



Our Family's Plan for Great Lent

*From “Orthodox Motherhood”
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For the Eastern Orthodox Church, Great Lent is the seven week period before Pascha (Easter) during which the faithful fast from certain foods and, more importantly, from sin. In order to enter more fully into the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord, we repent through the traditional disciplines of prayer and fasting.

Great Lent is almost here. This Sunday we observe Forgiveness Sunday, and then Monday starts the Fast in earnest. **I always approach the Fast with a feeling of both joy and trepidation.**

Joy because I know that my soul, my heart, and my body are longing for a time of deliberate quiet, of a slowed life, of meditation and repentance. Trepidation because I know that repentance, humility and brokenness are often painful and tearful. **This is why the Church refers to Great Lent as the Bright Sadness.** It is a joyful mourning, a happy repentance that leads from the Cross to the Empty Tomb. There can be no victory of the Resurrection without the utter devastation of the Cross. No celebration of Pascha without the repentance of Lent.

And so we approach Great Lent with joy and trepidation.

Each year I pause before Great Lent to consider how I can help my family and myself have a more intentional, meaningful journey to Pascha. My husband and I pray and discuss it, and we make a plan of sorts. **We think of ways that we can help our children (and ourselves) experience the fasting, prayer, almsgiving, spiritual study, and repentance that are central to Lent.**

I would like to share that plan with you. But, first I want to give three important caveats:

-This plan is unique to our family and our situation. Our children are young; I work full-time; my husband is in the frantic-finishing-stage of his dissertation. All of these things play a part in our decisions as to what things we included or did not include in our plan. Your family's Lent may look vastly different as your situation is different than ours.

-This is not the “ideal” or “perfect” plan. I am an ordinary, busy mom who struggles with maintaining my patience with my children while trying to live out my faith in an imperfect way. This is by no means *the* definitive way to observe Lent.

-As always, speak with your spiritual father. I am also (obviously!) not a priest. Be sure to speak with your spiritual father as you think through your family's plan for Great Lent.

Our Family's Plan for Great Lent



Fasting

—My husband and I will fully participate in the church's prescribed fast. In the Orthodox faith, this means that we will abstain from meat, dairy, wine, and oil from Clean

Monday until Pascha (Easter). I will research new fasting recipes (many of which I hope to share here!) to try. I will also pull out family favorites such as [Vegan Split Pea Soup](#), [Potato Tacos](#), and [Cilantro Black Bean Salad](#).

—Our children will observe a modified fast. Because of our children's young ages (3, 4, and 7), they will still eat some dairy. They will have milk at breakfast and supper, and I will put yogurt into their lunchboxes. However, they will, by default, not eat meat. They are still at the age where they love eating a peanut butter sandwich for lunch each day, so we will continue that. Each supper will be a fasting supper—often with beans, lentils, peas, etc.—so they will still have plenty of protein in their diets.

—I am especially excited to try several of the recipes from Melissa Naasko's book *Fasting as a Family* this year. I used Melissa's worksheets at the back of the book to help me plan out our meals for the first week of Lent already!



Prayer

-We will pray the Morning Prayers and Evening Prayers as a family each day. For our family this typically means praying the Trisagion prayers and personal prayers. Our youngest children ask the Lord to have mercy on various people. Our oldest prays the Jesus prayer and then does the same.

-During Lent we will also add the *Prayer of Saint Ephraim* and its accompanying prostrations to our routine. I was amazed a few years ago when our oldest son, then 4, learned the entire prayer through our frequent repetition of it. In addition, we will sing appropriate hymns throughout Lent—for example, “Your Cross We Adore” and “Having Suffered the Passion for Us.”

-Personally, I will be praying the Psalter this year. I am really looking forward to becoming more disciplined about this.

Almsgiving

Another key element of Great Lent is almsgiving. During this time of fasting we are called upon to consider the poor and suffering around us. As we have simple meals, we should use the money saved to help those in need



-Our family **will collect and donate canned good items** to our church's Lenten collection—which goes out to our local community. This year I plan to give my oldest a gift card for our local grocery store and let him pick out what he would like to donate. This will be a good lesson in both giving and budgeting. If you are looking for other ways that your family can serve, take a look at [10 Ways Your Children Can Serve Others](#).

Spiritual Study



During Lent Orthodox Christians also try to tame outside distractions and focus on the realities of our faith. This means we limit television and other media and read spiritual books and the Scriptures.

Books for the Children:

-We will read [Lent! Wonderful Lent!](#) many times at home and take it to church with us.

-Read [The Story of Mary, the Mother of God](#) for the Feast of the Annunciation

-Read [Pictures of God: A Child's Guide to Understanding Icons](#) for the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy

-Listen to the [Gospel Retold for Younger Children](#) from Ancient Faith Radio before Liturgy each Sunday so that our children are familiar with that day's Gospel reading.

-My oldest son and I will also read [Shepherding Sam](#) together

My Reading Plan:

-Read all four Gospels

-Reread [The Way of a Pilgrim](#), a classic of Orthodox spirituality and The Jesus Prayer

-Read [Christ in the Psalms](#) as part of our Church's small group studies this Lent

For more recommendations of spiritual reading, take a look at [Best Children's Books for Lent and Holy Week](#) and [Spiritual Readings for Great Lent](#).



Services

During Lent, Orthodox Christians attend various services more frequently. In addition to Sunday Divine Liturgy, the Church also offers a Presanctified Liturgy mid-week as a means of strengthening believers. Also, many churches offer an Akathist

Hymn during the week, some Saturdays are called Soul Saturdays and have a Liturgy for the Departed, and regular Vespers (Saturday evening services) continue.



This schedule can be a bit overwhelming for those with children—our family included. We also live 45 minutes away from our parish, and evening services wreak havoc on bedtimes. Therefore, we modify it a bit for our circumstances.

- We all attend Sunday Divine Liturgy
- We will all attend Forgiveness Vespers
- My husband and I will both attend at least one part of the Great Canon of Saint Andrew during Clean Week
- My husband and I alternate weeks for Presanctified Liturgy. He frequently serves, and I chant.
- My oldest son will attend 1-2 Presanctified Liturgies
- We will all attend Vespers at least twice a month.

We hope and pray that as the children grow older (and if we move to a town with a parish in closer proximity) that we will be able to attend more services together as a family.

Repentance

Finally, repentance is a major theme of Great Lent. We repent of our sins, ask God to forgive us, ask others to forgive us, and seek to live a righteous life. While primarily an inward discipline, there are a few things that we want to do as a family:

- We will all **attend Forgiveness Vespers** in order to ask forgiveness from and offer forgiveness to each member of our parish.
- Both my husband and I will **go to confession** at least once during Great Lent, as is prescribed by our priest and spiritual father.
- My **oldest son will come with one of us to confession** in order to see what happens during the sacrament.
- My oldest son will attend classes with our priest to **prepare for his first confession** during Holy Week.

I pray that you have a blessed Fast and that our family's imperfect plan for Lent may encourage and help you. Great Lent is almost here. Let us draw near with joy and trepidation. Let us fully enter into the Bright Sadness.