

## On Kids and Faith

When I think back on my childhood and how I experienced God and faith, one of the first memories that comes to mind is my struggle with prayer. In the church I grew up in, I had been taught there was a correct way to pray, and that in order for God to hear you when you prayed, your hands needed to be folded, your thumbs crossed and your fingers pointing up. I would often find myself awake late at night, mind racing, body tired, wishing I could talk to God about what was on my mind, but I was too tired to move my arms to where they needed to be.

Then, there were the prayers for every occasion that I learned from a children's prayer book I had been given. These prayers often rhymed - "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless this bed that I lay on"- and somehow I concluded that all prayers must rhyme. I am unfortunately most untalented at rhyming verses, and I struggled to come up with meaningful prayers on my own. So I stopped trying.

Moving into adulthood, this meant that I couldn't talk to God unless I was reciting prayers from a book or using one of my memorized prayers. Many of these prayers, while lovely, had no personal meaning to me. If I tried to simply pray what was on my mind, I would feel panic, searching for rhyming words, or fearing those who, knew "the right way to pray" would hear me and judge me.

I didn't absorb many Bible stories either while growing up. We didn't read the Bible at home. My family's faith tradition is rich, going back generations, and we had other ways of practicing and living out our faith. I was confirmed in my childhood church and I'm sure I had to learn Bible stories in the classes we had to take leading up to that event, but they didn't seem to stick. There was little in the Bible I felt I could look to for comfort or assistance in my daily life. The few stories I remembered were happy stories with rainbows and heroes and they were tied up neatly with a bow.

So it was quite a shock for me, then, when I started reading the Bible again as an adult. Four years ago, when I took the position of Kids Ministry Director here at Sanctuary, I went through something of a faith crisis. I had spent most of my time before that volunteering in the nursery or toddler classrooms, where we didn't have lesson plans and we spent our time playing. Suddenly I was preparing lesson plans for older kids with bible stories every week. And nearly every week, I would go over the story with Mim Winn, who would listen patiently as I freaked out about Moses being a murderer, or Noah and the flood being a story of genocide.

No one had told me and I don't think I'd ever read these stories myself in the Bible! I didn't know how to tell these stories to our kids when I couldn't figure out how to

process them myself. I didn't know how- or trust that I could- talk to God about it. I felt that, when it came to the faith and God, I didn't really know anything at all.

Looking back, I can see God close to me every step of the way as I grew into my current role. I had an amazing team of women who met with me for well over a year, sharing their own experiences of faith and gifting me with their particular expertise in working with or parenting kids. David and Adey met with me every week and listened as I asked all of my questions. And Mim still meets with me every week, along with Dana Lehmann, wondering with me about where the kids might find Jesus or themselves in the stories we tell.

Along the way, I discovered that I could ask Jesus my big questions and talk to him about all of the things I was worried about- in my own simple, unrhymed words- and I could find peace and hope even when I didn't find answers.

After years of reading, questioning and wondering, I still have a lot of questions, but instead of feeling paralyzed by them, now they are opportunities to invite God into what I'm thinking about, to meet me where I'm at on any given day. I look at my own journey into relationship with Jesus and my periods of wrestling with faith and I wonder,

- “How can we share the stories of our faith with our kids without giving them something they have to tear down and reconstruct as adults?”
- “How do we best prepare our kids to wrestle with their faith, knowing this is a healthy and natural part of human and spiritual development that can ultimately lead us to a stronger, more fulfilling faith in God?”
- “How can we equip and empower our kids to have their own relationships with Jesus, feeling comfortable talking with him in their own words, in their own way?”

These are big questions. In our kids ministry, adding to the challenge is writing lesson plans each week that try to make room for all of our kids- honoring the diversity of the families and faith backgrounds in our community while recognizing that some of our kids have grown up going to this church every Sunday and some might be at church for the very first time.

In the spirit of creating a space that meets kids wherever they're at when they are at when they're with us Sunday morning, we've found it helpful to focus on cultivating personal connections to Jesus and the stories of Jesus and God in the Bible, instead of learning about them. We share these stories, making space for wondering and asking questions- offering the children *perspectives* instead of answers.

We believe that when we give our kids all of the answers, we don't leave anything for them to discover on their own. But if we let them process their own, individual responses to a story, then we give them the opportunity to find deeper meaning as they grow and mature into adults. We hope we're giving them tools that will help them in the inevitable wrestling to come out on the other side closer to God.

