

“Experiencing Holy Week with Your Children”

-some beginning steps-

Introduction

Holy Week is one of the most important times in the year for Christians; it also contains some of the greatest mysteries of our faith, and therefore can be difficult to talk about in simple terms that our children can easily understand. We celebrate and teach in the church school about Palm Sunday and then when we meet again it is Easter, so it is understandable that they may be confused or unsure about the events we remember on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. One important first step in experiencing Holy Week with our children is to consider our own experiences of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and the questions we have about the events we remember during Holy Week.

Concrete answers are few and far between, even for adults, as we try to explain why “Good Friday” is good, or as we try to define the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection, or as we wrestle with issues about betrayal and human weakness, suffering and despair. We talk about a “life of faith” for a reason: we don’t have to have all the answers right away. It is important to remember that this is true for our children as well. Some questions they have will not be able to be answered completely right in the moment; they will continue to learn and grow and hear the stories repeated year after year and this will help them develop depth in their faith. Those layers of learning can’t be learned all at one time. Give age appropriate answers. Ask children what they think. Tell them about your experiences. Admit certain things are a mystery! Not even parents have all the answers.

Holy Week

One simple way to encounter the events of Holy Week with your children is to think about your experiences of these days in your own faith journey, either as a child or as an adult, in this church or in another place where you worshipped frequently. Share those memories with your children and with your partner or spouse.

Palm Sunday

Entry to Jerusalem * Celebration * Excitement * Anticipation * Welcome

The enthusiasm of joining a celebration is a feeling that even very young children can participate in on Palm Sunday. By early elementary age, children can begin to encounter the concept that this was an unusual celebration. Jesus was not the kind of leader that was expected; his riding a donkey represented a new type of leadership that would not be using military force. Older children and youth are more familiar with this story, but they too can find new things in the story. Consider how this event would have been experienced by people in the crowd.

Maundy Thursday

Last Supper * Shared Meal * Promise of Love * New Covenant

This day of Holy Week remembers the beginnings of the sacrament of communion. “Maundy” comes from the Latin word “maundatum” which means commandment (see www.factmonster.com; from The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th ed. 2003). As

Jesus shared this meal with those gathered, he suggested a new way (“new commandment”) of being in relationship to each other and to God. The mysteries of this sacrament are not easily explained; it is probably best described as a meal where Jesus shares a new way of thinking about his love for us. Older children can begin to think about the symbolism of the bread and the cup representing God’s love, forgiveness, and saving power in our lives. The Last Supper emphasizes sharing together; giving thanks; remembering Jesus; and hopefulness.

Good Friday

Jesus’ Death * Sadness for Humanity and God * Gloom

For young children, who learn stories about how wonderful Jesus was and how he cares for them, hearing about his death may be upsetting. For many young children, they may have experienced the death of pet or grandparent, but they will still be struggling to understand what death is. Let them explore the questions they have, but don’t worry if they do not want to talk about Jesus’ death. They may be more interested in the people around Jesus: were they sad? Why did people want to hurt Jesus? Try to be honest and inquisitive with them. Do not be afraid to ask them to answer their own questions, then you can also share what you think.

Children in the middle elementary ages may want to know about the details of crucifixion; remember you can give them information without being graphic. Violence is so prevalent in our everyday world as adults, as well as for many of our children, it takes some extra consideration to decide what details are okay to share. If older children are especially curious you might ask them to consider why they want to know specific details. It may be a way of trying to understand why this would happen, especially to Jesus whom they have been learning about as a person who stood up for other people. Questions may arise about why his disciples didn’t help him or why some other form of punishment wasn’t given. Try to respond without giving all the answers, but leave space for them to share what they think about the questions they are asking. Our tendency, even as adults, is to rush through grief and suffering and not talk about it. Good Friday is a good day to think about the importance of taking time to be sad.

Easter Sunday

Resurrection * Surprise * Joy * Renewal * Living * Mystery

The celebration on Easter Sunday of the resurrection of Jesus is one of the most important days in the religious lives of Christians. For children, the excitement of Easter is coupled with many joyful activities: the sharing of candy, searching for eggs, and hearing about the mystery of Jesus being alive. Easter reminds us that we cannot be separated from the love of God. Easter celebrations can also bring disappointments and exhaustion for children; so while we think about it as a day of rejoicing, be prepared to have some quiet time as well.

For young children who have not learned much about Jesus’ death, Easter can be confusing or anti-climatic; as mentioned earlier, learning about the mysteries of our faith as expressed in the events of Holy Week are not learned all at one time. Allow your children to gauge what meaning they can understand from the story; don’t worry if they

are not as surprised or awestruck as the situation merits. You can depend on that fact that they will hear this good news again. Learners may be able to understand Mary's joy of finding Jesus alive, especially as it relates to the excitement of finding something that she thought she had lost.

