



One Holy Week I was busy in the kitchen. I found an animated Holy Week video for my preschooler to watch to keep him occupied. I thought it would be a kid-friendly way to help him enter into the special days we were celebrating. A few minutes later, I found him hiding behind a chair. Though a cartoon, seeing the story of Jesus' suffering played out was too much for him. I was upset with myself for not having been more thoughtful about how I was sharing Lent with him. This event caused me to **reflect on what themes of Lent are appropriate and helpful for my preschool-age boys.** They're smart little guys, so I sometimes need to remind myself that cognitively and emotionally they're not always taking things in the way I'd imagine or even the way I present them. They're absorbing things in a "pre-logical" way. So what's going to help them form an accurate concept of our loving God – a God that *they* can respond to, in a way that fits their needs and abilities and interests now?

## LENT IS FOR ADULTS

I'm still pondering, and no expert. . . but I've concluded that Lent is really intended for adults. (Ironical, considering the title of this article, right?) Think about it. **For kids under the age of 7, these themes are hard to grasp:**

- **Sin.** Under the age of reason, kids learn about what's right/wrong, but understanding actions as being offensive to God is too abstract for them and can actually be harmful to their concept of God. They are not capable of sin. Prayers of forgiveness at this stage attribute a culpability they do not have.
- **Fasting.** Giving up something in order to show sorrow for our sin, dispose us to grace, and unite ourselves in love to the suffering Jesus requires abstract thinking and maturity. (Also, little ones have no sin.) Children are capable of great generosity of heart in concrete ways. Perhaps kid-level almsgiving is a better forum for "giving up something" for little ones.\*
- **The Passion and Death of Jesus.** Small children are very sensitive and even an un-detailed crucifix can trouble them. And why wouldn't it – when someone dear to you has such "owies"?! While children *should* learn to associate the cross as the sign of Jesus and *should* hear that he died and rose, it is not necessary or helpful for them to dwell on the details of Jesus' suffering.



Does this mean kids, roughly ages 2-6, should not be told about Lent? As with most important things, **there is nuance here.** Parents should determine what “layers” of Lent speak to little children and their developmental needs and capacities. As I mentioned, I’m still pondering who my boys are (individually and simply as little ones) and how to best initiate them into the Mysteries of our faith. How can I help them to experience God as the Good Shepherd, who loves them and calls them by name, and gives all of himself to them that they may have fullness of joy and life in abundance?

## LENT FOR MY LITTLE ONES THIS YEAR

I think I’ll keep it simple: *Lent is a special, quiet time of preparation for celebrating Jesus’ dying and rising at Easter. Our preparation involves spending time with Jesus and trying to be like him.* I’ll be choosing some means of pre-school prayer that resonate with my boys and finding concrete little projects they can do with me to live the **corporal works of mercy** (though, I don’t think I’ll use that fancy name yet.) Perhaps I’ll invite a little stretching of their generosity in order to share with others (giving the people at the food shelf the box of their favorite snack for the week) if I perceive them ready.



## IDEAS ON PINTEREST

I invite you to follow the Diocese of Des Moines on [Pinterest](#) for posts on “Lent with Little Ones” on the Lenten Activities board. We’ll be pinning simple words to explain Lenten concepts and ideas for helping kids ages 2-6 live Lent.

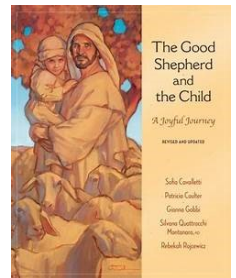


[pinterest.com/dmdiocese/lent-with-little-ones-2022](https://pinterest.com/dmdiocese/lent-with-little-ones-2022)

For further food for thought and practical suggestions, order the book

*The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*

by Sofia Cavaletti and her team.



**\*A further note on small children giving up something for Lent.** There are 4-6 year-olds out there with vibrant, loving, and trusting relationships with God who are ready to give something up for Lent. (Especially if they see an older sibling doing it!) Parents can explain it as a beautiful gift we can give Jesus to show him our love and to make extra room in our hearts for him as we prepare for Easter. Respecting each child’s developmental needs and personality, introduce the “layer” of this Lenten practice you feel they’ll joyfully receive. Check in with your child on their understanding and feelings in this regard. Invite, never impose. Let the child choose what they’ll give up (they’re creative!) and moderate or direct as needed. Be attentive so that this practice remains positive, loving, and free -- and doesn’t form any misconceptions of God or unnecessary burdens. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you discern how, when, and what layers of Lent to share with your little ones. Trust that the Spirit is at work in their little souls, too!



Find this and other resources to share at [www.dmdiocese.org/lent](http://www.dmdiocese.org/lent)

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