

Feasting on the Word[®]

GUIDE TO
CHILDREN'S SERMONS

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Introduction

We believe, as many of you do, that children's stories or sermons should be part of the weekly gathering of faith communities as they worship. We also believe that children should hear the stories within the context of worship. First, the stories of faith, although written with adults in mind, belong to all of God's children, young and old. Second, hearing the stories within the context of the worship tells children that they are welcome, that they are part of the "church family," and that these stories are their stories. Last but not least, children need to hear the good news that they are loved, helped, and cared for and that they can love, help, and care for others.

This is not a book of children's stories that you can go to on Saturday night to find a story to tell to the children at Sunday morning worship. We recognize that these types of books can be good resources, and in chapter 5 we provide some sample stories. However, we want to encourage those of you responsible for telling the stories to write your own. We urge you to use the same kind of process that you use when writing a sermon for adults. Start with the questions you would ask when preparing your sermon: What does the lectionary text say? What is happening in the lives of the

congregation? What are the needs of the congregation? And what is the good news they need to hear?

In the second chapter, because children are not small adults, we have attempted to address some things that we feel would be helpful for you to be aware of as you begin to write; for example, how younger children hear and understand the meaning of words as well as some of the stresses, fears, and losses they experience and bring with them to morning worship. This chapter also looks at the role of the stories of faith in a child's moral and faith development.

Many books on children's sermons specify the use of particular strategies when telling the story to children. In chapter three, we look at some of these strategies in terms of the positives and the possible pitfalls of each when used to tell the stories of faith, as well as the use of body language when giving the children's sermon. The chapter ends with a discussion concerning the appropriateness of some of the stories for young children and whether there are ways to tell some of these stories in a way that is faithful to the text but does not confuse or frighten young children.

In the fourth chapter, we look at the use of children's stories or sermons in the larger context of Christian worship. We suggest that the Revised Common Lectionary can provide a rich resource for children's stories as well as for "regular" sermons. In this discussion, we seek to be faithful to the purposes of *Feasting on the Word*, the collection of essays also published by Westminster John Knox Press as a guide for preaching on the lectionary texts.

We look at the ways in which the rest of worship can enrich and be enriched by the children's story. And we look at other ways in which children can participate in worship,

ways of reaffirming their place as welcome members of the regular worshipping community.

In our fifth chapter, we provide examples of stories that could be used for children in worship. Our hope is that these stories will provide starting points and inspiration for pastors to write their own stories or to build on ours in ways appropriate to your own congregation, its interests, and needs.

Our deep hope is that this book will encourage and inform congregations and pastors that include children's stories as part of weekly worship. Our further hope is that other congregations and pastors may be challenged to try this way of bringing the gospel to the children among us.

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CHAPTER 1

Bible Stories

Part of the Family

Christian worship is like a family meal—especially on a great occasion such as Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter. At those family meals we talk together and eat together and sometimes say prayers together. We also tell the family stories. Children want to hear stories about themselves when they were younger. They want to hear stories about their parents or caregivers.

The stories we tell may be sad or amusing; they may make a point or they may be blessedly pointless, told for their own sake, not just to inform but to delight. The stories we tell help to shape the family. We discover who we are partly because we discover that we are the people who tell *these* stories. With the richest of such stories it does not really matter if we tell them time and again.

“Come on, tell the one about when we went to the circus.”

“Tell us again about your grandmother and her doll.”

“What did I do when you brought my sister home for the first time?”

After a while the stories become so much a part of our eating and sharing that someone can just say: “Remember

the circus!” and we share the laughter or the dismay with fresh enthusiasm.

One reason we tell children’s stories in church is to help children know themselves as members of our community. The fact that we pay attention to children is one sign that they count in our community. But the fact that we share our favorite stories with them is another sign. These are the stories we tell as part of our church family, and now the children can learn and share the stories too.

The Bible is a collection of stories for the family of faith. Of course there are many texts in the Bible that are not stories. The psalms are songs; the lists of rules are instructions; Paul’s epistles are letters.

Yet even here we can often discern a story behind the texts. Psalm 23 is a song that tells a great story about God as shepherd. The lists of rules in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are part of a story about the escape of the children of Israel from Egypt and their long trip to the Promised Land. First Corinthians is a letter, but when we read it we learn a good deal about the story of the Corinthian church, and the story of Paul, and in many places (such as 1 Cor. 15) we learn something of the story of Jesus.