In the same way that older children wanted to know about the crucifixion, they may also want to know the details of the resurrection. Part of their learning process may be to express their doubts and raise questions about information; help them explore their questions by encouraging them to think about how they would express what they believe about Jesus' resurrection. Do not be too quick to dismiss or correct their inquiries, but instead think of how you might help them find out more information.

Suggestions

Find some different (or favorite) Children's Bibles that you like and read the stories relating to Holy Week with your child. All the stories that we have about Jesus are told through individual interpretative lens of each Gospel writer, so reading different Children's bible versions of these stories allows you to reinforce the concept with your children that the bible is not "historical" reporting, but rather it contains many different stories, often about the same events. The bible passages that tell the stories of Jesus during "Holy Week" are found at the end of this brochure along with some suggested Children's books and Bibles that are particularly good for Holy Week.

Attend services with your children during Holy Week. Consider bringing your children to the Maundy Thursday service at 5:30 pm or 7 p.m. The Good Friday service is from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. and is more adult friendly, with extensive preaching on the "Seven Last Words" of Jesus on the cross, and music by the adult choir; consider bringing older children (5th grade and older) to a portion of the service or coming to part of the service yourself. (*People move in and out of this service all afternoon; there are hymns between each ten-minute meditation on the Jesus' seven last words on the cross that are used for transition in and out of the sanctuary.*)

Resources

Books:

The Story of Easter by Aileen Fisher, illustrated by Stefano Vitale, Harper Collins, 1997. *This book starts with the retelling of the events of Holy Week, followed by a good overview of Easter traditions, recommended for early elementary age children.*

Love One Another: the last days of Jesus retold by Lauren Thompson, illustrated by Elizabeth Vyebara, Scholastic Press, 2000.

Captivating illustrations with short text on each page; recommended for middle elementary ages or early elementary with parents.

One Morning in Joseph's Garden: An Easter Story by Barbara Younger and Lisa Flinn, illustrated by Joe Boddy, Abingdon Press, 1998.

A story about the many creatures in the garden on the morning of Easter, when Mary came and found the empty tomb; recommended for young children (5 and under.)

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

A good resource for families, not just for Holy Week, but throughout the Christian liturgical year; it contains many prayers, suggested scripture readings, and explanations of the seasons.

Children's Bibles:

The Family Story Bible by Ralph Milton, illustrated by Margaret Kyle, Northstone, 1996.
A good version to read out loud or for early elementary readers.

Reader's Digest Bible for Children stories retold by Marie-Helene Delval, illustrations by Ulises Wensell, Joshua Morris Publishing, 1995.

A good version for young children; great illustrations and short, easy to read text.

Bible Stories for Children retold by Geoffrey Horn and Arthur Cavanaugh, illustrated by Arvis Stewart, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980.

A good version for middle and older elementary readers; it has large amounts of text and also many illustrations.

Tomie De Paola's Book of Bible Stories: New International Version illustrated by Tomie De Paola, Puffin, 2002.

A good version for older preschoolers and early elementary children.

The Children's Illustrated Bible retold by Selina Hastings, illustrated by Eric Thomas, Dorling Kindersley, 1994.

A good version for elementary age children who are also interested in the history and life of biblical times; contains biblical text along with small illustrations and information and boxes, photos, and drawings explaining historical details relevant to the bible story.

Bible readings relating to the events of Holy Week:

Palm Sunday (Jesus Enters Jerusalem):

Matthew 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-40.

Maundy Thursday (The Last Supper):**

Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:1-38; John 13:1-20*

**John's Gospel does not tell the story of the Last Supper; traditionally, the passage listed here about Jesus washing the disciples' feet replaces the story of the meal shared in the other gospels. Some churches have rituals of foot washing on Maundy Thursday, instead of or in addition to sharing a meal or communion.*

***I have intentionally not included the passages relating to Jesus' arrest and trial, since they were not the focus of this article. If you would like to read about those events simply continue the gospel narrative after the passages listed above for Maundy Thursday (except in John's Gospel, you should move ahead to chapter 18).*

Good Friday (The Death of Jesus)++:

Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:16-41; Luke 23:32-49; John 19:17-30

++I did not include the burial in this list of verses; you can read about the burial by continuing reading after the passages in any of the gospels listed above concerning the death of Jesus.

Easter Sunday (The Resurrection):

Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:18.

It is worth noting that the resurrected Jesus also appears several more times to the disciples in several of the gospels. These stories can be found immediately after the passages list above concerning the resurrection.

In Conclusion

The events remembered during Holy Week are some of the most challenging aspects of our faith. These events are also some of the most important pieces of our faith. Inasmuch as we want to encourage our children to explore their faith by being good listeners for them and giving them permission to ask questions, we, as parents and teachers, need to accept our role as learners in faith as well. We must also ask our own questions and find comfort in knowing that faith is a long journey with many twists, turns, but also with plenty of people and places to rest with along the way.

3/2004 revised 3/2010

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