One of the ways we practice this is by presenting stories inspired by an approach called Godly Play. When we tell a Godly Play story, we use materials that help the viewers go deeper into the story. After we tell the story, we wonder about it together, and then give the kids several options to respond to the story. There's usually a variety of beautiful or fun materials to work with, so the kids can choose to respond in their own way to the story they heard.

Experiencing stories this way can be a gift, and today I get to share this gift with you. I'm going to present one of our Godly Play stories to all of you this morning. I'll be sitting at the table here in front, with the materials in front of me. But don't worry if you can't see; we'll project the story on the big screens behind me.

As I'm telling the story, I won't be looking up or making eye contact. Instead, I invite you to enter into the story without worrying about me. You can listen to my words, and watch as I move the materials.

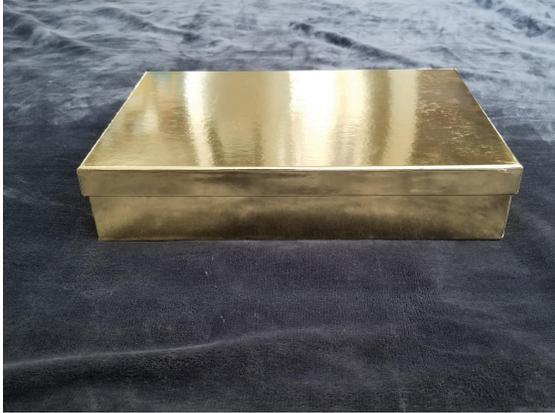
When the story is finished, I'll ask some wondering questions. We'll wonder together, and then I'll give you some time to respond to the story in your own, personal way.

I'd like to pray before we begin: Loving and Gracious God, we invite you here as we enter into your story. We thank you for meeting us wherever we are at today. Amen.

### Movements

### Words

*Sit facing the children, with gold parable box in front of you:*



**You need to be very careful when you come close to a parable. You need to be ready, because you can break a parable, if you aren't ready.**

**Look, the box is the color gold. Perhaps there is something valuable like gold inside. There could be a parable inside, because they are very valuable. They are worth even more than gold.**

*Knock on the top of the box as if the top were a door.*



**The box also has a lid on it. Sometimes it is as if parables have doors that are shut. You can't go inside the parable even if you are ready. I don't know why. It just happens, so don't be discouraged. Keep coming back again and again. One day the parable will open up for you.**

*Lift up the box and hold it out to the children as if it is a present.*



**The box looks like a present. You know, there may be a parable inside, because you were given parables as a present, even before you were born. Even if you don't know what a parable is, it is still yours.**

**It looks old. Parables are also old. They are older than you, and they are older than me. They are even older than your grandmother or grandfather. They are almost two thousand years old.**

**I wonder if there is really a parable inside?  
I have an idea. Let's look and see.**

*Move the box to your side and take the lid off.*

*Remove the brown underlay. Drop it in a crumpled shape in the middle of the circle and look at it for a moment. Then begin to smooth it out as you say:*



**I wonder what this could really be?**

**There is so much brown. There is no green at all. Look, there is no blue. There is nothing but brown, and the brown is scratchy.**

**It is hard to know what this could really be if there is only brown.**

**Let's see if there is anything else in the box that can help us.**

*Wait a moment and then turn to the box and bring out the "road."*



**Oh, I wonder what this could be?**

**What could it really be?**

*It might be a fence you have to jump over.  
(Move your fingers along and jump them over it.)*

*There are many things it might be. Invite the children to help you build the metaphor of the parable so it will be the common property of all.*

*Place Jerusalem and then Jericho at opposite ends of the road. Make sure Jerusalem is at the end nearest you.*



**Could it be a crack? Perhaps the whole thing is going to break into two pieces?**

**Maybe it's a fence, and we have to jump over it. Hmm....**

**Let's see if there is anything else to help us.**

**Oh look. It's a road. It's going from this place to this place. But there is more. Look at this.**

**I wonder what these could really be? There is no light in them at all. They are like rocks, or deep holes, or shadows. Let's see what else we have in here to help us make the parable.**

*Take the two black pieces of felt from the box one at a time. Put one on one side of the road and the other on the other side of the road at the midpoint of the road.*



