

Tips for a good Holy Week with children

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Holy Week is a long, intense, busy week, and sometimes the thought of going to all of those services with small children can be more than a parent wants to deal with, and the temptation to leave them at home or not go to church at all becomes very strong. Let me encourage you to fight that temptation and bring your kids to as many services as possible. I'm not saying that it will be easy or even necessarily fun, but it will be important for their future spiritual life.

You can look at it this way: behaving in church takes practice. With everything else in our lives, we know that practice once a week does not actually teach us much. Consistent, even daily, practice is required. Holy Week is a marathon — 40 hours of church in 5 days. It is a great way to get some intense practice in for your children. And the services are interesting, with a lot of different activity, which can help keep them engaged.

These things can work with children as young as two... you just need to adapt them for their understanding level. And remember, they understand a lot more than most people think they do. With that thought as background, here are some tips:

SET EXPECTATIONS

There is going to be a lot of church this week. Let them know that as soon as possible. I used to tell my kids things like:

"Holy Week is coming. The world is going to turn upside down and get confused. We are going to go to church *every day*! And we are going to have morning services at night and nighttime services in the morning. On Holy Saturday, we are going to get up, go to church in the morning, come home, dye eggs and make our Pascha basket.

"Then, while it is still light out, we are going to go to bed and sleep. Isn't that strange? And then, when it is dark out, we are going to get up and go to church! Pretty crazy. And after church, in the middle of the night, we are going to have a party at church and celebrate Jesus's resurrection. It's going to be hard and we are going to be tired, but it is going to be a lot of fun in the end."

Repeat the part about going to bed in the day time on Holy Saturday every day... it will help them actually do it when the day comes.

This is the behavior we expect. Before going to each service, remind them of what you expect: how much you expect them to sit, stand, kneel. A good guideline that the younger kids can remember might be: any time the priest is among the congregation, they should be standing (unless it is a kneeling service, of course). Let them know that you expect them to be in church for the whole service. Don't promise them a break — if you do they will spend the whole service asking if it is time for their break.

If they need to take a break, and you take them out, make the break as boring as possible. Stay in the bell tower. Or go downstairs and watch the service on the video feed, but actually watch, don't do other things. Keep them quiet (or quiet them down). Don't talk to them about anything except their immediate needs and why we are at church and what the focus of the service is. Remind them that this is Holy Week and we are going to be in church a lot and that everyone is tired, but that they are strong and can make it through all of the services too. If you are positive, they will be too.

If it becomes clear that leaving the service has become a game or a way to get more of Mommy and Daddy's attention, have someone else take them out, or send them to stand with someone else. This usually puts a stop to the behavior — either because they are scared and don't want to leave the parents or because they realize that the behavior expectations are not just rules from Mom & Dad, but what everyone at church expects.

Playtime is after the service. We all love to come to church and see our friends, but when the service is going on, we should be paying attention and doing our "work". The congregation's work is to sing and to pray. I used to tell my kids that all of the time, and I still say that to the little ones that stand with me. We don't play together (or poke each other, or redo each other's hair) during the service. That is for afterwards. During the service we sing and we pray.

BE PREPARED

Talk through the week with your children. Start on Lazarus Saturday, and go through all of the services with them, what happens at each and why we go to them. Even little kids will respond to this.

Read the stories. Get out your children's Bible, and read the story of what is going to happen at the next service. For Unction, read some of the stories of healing that are read during the service. Ask questions and make sure they understand the story. Then during the service, when the Gospel is read, ask them if they remember the story. For the rest of the services, read some or all of the Gospel readings for the day. It is probably best to do this at night, before bed, for the next day.

Get there early. If you had to give a presentation at a big meeting at work, you wouldn't show up 10 minutes late, run in and start. You would arrive early, get everything set up and have a few minutes to run through it in your mind before the meeting started. Church is like that for children. They need to get there early, have a few minutes to be prepared, and then go into the service.

I always try to be at church at least a half hour before the service starts. When the kids were little, this gave us time to go to the bathroom (and remind them they weren't supposed to go during the service), maybe have a little snack or a drink (when they were little) and then quietly and calmly go upstairs. Rushing in at the last minute would just make them cranky and wind them up so that they couldn't pay attention.

Talk through pieces of the service before it starts. When you get to church, before the service starts, remind them of what is going to happen during the service. Remind them if there is going to be kneeling, or a procession, or give them things to watch for... like during Unction, there will be 7

Gospel readings. After each one, the priest will do something special (light a candle)... let's watch and see what it is. Let's count the candles, etc.

Bring them in their pajamas. If you are worried about the late bed-time after some of the services, bring them in their pjs, bring a blanket and pillow. I am convinced that going to those nighttime services and experiencing the candle light and the incense while half asleep touches the soul, even of the littlest ones.

MAKE IT INTERESTING

Pull them out of school. This is a reward in and of itself. And it tells the children that church is very important to the family. This gets harder in Middle School and is a difficult balance in High School, but if it can be done, it is worth it. There is an excused absence from school note on the church website for this purpose.

Stay engaged. Use the service books to follow along (even if your little ones can't read yet, this seems to fascinate them at a certain age). I used to spend a lot of time kneeling. I wanted to be on their level to help them understand what was going on, and I didn't feel like I should sit, since I didn't want them to sit, so I knelt next to them. This makes it easier to whisper in their ears and point out what is going on.

Give rewards. Promise them a treat of some kind if they meet your expectations — some time on the swing set with their friends, a few minutes at the park, some other special treat.

Make family traditions. We always had activities we did around the services. For example, after the morning liturgy on Holy Thursday, we always went as a family to buy the sausage for the Pascha basket. We went into the city to the Broadway market, to a little Polish place and bought several different kinds. The kids would always pick out some of them. On Holy Saturday, after church, before we went to bed while the sun was shining, we dyed eggs and made the easy Pascha cheese. The kids helped. On Holy Friday, we mostly stayed at church, helping with the bier. Doing the same thing every year helps with the anticipation and becomes it's own reward.

Come to Bright Monday. This is a service for the kids. One of the older kids even reads the Epistle. And the food and fun afterwards makes it the highlight of their week.

It will be a long week. Naps will be missed. Bed times will be messed up. Kids will be grouchy and excited and crazy, all at the same time. But in the end we will all have participated in the glory and wonder of Christ's Resurrection. That is a great gift to give to your family... to build those memories and celebrate the Feast of Feasts together. And just think, after they have made it through Passion Gospels, Sunday morning Liturgy is a short service!