

BIBLE STORYTELLING: GOING BEYOND THE LEAFLET

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The Bible is the story of God's love and the history of God's people. It is full of wonderful stories that children need to hear and want to hear. The stories in our Bible need repeating. As children hear stories repeatedly, they "layer" their understanding. Thus, when five year olds hear about David and Jonathan, they learn the characters and sequence of the story; older children begin to understand "friendship," and adolescents and adults (maybe) begin to understand the complexity of friendships and connect the love for these two friends with God's love for us.

As with anything we do with children, the first thing we need to think about before deciding how to share Bible stories with children is their **developmental age**.

- **Younger children (through preschool usually)** are very concrete in their thinking. They need lots of examples; they build on their experiences, what they see, and what they have done. They truly want to please adults, but still have some trouble following directions and "staying on track." Their thoughts and questions may appear to be unconnected to the story we have just told them, but only because they can't yet articulate some of these connections. They see the world through their eyes, and quite often attribute personal characteristics to God. These years are critical ones as young children learn how to interact with others, show respect for adult teachers/leaders, and begin to make sense of stories found in our Bible.
- **Elementary age students** begin to expand their thinking beyond what they have seen, heard, or experienced. They can think about time in terms of past and present. They can imagine people living in other areas of the world. Their horizons are truly expanding, and their ability to develop concepts expands as well. They link Bible stories and experiences together and begin to make "connections." They can listen a little longer and many enjoy working together in groups. During these years children do what is expected because they want to follow adult rules and they care about how others see them.
- **Older elementary children** and **middle school/adolescents** can begin to think about abstract concepts such as love friendship, jealousy, sacrifice, generosity, trust, etc. that have no concrete representation. Because their thinking abilities are expanding, they often ask questions to which we don't have answers. They may openly challenge the lesson's main ideas or accepted theological perspectives. They begin to see themselves as a part of something larger than themselves – their church, their community, and the world. As they approach adolescence, many children become more sensitive to the needs of others. They hold us, and our faith community, to high expectations.

Teachers can present stories of the Bible in a variety of ways. Sometimes the best way to share a story is through a beautiful children's book. Sometimes teachers feel confident in their "storytelling" and can recount the Bible story by memory, using voice inflection and hand motions. At other times, drama or props are best utilized. Children need and appreciate variety. As teachers review curriculum materials and suggestions, they need to ask several questions.

- Is the story content and presentation consistent with my denomination's theology (PCUSA)?

- Do the authors' suggestions meet my group's needs in all areas: (developmental, social, emotional, and physical) and does the curriculum center on my students' interests?
- Does my church have the materials needed for story presentation?
- Do the suggestions allow my students to build on what they know or to learn something new in a novel way?
- Do the suggestions allow teachers to adapt for children who have physical, social, or developmental limitations?
- Does the curriculum provide a balance of teacher directed and student led activities?
- Do suggested activities and/or story presentation provide sufficient time for student reflection, questioning, and connection to other learning?
- Am I comfortable in modifying suggested activities or making choices among suggestions?

STORYTELLING SUGGESTIONS BY AGE GROUP

Infants and Toddlers

- Make sure your classroom has several picture books and board books that tell God's story of love for them. The book collection can include Bible stories as well as regular stories.
- Sit on the floor and sing a song or pull out a book to read. You may have one child or all of them sit with you - or on you - for all or some of the time. Children may wander in and out of your story time.
- When you look at a book, use your language carefully. Expand the pictures with carefully chosen words or names. Let the child point to a picture and follow his/her lead as you enrich with one or two words or a simple sentence.
- Tell a story using ONE puppet. Let the puppet tell the story.
- Tell a story pulling a few props out of a bag. Don't use lots of props, and let the children look in your bag.
- Put out one or two props that allow your young toddlers to "dress up" or act out a story (crown, toy animal like a sheep).

Three and Four-Year Olds

- **Felt/flannel board and cut outs of story characters:** These cut outs will serve as your prompts for Bible story characters, sequence, and setting. You can use leaflets from past curriculum series as cutouts. Simply attach a self sticking Velcro to the back of the cutout so that it adheres to the felt/flannel board. Cutouts can be stored in medium to large size mailing envelopes with the Bible story written on the outside.
- **Puppets:** Preschool children love to hear a story through the use of puppets. Hand puppets or home made stick puppets work equally well. You can use the puppets yourself or engage the help of one or two children to hold the puppets as you tell the story. Use character-like voices and lots of voice inflection to keep children's attention. Then, leave the puppets out for children to retell the story.

- **Shoe Box puppet stage:** Using a shoebox, cut slits in the top of the box large enough to fit a tongue depressor or large Popsicle stick through. Then, cut out Bible story characters from color pages, previous curriculum leaflets, or other sources. Glue them to the top 1/2 of the tongue depressor. As you tell the story, move the tongue -depressor puppets across the stage by inserting them into the cut out slots. Children will enjoy retelling the story with the shoebox stage and puppets after the story session is over or during the next few weeks. Puppets can be conveniently stored inside the shoebox.

