

Make Room: A Child's Guide to Lent and Easter A Webinar by Laura Alary

A New Perspective on Lent

Many years ago during Lent, I decided to try a new way of praying with my children. I had been reading a book called *Praying in Color* by Sybil MacBeth and I was intrigued by her practice of holy doodling. So one wintry evening in February we spread the dining room table with colored pencils and crayons, lit the Christ candle, put on some gentle music, and began to draw.

At first there was a restless flood of questions and comments: “Mommy, why are we doing this?” “How do I start?” “Can I paint instead?” But eventually a stillness fell over our little group and fascinating images began to emerge: there were tangerine bubbles for an aunt who was always cheered by the colour orange; green vines for a grandmother who needed glimpses of new growth in her life; and for a friend dying of a neurological disease there were starbursts of yellow crayon drenched with deep purple watercolors. As we wordlessly held these people in our hearts, we could feel that they were also held in the heart of God. It was a holy moment.

Later that evening, after the art supplies had been put away and we were engaged in the ordinary rituals of teeth-brushing and reading stories, I found myself wondering about what had happened around the table. I loved the way the children had naturally settled into silence and become absorbed in their prayers. I loved their honesty and creativity. I loved the way their awareness of God and others expanded. It felt right to see my children engaged in a Lenten practice that opened their minds and hearts. They had lost themselves in their work in the best possible sense. I was quite certain that anything I imposed on them—forcing them to give up sweets or television for instance, or even providing Lenten-themed crafts—would not have engaged them so deeply.

My own experience of Lent always emphasized limits: self-denial, sacrifice and death. But as I recalled the joyful freedom of praying in colour, I felt that what I wanted to share with my children was a sense of *spaciousness*: freedom, choice, openness to new ways of seeing and being, and above all, the awesome expansiveness of divine love.

For me this was an entirely new perspective on Lent.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it had been there all along, especially in scripture. One of the defining stories of the Lenten season is Jesus in the Wilderness. As I meditated on this story, I began to notice the quality of space. Jesus goes out alone into the desert. He leaves behind clutter and distraction. He seeks out a still place where he can listen and wonder about his own identity and the way he needs to go. The path he chooses is also defined by making space. Jesus continually makes room and stretches the limits of who is welcome. He does not cling to possessions or power or prestige or even to life. Jesus empties himself to make room for something new—something better.

Excited by this new perspective on Lent, I went looking for resources to help me guide my children along this path.

I knew what I wanted.

First, I wanted a book that told the story of Jesus as an integrated whole. I wanted my children to see the death and resurrection of Jesus not as isolated events, but as an expression of everything he has been doing and saying all along—his message about openness and self-giving and deep trust in God.

Second, I wanted a book that would encourage children to see themselves as part of this bigger story. I wanted them to know that they are invited to follow Jesus, and that Lent is a special time to practise doing this.

Third, I wanted a book that would help children enter Lent not with fear or resentment, but with excitement at being part of something purposeful and transformative.

That is what I wanted. But I could not find it.

That was my cue to start writing.

Strangely enough, the first book to emerge was not a Lenten book at all. *Jesse's Surprise Gift* is the story of a little boy who desperately wants a guitar, but his mother cannot afford one. Instead, she buys him an ocarina. One day Jesse goes for a walk and takes his ocarina with him. Along the way he meets people who are in need. Over and over Jesse is confronted with this choice: Should I hold on tight to what I have? Or do I dare let it go for the sake of helping someone else?

As I said, *Jesse's Surprise Gift* is not explicitly about Lent. But it echoes some familiar themes.

When Jesus goes out into the wilderness he is confronted with a series of choices.

All of them relate in some way to self and desire.

Do I choose to satisfy myself above all—

my hunger, my need for power, my desire for affirmation—

or do I go a different way?

Like Jesus, Jesse chooses the path of generosity and self-giving. His story is all about emptying out and making space for better things.

Writing *Jesse's Surprise Gift* helped focus my thinking about Lent. It helped me get ready to write the book that had been percolating for years.

The Purpose of the Book

Make Room: A Child's Guide to Lent and Easter is the fruit of all my wondering and searching. It aims to do three things: First, it presents a positive view of Lent as a special time for creating a welcoming space for God and others. Second, it describes practical and meaningful ways children can experience the season with all their senses. Finally, it connects these activities with specific moments in the story of Jesus, so that children can see for themselves that the things we do to mark this season are not ends in themselves, but are part of a life of following and imitating Christ.

