. When you are ready, slowly tear the paper into strips and listen to the sound. How does it make you feel? You can glue the torn strips to a piece of paper or card stock to make a collage.
- **Salt-water painting:** As you did with the torn paper collage, start by thinking of something that makes you sad. Paint a watercolor painting using colors that show how you feel. When you are finished, sprinkle salt

over the painting. Add a bit more water if you like. Now your painting is covered in salt water—like tears! Look closely and notice how the salt changed your painting.

- **Breath Prayer:** Let your body get still. When you are ready, inhale and say these words in your mind: *God, you are with me.* When you breathe out, say these words: *I am safe.* Repeat this as many times as you want. You can also make up your own breath prayer.
- **Hold a Stone:** On Holy Saturday, go for a walk outdoors. Find a stone and hold it in your hand. Try to imagine the journey of the stone—all the places it has been and how far it has traveled to become the stone you hold in your hand. Put it on your prayer table as a reminder that some changes take time.
- Bake homemade **hot cross buns** on Good Friday.
- **Make an Easter Garden:** Pour an inch or two of potting soil into a pie plate and sprinkle grass seed (or some other fast-growing seed) on it. Use modeling clay to shape a tomb and stone. Water the seed and put the garden in a sunny place. Wait and see what happens. [Note to grownups: It can take time for seed to germinate, so for a dramatic surprise you may want to move the stone and add a battery-powered tea light and some real flowers to the garden in time for Easter morning!]
- **Jellybean Prayer:** For Easter Sunday, this sweet jellybean prayer is a lovely way to connect the tradition of Easter baskets and candy with the story of Jesus and the transformations taking place in the natural world. As you say the prayer, line up the jellybeans and look at them. When you're finished, eat them!

Red is the robin. We see her in spring.
She feeds her babies, sheltered under her wing.
Black is the soil where seeds sprout and grow.
Look closely and see so much life down below.
Green are the leaves on the flowers and trees.
They shelter the animals, insects, and bees.
White is the color of the clouds way up high.
What interesting shapes do you see in the sky?
Pink, yellow, and orange make a beautiful sunrise.
It reminds us of hope. It's a daily surprise.
All of these colors are the colors of spring.
They show us God's love and the new life God can bring.

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Things to Read:

- *Why Do We Cry?* by Fran Pintadera and Ana Sender (Kids Can Press, 2020)
- *A Shelter for Sadness* by Anna Booth and David Litchfield (Peachtree, 2021)
- *My Favorite Color is Blue...Sometimes* by Roger Hutchison (Paraclete Press, 2017)
- *Petook: An Easter Story* by Caryll Houselander and Tomie dePaola (Holiday House, 1988)