As far as we can tell, Mark was the first person to discover that one essential way to talk about the Christian faith is to tell the story of Jesus in some detail. All four of our gospels are stories filled with stories. The Gospel of Luke, for example, tells the story of Jesus from his birth through his death and resurrection and ascension. Within that story are many smaller stories about Jesus—the nativity story, the story of feeding the five thousand, the story of Jesus’ arrest and trial and crucifixion.

Yet there are also the stories that Jesus tells—most famously the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of the father and the two brothers, usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son.

As members of the family of faith, we want to know the story of the prodigal son, but we also want to know that this was a story told by Jesus. We want to see how the smaller story fits into the larger story of God welcoming home prodigals and reaching out to elder brothers through Jesus Christ himself.

Our hope is that this book will help us as Christians rediscover and tell the stories that are essential to our faith and essential to our life together as the church.

The Children's Sermon in Worship

We love children's *stories* as parts of worship.

The stories have been passed down in the family of faith in a book, or a collection of books—our Bible. Before many of our favorite stories were written down, they were passed on by word of mouth. Preachers and storytellers from the earliest days until now know how to capture our attention: “Once upon a time . . .” Based on fifteen years of leading children's time in church and even more years of observing children's time in church, our bias is for simple, old-fashioned storytelling. The leader speaks to the children of the church as a parent or loving adult speaks to the children at home or at school. “Once upon a time a man was taking a trip from the city of Jerusalem to the town of Jericho,” for example.

However, we also know that there are other ways of telling

stories that can also be very effective. Stories can be dramatized. Stories can be visualized. A prop can open up a whole narrative. A question can provide the opening for telling a biblical tale. In the course of this book, we will suggest some ways in which all of these strategies can be used in service of the story. We believe that stories shape lives even more richly than quizzes and build communities more lastingly than even the most colorful bunches of balloons. Stories help children answer the same questions they help adults answer: Who am I? To whom do I belong?

The Christian family that welcomes our children is of course much larger than the family that gathers in any particular sanctuary on any particular Sunday. It stretches around the world and back for two millennia. Sometimes we will want to tell a great story about Mount Pleasant Church or an anecdote about what happened at the Church School picnic last May. But more often, we will want to share the stories of that much larger family, not just what it is to be part of the Lakeshore family or the University Church family, but to be part of the family of faith.

For children as for adults those great, enduring, encompassing family stories are found in the Bible. We could make a good many claims for the authority of Scripture, but for the purposes of this book one claim is claim enough. The Bible contains the stories that shape us into Christian people and form us into Christian communities. Our children have the right to hear these stories, to be nurtured into our community.

There are many other wonderful stories for children and adults as well. In this family, in the church, we want to tell and hear stories taken from the Bible.

What's the Point?

We are wary of stories that end with morals.

We love stories that tell themselves, stories that involve us in such a way that we cannot simply say: “Here’s what the story means in a sentence or two.” We want the story to mean the story. Of course that works better for some stories than for others. When Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, he tells it in a way that involves all the listeners, and then he leaves the story open-ended. We have to figure out the ending and discern the meaning for ourselves. Does the older brother come in to the party? Would we? At the end of the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus does give a kind of moral, a lesson, but it is precisely not the moral the lawyer who first heard the story would have expected. And Jesus’ answer does not exactly respond to the lawyer’s question. “Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks. “Go be a neighbor,” says Jesus.

So we are wary of morals because they simplify the story, wrap it up in too neat a package. More than that, we are wary of stories that end with morals because they are “morals.” Our hope for children’s time in church is that it will be the opportunity to invite children into the richness of God’s love, not to add another injunction or two to the rules and reminders they hear so regularly. We will remind ourselves in the next section of this chapter that the church is in the business of providing good news, not of inflicting new rules. While the traditional distinction between law and gospel covers over a multitude of issues, preaching for children as well as for adults is more about the good news of what God is doing than a new set of instructions about what we are to do. This is true for children as much as for adults.

What is more, sometimes there is great value in telling Bible stories just because they are our family stories. A six-year-old may not be ready to grasp the complex relationship between liberation and responsibility in the story of the Exodus, but she is surely ready to have some idea of who Moses is and what he did. Teenagers may be ready to think through the theological implications of Peter's conversation with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, but we will want younger children to know that Peter followed Jesus—sometimes very faithfully, sometimes not so well.

Truly Including Children

Children's stories also find their appropriate place in a larger context. Worship leaders will want to attend to children's interests and abilities in planning the worship service. If children are present only for the first part of worship, then that would be an especially appropriate place for songs that children can learn to sing and prayers that children can hear appreciatively.