How to Read the Book

Make Room interweaves the story of Jesus with the reflections of a child experiencing the season of Lent. These intertwined storylines help children connect their own choices and actions with the life and work of Jesus.

They also open up different possibilities for reading, either at home or in a church or a classroom setting:

- Read the whole book aloud from start-to-finish, perhaps at the beginning of Lent, as an overview of the whole season. Read it again during Holy Week.
- Separate the two narratives and read the story of Jesus as a single story. Guide the children in wondering about what they hear. Where do they find themselves in the story?
- Read one section of the book at a time. When you finish one portion (e.g. *Making Room*), spend some time talking about how to put the theme into practice. What ideas are suggested by the story? How do they connect with the story of Jesus?
- Adapt the book for use in liturgy. Last year I received a note from a woman who had created an Intergenerational Shrove Tuesday service based on *Make Room*. She combined passages from the book with symbolic actions and simple responses.
- However you choose to read the book, you can always use wondering questions to encourage children to connect their own lives with the story. Wondering questions are open-ended. Their purpose is not to provide right answers, but to stir the imagination to new possibilities and insights. For instance, “I wonder why Jesus went into the desert by himself? I wonder how he felt there?” “I wonder where you go or what you do when you need to make important choices?” “I wonder how Jesus knew when God was close to him? I wonder how you know?” “I wonder why so many people wanted to come close to Jesus?” “If Jesus came to your school or church, I wonder who he would talk to and what he would say?”

How to Use the Book

Make Room is not a how-to activity guide, but it does suggest many possibilities, and may (I hope) inspire you to think of more. Depending upon the ages and interests of the children with whom you are working, you may wish to choose a few activities or practices (e.g. a new form of prayer) and use them throughout the whole Lenten season. Or you may prefer to follow the themes set out in the book and try a few different activities each week.

As a whole, *Make Room* is about creating openings for God—windows where the Spirit can enter and transform us, and through us, the world.

However, each section of the book has a particular emphasis. There are three main sections. Each of these is reframing of one of three traditional Lenten disciplines: Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving.

In my interpretation, Prayer becomes *Making Time*. Fasting becomes *Making Space*. Almsgiving become *Making Room*. I am going to introduce each section briefly and offer a few ideas for putting the theme into practice.

Making Time: Slowing Down

My youngest daughter attended a Montessori school for a year. I used to love to visit her classroom. Enormous windows flooded the space with natural light; bare walls were saved from starkness by some green plants and a few thought-provoking quotations; the shelves were orderly and filled with intriguing wooden materials. Best of all, despite the large number of very young children, the room was never noisy or chaotic. Rather, there was always a gentle hum of activity as the children went about choosing and becoming absorbed in their own work.

The *Making Time* section of the book is an invitation to take a break from some of those things that distract and drain us. This is a chance to experiment with everything from your physical environment to how you spend your time.

How can you help children slow down and savor the delights of stillness:

- Try to simplify your physical space. Remove some artwork or ornaments from your living space or your liturgical space. Invite children to take down the posters in their rooms for a few weeks. Notice and talk about how the change feels.
- Create a simple focal point for prayer or meditation. It could be a small table with a Lenten symbol (e.g. a pottery bowl filled with earth, some stones, a plain cross, a bare branch in a vase) or an empty corner in a room.

- If you are in the habit of watching television during mealtimes, try switching it off, or move it into another room. This is not a punishment, but an experiment to see how life feels with a bit less noise and distraction.
- Practise mindful breathing or simple guided meditation with your children for ten minutes every day. Create your own breath prayers, with simple phrases for the in-breaths and out-breaths (e.g. “I am breathing in peace, I am breathing out kindness.”)
- Go to a yoga class, or borrow a book and learn some postures together.
- Try having a few electronic-free evenings (or even days). Be sure to include the adults in your household as well as children. No texting under the table! Check in with each other about how it feels. What did you do with the time this opened up?
- Read aloud as a family or with the children in your congregation.
- Try a new form of prayer. Draw your prayers (see *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* by Sybil MacBeth), move your body (see *Praying With the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life* by Roy DeLeon) or write a letter to God (see *Writing to God: Kids’ Edition* by Rachel Hackenburg).
- Explore intercessory prayer with a book like my own *How Do I Pray for Grandpa?* (CopperHouse, 2014). Invite children to come up with their own images for God and for prayer.
- Introduce your children to the ancient practice of centering prayer, which involves intentionally letting go of thoughts and feelings. A helpful guide is *Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children* by Frank X. Jelenek (Paraclete Press, 2013).
- Try this child-friendly adaptation of the Ignatian practice of the daily *examen*. You will need a large glass jar and two smaller bowls filled with green and purple marbles or glass stones. Explain to your children that the green stones are a reminder of those moments in the day when God felt very close, while the purple stones represents times when God felt farther away. At the end of the day, give the children (or every member of the family) a purple and a green stone. As they hold the stones, encourage them to remember the events of the day and share aloud (if they wish) a moment when God felt close, or far away. Then they can place their stones in the large glass jar. As the jar fills up throughout Lent, children will develop the habit of paying attention to the presence and activity of God throughout the day. The fact that all the stones are gathered in the large jar reminds us all that our experiences and feelings—good and bad—are ultimately held together in the loving embrace of God.

