

PRAYING LENT

From the *Online Ministries*, CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

Helping Little Children with Lent

As parents of young children know, Lent can seem so “heavy” in comparison to the anticipation and excitement of preparing for Christmas. What can this season of conversion and preparation “to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed” mean for little children?



For many of us growing up, Lent meant “giving up candy.” That wasn’t a bad way to introduce us to the notion of self-discipline, but simply giving up something for Lent, without a whole spirituality that children can enter into, can leave kids dreading Lent more than looking forward to it.

The first and most important help for little children is that we as adults understand Lent and enter into it ourselves with real devotion and joy. If Lent makes its way into our home and into our conversations and practices that children can see, they will naturally grow up in a culture that embraces Lent as a season of grace.

Secondly, symbols are very important. Children need a context. They need to explore and understand what we just take for granted, and sometimes forget. When we put something in a central place in our home, and call attention to it, it naturally leads children to ask “why” it is there and what it means. In their curiosity, they want to know what’s changed and what difference it makes for them.

It is important, with our family prayer to let the story of our salvation enter the imaginations of our children. Telling stories helps it all “fit together” for children, and

for us. So, if we have a bowl of water in a central place in our home, it can be a wonderful “entry point” to the season of Lent for the whole family. What does this water remind us of? Our baptism. Lent is a time in which we want to be renewed in our baptism. That’s why it is nice to find the children’s baptismal candles or baptismal garments. Perhaps we have photos of their baptism or even a video of it.

Helping children get back in touch with their baptism can help them understand that when the water was poured over their foreheads, or when they were immersed in the water, they were placed with Jesus for the rest of their lives. It becomes very vivid if children can be helped to act it out with a doll. We’re not baptizing the doll, but our doll can help us imagine what it was like when we were baptized. Why do we use water to help us think that we are one with Jesus?

Water is so important to life; we can’t survive without it for even a few days. Water plays an important part in our story. The story of creation begins with the Spirit of God hovering over the dark waters until God said, “Let there be light!” The story of the exodus from Egypt tells how God led his people to safety and freedom through the Red Sea. When John the Baptist was baptizing people in the River Jordan, to help them turn away from sin and live a good life, Jesus came and asked to be baptized too, not because he was a sinner but because he was beginning his public life to become completely a part of our lives on this earth. And, when the centurion pierced Jesus’ side, after he died on the cross for us, blood and water flowed out as a sign of the sacraments he would give us. And, of course, there are the small fonts of water at the doors of every church, to remind us of the baptismal font in which we were baptized. So, each time we enter a church, we dip our hands in that water and sign ourselves with the cross of our salvation.

Depending upon the age of our children, we can have the older children help the younger children with Lent. A family “meeting” could be scheduled each week, in which we could say a prayer, and then plan out what each person in the family can do in the upcoming week, to help the whole family out and what the whole family could do to help the poor. For example, each child could be assigned one small “duty” to do,

Visit the *Online Ministries* site: *Praying Lent*.

In addition to this resource for Lent, there are many others to support our journey through Lent. And, there is a ***Lenten Daily Prayer*** for each day of Lent.

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to help out the family this week. It could be an ordinary household chore, or it could be to draw a symbol for our Lent journey – a picture of the people crossing the Red Sea, Jesus’ baptism, his or her own baptism, one of us in the family when we are sad and when we are happy.

Perhaps at this family meeting, the family plan for eating during Lent could be discussed. How will we abstain from meat this coming Friday? Why are we doing it? It’s a sacrifice, but it is a remembrance of the Friday we call “Good”, the day our Lord died for us. And, avoiding meat on this day places us in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in our city, our country and around the world who are poor. A family can also get a sense of its relationship with the poor if a simple meal is connected with “savings” which can be given to the poor. One practice a family might take up together is to find out about a meal program for the homeless in the area and to make a meal to bring to the meal program each week. Children can help in making a big pot of chili or sloppy joes and come along on the trip in delivering it to the meal program. This kind of family Lenten practice can transform a child’s experience of the special power of Lent

The most important part of Lent can be how children are helped to make this a time to practice being more loving. Children are naturally loving, but they can get into really bad habits of fighting with brothers and sisters or being disobedient or even talking back. Lent is a great time to build in some family practices, which can also be an outstanding renewal for parents and adults in the family. Children will notice, if part of my Lenten journey is to choose to fast from my crabby-ness or busy-ness and to spend more time with them. They will notice, if we set the example of choosing to compliment others in the family more, highlighting the good things I notice in them. If our family Lenten practice is to focus on being nicer, kinder and more generous in helping each other, the children will take part in it. And, if we fail on a given day, we can quickly apologize and ask forgiveness and model penitential and reconciling behavior that is central to Lent.

During Lent, a family could choose a number of things to make a huge difference in a child’s experience of Lent. All they take are a commitment of time and some creativity.

One possibility is to take 20 minutes, perhaps on a Friday in Lent, to go through the Stations of the Cross together as a family. Each of the stations can be described. The point is not to frighten the children with the terrible things that happened to Jesus, but to help them understand that he went through all of this for us, so that we need not fear death, for we are going to live with him forever.

Perhaps as part of our special Lent practices, a family could look at the upcoming Sunday’s gospel together on Saturday, to prepare for Sunday. The more the story of the gospel enters the children’s imagination, the more the children can get out of celebrating the Sunday liturgy with

the family. And, it will be great to talk about the homily, in practical terms for the family, sometime during the day on Sunday.

Finally, the most important days to prepare children for are Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday – the three days Lent builds up to. It would be wonderful to prepare children for the great liturgies these days, but if it is not possible to celebrate these liturgies in person, it is possible to make those times special at home.

On Holy Thursday, a special meal can be prepared and the family can remember the meal Jesus had with his disciples, the night before he died for us, and how he gave us his body and blood that night. Perhaps lamb can be prepared, along with pita bread and some wine, so that the whole Passover story can be shared with the children. This connection with every Eucharist, can be a great and memorable time for the children. After supper, a family could wash each others’ feet as an important ritual to talk about afterwards. It will certainly seem awkward or uncomfortable. It’s supposed to. We can then talk about what this ritual means for us, linking it to the gift of the Eucharist, as we live out the example Jesus gave for us, of self-giving.

On Good Friday, we can plan to observe the day in many special ways. We can plan our meals carefully, to explain fasting and abstinence. Without jeopardizing the children’s health, we ourselves can demonstrate fasting to them, and explain its meaning: to make us more alert and hungry for God’s gifts to us. The time between Noon and 3 o’clock should be a particularly quiet and reflective time. We can read the Passion story – from John’s Gospel – and add our own words here and there to fill out the story and let children ask questions. We can pray our petitions for all of God’s people, especially the ten groups we traditionally pray for on Good Friday. It is a wonderful time to do the Stations of the Cross together. It can also be a time to do a veneration of the cross together – embracing or kissing a family crucifix.

On Holy Saturday, we can make the day a time of waiting. We can remember that it is the only day of the church year on which there is no liturgy. We are conscious all day of the memory of Jesus in the tomb. It is a day in which we can help children talk about the reality of death, and then explain to them the anticipation of new life. If we really reflect upon that tomb, which held the body of Jesus, we can really understand the power of our Easter joy – that the tomb is empty forever.

In this spirit, every family can do something to make Lent special for the youngest of children.