

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT LENT AND EASTER

A woman in my congregation once brought her 7-year-old granddaughter to worship on Christmas Eve. The child was touched by the story and celebration of the birth of baby Jesus. The next time the child attended worship with her grandmother was our Maundy Thursday service. As I stood before the Communion Table and prepared to serve the bread and the cup, the child turned to her grandmother and said, in a loud wail, "Grandma, they're going to kill and eat the baby Jesus! He was just born! Well, I'm not eating!" She crossed her arms in front of her with a frown. The grandmother appealed to me for advice: How could she help her granddaughter understand these crucial events of our Christian faith?

It's a short few months between the joy of Advent and Christmas and the passion, pain and triumph of Lent and Easter. When it's explained, most adults can grasp the symbolic nature and annual rhythm of the Christian year. But for the child who is more literal, the interval between the baby Jesus, whom we meet at Christmas, and the adult Jesus, whom we crucify and bury during Holy Week, is just too short.

How do we help our young concrete thinkers embrace the meaning of Lent and Easter without scaring them or pushing them away?

Traditionally, the season of Lent has been a season of faith formation in the church. As we involve children in the various events of the season, we allow them hands-on experiences of repentance, forgiveness, community, sadness and joy. When a child attends an Ash Wednesday service and receives the mark of ashes, there is an opportunity to talk about who we are as children of the earth. There will be death; there will be burial for each of us. We can tell our children that even Jesus experienced death and burial, but death was not the end for Jesus. Neither is death the



end for us, for Jesus promises to welcome us to a life beyond any wonderful thing we can know. This is our hope forever and ever.

It is often difficult to talk about such things as adults, let alone as children. But the concrete experiences of Lenten worship give us entry points for sharing God's wonderful, hopeful promises with children.

At the beginning of Lent, we mark the time when Jesus is sent into the wilderness. While there, he prays and prepares for what lies ahead for him. Likewise, the season of Lent can be presented to children as a time to pause, to pray, and to prepare for what lies ahead for us. These brief six weeks can

stand as a respite from the regular rhythms of life. Families and congregations can set aside this time for special study, prayer, or weekly fellowship. Parents and teachers can use the Lenten season to teach children about prayer by helping them to learn and memorize the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed, or to read the Bible passages about Jesus praying. Parents can encourage a family prayer time each week or each night during Lent.

The Last Supper, which Jesus shared with his friends, is another concrete Bible story that churches and families can share with children. Whether the Last Supper is recalled during a Maundy Thursday worship service or during the celebration of communion on a Sunday morning, children hear and experience Jesus calling his friends to gather around a table with him. Children are able to connect with this concept of people who gather to share a special meal. In the celebration of communion, Jesus and his friends are likened to an extended family, as the church community is the extended family for those who worship together. Common table elements are blessed, shared, and eaten, just as families often share common foods at home. The communion table is also an entry point for talking with children about Jesus' final meal with his friends and the meal we continue to share in our churches. At these meals, we remember Jesus. We can also talk with children about sharing this communion meal again with Jesus and with all of our friends and family, in heaven and on earth. This can be a rich teaching moment for a child to draw on each time the Lord's Supper is celebrated in the church.

Finally, the brightness and joy of Easter morning stand as an antidote to the solemn passion of Holy Week. The reality of life is that sadness, pain, and disappointment exist. All children, as well as adults, have experienced these emotions on some level in their lives. Easter morning and Jesus' resurrection stand in our faith tradition as ringing affirmations that there is good. God is good. Light shines and darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5)!

We want to talk to our children about these things. We want to tell them the good news, to tell them about Jesus, to assure them that God holds all things in hand. Words can't convey all the mysteries of faith. Experiencing events in concrete ways, participating, worshiping, praying, and celebrating give openings for the words we want to share. Ultimately what we seek for our children is that they embrace the faith we have also received. Let's walk along with them and deepen our faith together.

For further ideas and insight, check out:

- Halverson, Delia. *Children's Activities for the Christian Year*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Caldwell, Elizabeth F. *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- Smith, Judy Gattis. *Birth, Death, and Resurrection: Teaching Spiritual Growth Through the Church Year*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.
- Stoner, Marcia Joslin. *Seasons of Faith: Teaching the Christian Year*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- Gee, Martha Bettis. *For Your Children: Creating Communities of Faith in Our Families*. Louisville: Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2005.

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