

Celebrating Holy Week with Young Children A Guide for Families

By Rev. Sem. Anita Peebles

As grown-ups on the journey of following Jesus who are blessed with the charge to guide children in Christian faith, isn't our hope for children to become critical thinkers who engage the stories of faith and respond in ways that contribute to justice, love and mercy in the world? So what do we do when we come to Holy Week, a time that is ripe with meaning and fraught with confusion, grief and injustice? Easter is a mystery. Good Friday is a mystery. God is a mystery. We cannot claim comprehensive understanding of these topics, so it can feel intimidating to offer meaning-making experiences to the children.

This week is a *Holy* Week for a reason. It provides an opportunity to engage the Holy with your child, and to point out God's continual presence with us. It is important to honor children's natural spirituality; to trust children's lead. They will tell you what they need. Be with them, attentive to their needs, and attentive to your own.

On page 2, you will find some basic guidelines for talking about Holy Week with younger children.

Through this week called "Holy," remember that Jesus embodied *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. Through all the things we encounter in life—through all the emotions we feel, through all our questions and confusions and doubts, God is with us. The Good News is that divine love never fails, never gives up on us, never ends.

Thanks be to God.



Anita Peebles is a Masters of Divinity candidate at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, TN. She is in the ordination process with the Alliance of Baptists. Originally from Michigan, Anita has B.A.s in Religion and Environmental Studies from Oberlin College in Oberlin, OH. Anita feels called to congregational ministry, focusing on pastoral care, environmental justice and ministry with children and their families. She shares sermons and worship resources at www.feelingthelight.wordpress.com. Contact her at: peebles.anita@gmail.com.



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GUIDELINES

- Allow yourself to encounter the story again for the first time. These stories and the church year and traditions are new for children. Engage them as new for you again, too, as you encounter them through the eyes and experience of a child.
- Accept questions. If you know the answer or know how to find out the answer, great! But sometimes we don't know how to answer questions and fear that not knowing reveals inadequacy to walk with children on the path of faith. Making space for questions creates a safe place to explore faith together with your child.
- Allow space for sad talk. Holy Week is sad, scary, dangerous, violent, traumatic. Young children are just learning how to name emotions. They process stories literally and attach to symbols. Symbolic access facilitates emotion regulation, but symbols can also provoke distress. Empathy begins to emerge around age 4. Children are better at regulating responses and at using words to express feelings beginning around age 5. Asking questions can help them evaluate emotion-eliciting events.
 - "How do you feel when you hear about Jesus dying on the cross?"
 - "What did the soldiers do? What do you think they were feeling?"
 - "How did Jesus show love to people throughout his life?"
 - "How would you feel if you were at the trial with Pilate and Jesus?"
- Offer alternative means of responding. Artistic means of expression are a great way for children to process their experiences with the story.
 - Act out the story of Holy Week as a play
 - Sculpt elements of the story with Play-Dough or clay or putty
 - Challenge children to describe the different emotions in the story with colors (crayons, pastels, or watercolor)
- Avoid language that names "Jews" as the "bad guys." Use terms like "religious leaders" or "priests and scribes." Describe how people in power can sometimes make bad decisions.
- Avoid sanitizing and moralizing the story. Jesus experienced an injustice, but in the view of the Roman Empire, he was a criminal. Acknowledge that it's not fair that Jesus died. That it is sad.
- Don't suggest that it was God's plan all along for Jesus to die. Do focus on God's continual presence with Jesus throughout his whole life, even through his death and resurrection.
- Talk about death in age-appropriate fashion. Preschool children mostly see death as temporary, reversible and impersonal. Between the ages of five and nine, they begin to see that all living things eventually die. Perhaps you've experienced a recent loss in your family or church family. Focus on death not being the end of relationship. That love continues beyond death is crucial to the story of resurrection. Explore what it means to live, especially in a world where we know God loves us enough to accompany us to and through death.
- Engage your child's senses as you explore this week together with questions such as:
 - What pictures do you see this week? What is different about how church looks?
 - What sounds and stories do you hear?
 - What do you taste?
 - What do you smell?
 - What does your body feel this week? On the inside? On the outside, on your skin?

