

Preparing Children for Advent

Preparing Ourselves First

The first, and most important thing, we can do to prepare our children for Advent is to prepare ourselves first. After all, if we are impatient and crabby - pressured by all the busyness of this season - we won't be very good at teaching our children anything about quiet, expectant waiting. If they never hear us talk about what we long for from the Lord, how will they learn about this kind of longing? And, if they hear "the coming of Jesus" talked about at church, and perhaps at school, but never hear us talk about the meaning of the coming of Jesus for us, what kind of message will we be giving them? Of course, our children will be watching us and listening to us - what we say and do, and what we fail to say and do. So, the first thing we can give our children is our own commitment to enter Advent as deeply as we can. We want to clear our own spirits so that we can be present to theirs. The graces we receive can be the graces we share with them.

Talking with Our Children

To talk with our children about our own religious experience doesn't mean we have to know all kinds of "theology" to "teach them," nor does it mean we have to "dumb it down" to ridiculously simple terms. We don't have to "burden" children with the burdens we have to bear in our adult relationship with God, and we don't have to make their world more unsettling and scary than it already is. We just have to find the right time and place to talk with them about our faith. We don't have to criticize everything in our contemporary culture's preparation for and celebration of Christmas. But, what we tell them about Advent, will help temper the materialism and consumerism involved in the marketing of Christmas to children.

The Message

We can tell our children about Isaiah, the prophet. We can tell them that God has wanted to be the one who would lead and take care of his people. But they rebelled against God, and demanded kings, just like all the peoples around them had. So, God let them have kings. As it turned out, there was one bad king after another. And God sent prophets to the people and the kings to remind them of the agreement - the "covenant" - God made with them: I'll be your God and you be my people.

Now the way the people made someone a king was to pour a bit of oil on their head. The one who was "anointed" this way with oil became the king. Well, the prophets began to tell the people that God would send them "an anointed one" (the word they use to say "anointed one" in Hebrew is "Messiah.") In fact, they said that this Messiah would be called "Emmanuel", which in Hebrew means, "God is with us."

So, the message of the prophets was about a promise - that God would save his people from all that they were suffering. The prophets use such wonderful images to tell the people that they could expect and hope for a day when "every tear would be wiped away." It would be a day of great peace - "the lion would lie down with the lamb" and the people will beat their spears into hooks to prune trees with. And, the most unbelievable promise of all: "death will be no more."

We all know now that what God was preparing his people for was the coming of Jesus, the Christ (*Christos* in Greek means "the anointed one.")

Then, of course, we can tell them about Zachary and Elizabeth and about Joseph and Mary. We can tell them the story from Luke's gospel first. What is so surprising about the story is that he comes, not like a king, but in great simplicity and poverty. Our God is truly with us, as a little baby. He knows what is like to be a child - everything.

We can tell this story to our children in so many ways. We can let them tell us what it means to them. Through all this conversation, the message will come through. During these weeks of Advent, we want to look forward to celebrating his coming to live our life and to set us free - free from our sins and free from death itself.

We want to open up Advent for them, so that they can get ready for - look forward to - Christmas in a different way. We want to introduce them to faith-filled meanings for light/darkness, hunger/thirsts, and all the other images of Isaiah. We want them to really know the meaning of "the Christmas story."