

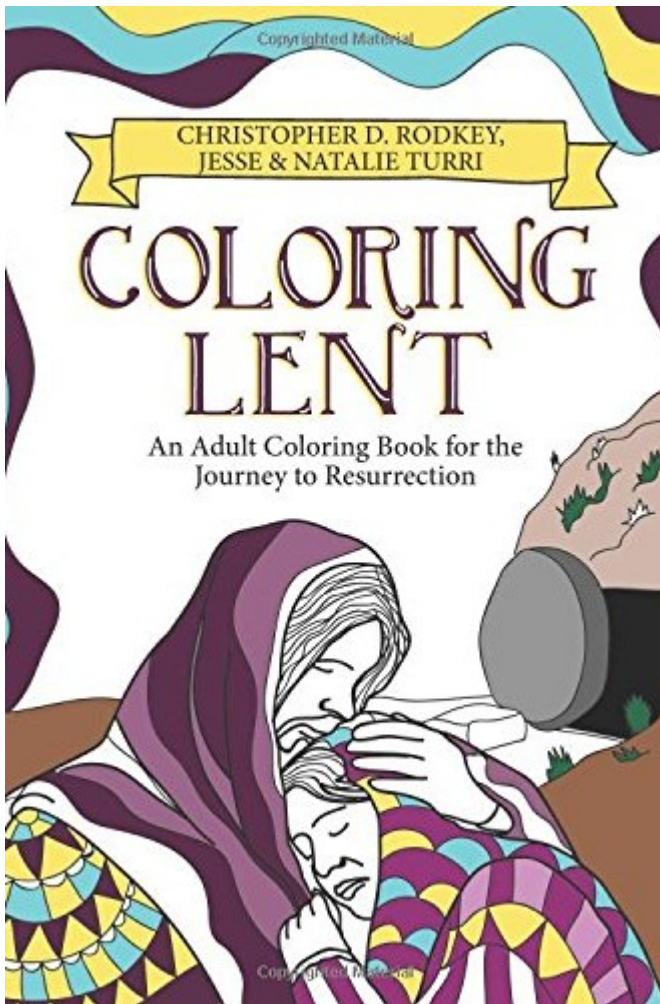
Not your kindergartener's coloring book

Should I let my child color pictures of Jesus on the cross?

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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In Review



Coloring Lent

An Adult Coloring Book for the Journey to Resurrection

by Christopher Rodkey; illustrated by Jesse and Natalie Turri
Chalice Press

I anticipate that when I tell my kindergartener I've decided to color with her every evening for the next 46 days, she will be thrilled. This idea was sparked by *Coloring Lent*, an illustrated journey through salvation history written by pastor and theologian Christopher Rodkey. The simple but evocative drawings by Jesse and Natalie Turri each share a page with a brief biblical reflection. Some of the words are purely narrative: "The Israelites followed the Cloud through the wilderness." Others are more theological, like this riff on Isaiah 52 and 53: "He will be like the sacrificial animal led to the slaughter to untangle the human logic of violence. The Cloud will negate itself by pouring out into flesh and into death."

There is mystery in Rodkey's writing, which alludes to theologians like Catherine Keller and James Cone. The book stretches resurrection into the lives of its readers, ending with a blessing and commission: "Now go, and break the seal of the entombments around you and others." This is the only coloring book I've seen that has an index, extensive endnotes, and references to Thomas Altizer and Slavoj Žižek. The drawings are sparse enough to be colored cooperatively with a six-year-old. Certain images appear again and again—clouds, serpents, crosses—all of which are appropriate for Lent.

Yet, I wonder what it will be like to color pictures of Christ suffering on the cross (of which there are several in this book). Will it be a deeply devotional act, or will it feel voyeuristic—or worse yet, trite? How will I help my daughter perceive that coloring a crucified Jesus is qualitatively different from coloring Doc McStuffins or Hello Kitty?

My child and I could avoid coloring the crucified Jesus (and still have plenty of poetic reflection on the meaning of faith) if we were to use instead the [Lent Coloring Devotional](#) produced by the creative team at [A Sanctified Art](#). This beautiful coloring poster is comprised of 40 sections inspired by the daily lectionary, each with accompanying devotional text. Social-justice oriented and thoroughly rooted in scripture, the artists behind this extraordinary resource claim: "Art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God. We need the prophetic, connective power of art in our churches." If I were working in a congregation, this is the Lenten resource I would use. It's child-friendly, poetic, and

structured for cooperative coloring.

Liturgically-oriented coloring books are becoming increasingly common, but the idea of drawing and coloring as a spiritual practice is not new. Years before “adult coloring books” flooded the market, Paraclete Press published Sybil MacBeth’s [*Praying in Color*](#), which connects [doodling](#) with prayer. In a chapter on praying for other people, MacBeth suggests several templates: a patchwork quilt, a grid, a calendar, even drawings of vegetables—all of which contain the names of those who need prayer. One particularly lovely sketch, drawn for a college student facing a difficult math exam, surrounds the student’s name with a cloud of mathematical symbols: square roots, infinities, and variables. Other sketches suggest forms of drawing/praying for one’s enemies, the use of *lectio divina*, and a method for theological brainstorming. *Praying in Color* is one of Paraclete’s bestsellers, but they now also [publish](#) several traditional coloring books, some of which are paired with contemplative music.

These days, the options for religious coloring books are nearly endless. Herald Press’s [*Beloved Amish and Mennonite Quilts*](#) connects scripture with elaborate pictures of popular quilt designs, along with commentary on the history and meaning of each design. Zondervan offers coloring books based on beloved hymn texts, including [*It is Well with My Soul*](#) and [*All Creatures of Our God and King*](#). HarperOne has just released Lindsay Sherbondy’s [*Sweeter than Honey*](#), with alluring line drawings of biblical words and hymn lyrics that would be ideal for coloring with a child who is learning to read. What better way to internalize the meaning and sounds of letters than to color them one by one? However, I won’t be using this coloring book with my daughter because I fear that she would internalize the book’s use of exclusively masculine pronouns for God.

I’m aware that there’s some irony here. I won’t let my daughter color a calligraphic “H” next to a fancy “E” when those letters refer to God. But I’ll let her color a picture of a man who we claim is God nailed to a cross with a serpent and skull underfoot. I realize that many parents would probably make the opposite choice. Thankfully, there are enough religious coloring books for all of us to choose from.