*Take out the two thieves and put one behind each of the black felt pieces by the road.*



*Sit back and prepare. When you and the children are ready, you begin:*

*Take the person out of the box who is making the journey and place him at the Jerusalem end of the road by you.*



**There was once someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people followed him. As they followed him they heard him speaking of many things, and sometimes people asked him questions.**

**One day someone asked him, “What is the most important thing in life?” Jesus said, “You already know.”**

**“That is true. I do. It is to love God and to love people just like they are your neighbors. But who is my neighbor?”**

**Jesus answered his question with this parable.**

**There was once someone who went from Jerusalem down to Jericho.**

Take the robbers out from behind the “rocks” and place them in an “X” over the traveler. Then move the robbers off the underlay, back to the box or to your side.



As he went along his way he was attacked by robbers.



They hurt him, took everything that he had, and left him by the side of the road half dead.



There was also a great priest of the temple who went on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho.



*When the priest comes to the injured traveler, move the priest slowly to the other side of the road and past the traveler.*



**As he went along his way he came to the place where the person was who had been hurt, had everything taken from him, and had been left by the side of the road half dead.**

**When the priest came to him, the priest went to the other side of the road and went along his way.**





*Move the Levite slowly down the road.*



**There was someone else who also worked at the temple who went from Jerusalem down to Jericho.**

**He was one of the people who helped the priests. He took care of the temple and helped with the music. He was called a Levite.**

**When the Levite came to the place where the person was who had been hurt, had everything taken from him, and had been left by the side of the road half dead, he went to the other side . . .**

**. . . and he went along his way.**



*Move the Samaritan slowly down the road until he comes to the injured traveler.*



**There was a person who went on the road who did not live in Jerusalem.**

**He was visiting from a country called Samaria. The people in Samaria did not like the people in Jerusalem, and the people in Jerusalem did not like the people from Samaria.**

**When the stranger came to where the person was who had been hurt, had everything taken from him, and had been left by the side of the road half dead, the stranger went to him.**



The stranger put medicine on the places where the person was hurt. He gave him his coat to put on. He then put him on his donkey and took him to a place to spend the night.



The stranger even stayed with him all the night, and in the morning he gave the innkeeper enough money for him to stay there until he was well.



Now, I wonder, who is the neighbor to the person who had been hurt, had everything taken from him, and had been left by the side of the road half dead?



**I wonder if it could be this one, the priest?  
Or if it could be the Levite?**



**I wonder if it could be this one, the  
robber?**



**Do you think it could be the samaritan?**

*Place the priest beside the traveler.*



**I wonder who is the neighbor to this one, the priest?**



**Maybe it could be the robber? Hmm...**



**I wonder if it's the Levite. The Levites do work with the priests.**



**I wonder who is the neighbor to this one, the robber??**

**Ahh. That's not easy, is it?**



**Could it be the other robber?**



**I wonder if it could be the priest?**



*Now wonder about children. The children need to know that going to get help is also helping.*

**Do you think it could be the samaritan?**

**I wonder what would happen if the person finding the injured traveler were a child?**

**Children need to go get help, don't they? Going to get help is helping, too. It's not a good idea to try to take care of a hurt person by yourself.**

**I wonder where you could be in this story, or what part of this story could be about you?**

**I wonder, have you ever been alone or scared or hurt and needed help?**

**I wonder if you've ever helped someone who was alone or scared or hurt?**

**I wonder if you've ever been *afraid* to help someone who was alone or scared or hurt?**

As we do in our Kids' Wing, I've prepared some options for you to respond to the story this morning. I invite you to process your own, individual response to this story, and to listen for what God might be saying to you.

We'll be handing out a booklet that explains these options and contains some materials you might work with. There are more materials on the cart in the back. You might think about the neighbors you encounter in your life, choosing one to pray for and adding their name to one of the prayer walls on either side of the room. There's space inside the booklet to doodle, an origami project, a prompt for our candle station, or you might simply choose to sit quietly and invite Jesus to meet you where you're at. We'll have five minutes for you to use the time as you wish, then I'll lead us into communion.

### [Booklet With Response Options](#)

I have come to think that these stories are not instructions from God about what we are supposed to do, but instead invitations from God to help us know who we are, and how he comes to give us the help we need. And this is a kind of conversation with God that I am happy to have.