If children are present for the entire service, then those who plan worship will want to ensure that there are more accessible opportunities for children from time to time throughout the service. Some churches provide activity bags related to the texts and themes for the service. All churches will want to be careful to allow some inclusive activities at different points in the service. Of course we want the passing of the peace to be in a liturgically appropriate spot, but we might also think a bit about how long children have been asked to sit still and whether there might be an appropriate

opportunity to stand up and move around somewhere toward the middle of the service. If there are three hymns, we want to make sure that one of them is either familiar to the children or easily sung. If there are concerns of the church (or even “the work of the church”)—a fancy term for announcements—make sure that children’s concerns and children’s activities are included.

We will find places in the worship service where younger members of the congregation can help in leadership—not just on Children’s Sunday but throughout the year.

Furthermore, the whole setting of congregational life can reinforce the importance of the children’s story. If the pastor shakes hands at the door after church, let her make sure that she shakes every hand, names as many names as possible, and looks straight at the children—not over their heads at their parents.

At coffee hour, adults will want to take time to talk with children, not just to hush them, and refreshments, needless to say, will include options beyond coffee and tea.

It is astonishingly clear to children whether or not this is a church that pays attention to them. We want to be sure that what happens for seven minutes in the worship service reflects the loving hospitality of the church’s whole life.

Good News

We make one more fundamental claim about children’s sermons. Children’s sermons should be gospel, good news. The preacher will find those stories in the Bible (by no means only in the Gospels) that declare the good news of God’s love

for all people. The preacher will tell those stories in such a way as to encourage and inspire such love in the children who hear our sermons.

In this book, when we try to talk about what makes the gospel good news, it seems appropriate to start with a story—two stories really. We want to look at the story of the Prodigal Son and then we want to look at the larger story that contains that parable—the Gospel of Luke. We will conclude this chapter by suggesting the ways in which different age groups might appropriately hear and understand the good news.

In looking at Luke 15:11–32, we notice first of all that there is good news here, not just for the prodigal but for his brother as well.

The good news for the prodigal is that, despite his “riotous living” (v. 13 KJV), he is welcome at his father’s home and embraced in his father’s arms. Of course this is a story about family life, not just about God’s kindness to us; but it *is* a story about God’s kindness, and the story makes clear that no matter how far we run, we cannot outdistance God’s care and compassionate concern.

The good news for the older brother is, first, that he lives his life in the providential care of the father (“Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours” v. 31.) The good news is, second, that the older brother is invited, urged really, to attend his brother’s welcome home party. Tempting as it might be for him to keep his distance from his brother, the father is in the business of ending division and establishing a loving brotherhood and sisterhood.

What is also striking is that in both cases it is the father who initiates the loving relationship. The younger son busily practices his little speech of repentance as he comes down the road toward home, but before he can say a word the father

runs out to embrace him. We can guess that, in his mind's eye, the father has been running to embrace the son for all the days of separation. The older son does not head out to seek the father's counsel at all; the father comes to console him and, most important, to welcome him in.

The story is good news, and we are of course hesitant to turn the story into a set of points or morals. What we see is how central community is to good news—the community between father and sons, between brothers. We see that, in establishing community, the father, like God, is always the first actor. We see that, when it comes to the love of God, at our farthest we are not too far, and at our latest we are not too late.

In the Gospel of Luke, this good news is contained in the larger story of good news where God sends God's Son down the road to meet us, out into the field to encourage us in companionship. Take the whole story and note the prodigals who are welcomed home—the Gentiles, the sinners, the thief on the cross. Take the whole story and note the elder brothers who are invited to the feast—the Pharisees at the beginning of Luke 15, the young ruler, the lawyer who asks about neighborhood in Luke 10.

Notice that in the larger framework of the story the Son who greets us also forgives us; his words on the cross include mercy. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34).

Note that in the larger framework of the story, the Son is always restoring community: gathering disciples, appointing apostles, dining with outcasts, promising the Spirit to the church. Again we resist quick summaries of a complicated Gospel and of the gospel it proclaims. Surely, however,

forgiveness and community are at the heart of Luke's Gospel, as they are at the heart of the story of the Prodigal Son.

When we tell sermons or stories to our children, we will want to ask how mercy and welcome are best proclaimed to them in ways that are appropriate to their age and also in ways that are congruent with God's great welcome in Jesus Christ—a welcome that, needless to say, includes children too (see Luke 18:15–17). This is not all there is of gospel, but it is a start.

Questions to Ask as You Prepare Children's Sermons

1. What text will this children's sermon be based on?
2. What is the story behind this text? How or why was this story told in the Bible?
3. How will the children's sermon fit into the larger context of the worship service?
4. Without moralizing, what will the children's sermon show the children about the family of faith to which they belong?
5. What is the good news in this children's sermon?