Making Space: Clearing the Clutter

Many parents—myself included—complain about how much stuff their children have. Yet we continue to buy it, store it, and spend precious time picking it up off the floor! We do this even though our own wisdom and experience tells us that having *more* does not mean deeper appreciation or enjoyment of what we have. Making Space is a kind of Lenten fast—a break from our usual consumption of things.

We try to help children feel the lightness that comes with letting go of clutter and excess:

- Challenge children to go through their rooms and play spaces, identifying toys, games, books and clothes they have not used in the past year. These items can go in a box and be donated to a local shelter. You could do something similar for the church nursery.
- Enlist the help of your children in cleaning out the pantry or kitchen cupboards, or even the fridge.
- Make a game out of creating meals from food you already have. See how many meals you can dream up without having to buy more groceries!
- As a family or church group, sign up to volunteer at a food bank or community dinner for people who need a meal.
- Create a jar for collecting coins. As a family, make a plan for when to put money in the jar (e.g. every time you buy something you do not really need, every time you go out for a meal in the restaurant, every time you see a movie). At the end of the season, donate the money to a local organization that supports people in need.
- Try eating meatless meals one night a week. Or find a simple soup recipe and make a batch to share.

Making Room: Opening the Circle

Children and adults alike tend to cling to what is familiar. We have trouble welcoming the stranger. And yet, Jesus provided for us a model of radical welcome, giving and receiving hospitality among those considered outsiders.

The *Making Room* section of the book encourages children to open their hearts to people outside their own familiar circles of family and friends. This can be done through practical acts of hospitality, but it can also happen through art and literature. Good stories can help children imagine what they have not experienced, stretching their minds and hearts to take in new people and situations around the world.

- As a way of symbolizing how our acts of kindness fill the heart of God with joy, create a large felt heart with an opening at the top, and a basket full of many smaller stuffed hearts. Each time one of your children does something kind for someone else, invite him or her to put one of the smaller hearts in the big heart. As the weeks pass, they will enjoy seeing the larger heart swell with these many small signs of love and caring.
- Invite neighbours into your home for tea or a meal. Or better yet, invite someone you have never had a chance to get to know, perhaps someone new to the community, or new to your church.
- As a family, you could make and deliver a meal to someone who cannot easily get out (e.g. an older person or a family with a new baby).
- Organize a neighborhood or church pot-luck. A simple menu of soup, bread and fruit is easy for everyone.
- Create a collection of prayer cards with photos of people from all around the world. If you wish, you can print wondering questions on the back (e.g. I wonder what this person is feeling right now? I wonder what happened right before this photo was taken? I wonder how this person would be welcomed if he or she came to my school? My church? I wonder what I would say if I met this person? I wonder what this person might say to me?). Invite the children to do their own wondering, then ask God to be close to the person in the photograph.
- Watch a movie or read a book about children whose lives are very different from those of your own children (e.g. *The Breadwinner Trilogy* by Deborah Ellis).
- Learn more about the experience of displaced people around the world. Invite someone who has been a refugee, or who works with refugees, to come to your church and share their stories with the children.
- Ask your local librarian for help finding age-appropriate books about children who have had to leave their homes and move to new places (e.g. *Four Feet, Two Sandals* and *My Name is Sangoel* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed). Or check out some websites like: www.storypath.upsem.edu or www.picturebooktheology.blogspot.ca
- Write letters to organizations which support refugees or raise funds to support a local project in aid of newcomers to your community.

Final Thoughts

If I can emphasize one thing it is this: All of the practices which belong to the season of Lent—the traditional triad of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and their modern interpretations—are not ends in themselves, but a means of *transformation*.

When children are guided through Lent in a way that encourages them to make time, space and room, they are changed. The fruits of this season are many: simplicity, focus, attentiveness, openness of mind and heart, hospitality and compassion.

I hope that *Make Room* helps you cultivate these qualities in yourself, and in the children you love.