5K and First Grade

- **Dramatic Play:** Children love to act out stories. You can provide minimal story props like crowns, robes, stuffed or plastic animals, a walking stick, etc., to prompt children to act out a Bible story. Choose your “characters” and let them put on props. Then, as you read or tell the story, children can come to the front of the stage. During the first retelling, let children practice character’s lines and act out any movement segments of the story.
- **Prediction:** As you tell the Bible story, stop and see if your students can predict what happens next. This is especially effective if the story is one that may be new to the children, or if they have heard it before, but the story resource you are using has new details. You can ask children “What made you think that” to help them think about their own thinking. Remember, some of our Bible stories don’t have logical endings, but are miracles, or are examples of God’s amazing acts. So, these questions are excellent ones to help 5s and 6s to process the greatness of God’s plan.
- **What Does It Mean?:** As you read or tell a Bible story you may read or use a word that is new for most of your students. Stop and ask, “What does it mean?” Let them use their words, or you provide synonyms or phrase to help them form concepts of new words: multitude, pharaoh, altar, psalm, tabernacle, ark.
- **Read the Pictures:** Use children’s picture books, a story Bible, or the color posters that come with your curriculum and see if children can tell the story using pictures as their cue. You can add elements that are new or that they forget. The more they tell or retell, the more likely they are to remember the Bible story and its theological concepts.

Second and Third Grade

- **Ear-to-Ear Reading:** Divide your students into pairs (a triad is also okay). Ask them to sit in chairs or on the floor opposite each other with the right shoulder of one touching left shoulder of the other (or ear to ear). Provide each pair with a story leaflet or a Bible that is on their reading level. Have students read alternately to each other, each changing readers at the end of each paragraph or at the end of a Bible verse. In this format, each student is engaged in reading the Bible story. As partners complete their reading, ask all to come to the front for time together. Have prepared a blank piece of chart paper or use a large dry-erase board. Ask children to recall what they read, listing the events of the story, the main characters, the setting, or whatever emphasis your curriculum has for that day. You can also pose “Big Questions” to which children provide answers after they read. you will have an opportunity during this part of the activity to correct misconceptions, ask or answer questions, and refine their understanding of the Bible story.
- **Read the Pictures:** Use children’s picture books, storybook Bible, or the color posters that come with your curriculum and see if children can tell the story using pictures as their cue. You can add elements that are new or that they forget. The more they tell or retell, the more likely they are to remember the Bible story details and its theological concepts. Story posters provide an excellent opportunity for you to expose children to elements of a Bible story or to a theme that is new to them. Simple children’s books like *God Created* by Bouzzuti-Jones may be simple in text, but the images can evoke theological understanding of concepts like

kinship of all people, faith, and hope. Let your students write their own text to match the illustrations or compare the text to the Creation passage in Genesis.

- **Process Drama:** Read the story of Moses from the Bible, the story leaflet or *The Moses Basket* by Koralek/Baynes. Stop at the point at which Moses' mother decides to put Moses adrift in the river with Miriam watching nearby. Ask your students to "Talk me out of it" or "Help me understand why I have to do this." While you act out Moses' mother, assign parts of Miriam and/or other Israelite slaves to the children. As they act out the drama, listen to their fears and their understanding of this story. Help lead them to an understanding of what it means to *trust* God and his plan for them. Not every child will get where you want him or her to be, but the dialogue helps them process the story through their own experiences.

Fourth and Fifth Grade

- **Journaling:** Provide individual journals for each of your students. Label with name and keep for use each Sunday. Have these journals available each week as students enter the classroom. You can provide "questions of the day" or let them use journals to write or draw thoughts about today or past weeks. Some examples of "questions of the day" may include – but are not limited to the some examples below. Try to make these fit your students and your Bible survey.
 1. **What question did we leave last Sunday unanswered for you?**
 2. **Our focus verse last week was (write focus Bible verse from last week). What, or who, did it make you think about? What didn't make sense? What Bible character most confuses you? Makes you think about yourself? Makes you think about someone you know?**
 3. **Today we are studying (give topic, event, or Bible character). What do you know about this? What question do you have about this?**
- **Drama:** Fourth and fifth graders still enjoy drama, but need variation from earlier grades. After you read the focus story from the Bible (vary translations), provide simple props and encourage students to act out the passage, using their words. For example, in story about Abraham and Sarah, use a blanket or quilt (Genesis 18) to construct a tent (hang between chairs). One student is Abraham, one is Sarah, and three can role-play as the "visitors." As your students create the dialogue, listen for its consistency with the Bible passage. You may need to let them reread and talk themselves through accuracy of their depiction.
- **Process Dialogue:** After reading the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37) using a Bible translation or story telling lesson plan, students can group themselves in pairs or triads, and dialogue among themselves using questions like:
 1. **What were Joseph's thoughts while in the pit?**
 2. **Why do you think Reuben persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph? How did he do it?**
 3. **How does resentment play into this story? (You may want to give your students some news articles that focus on bullying and resentment today)**
- **Children's Books Art:** books like Brian Wildsmith's Exodus to help tell the story from Exodus 5-14. After hearing the story, students can compare the text to the Bible passage, discuss the impact of the illustrations on the overall message of the Exodus story, and/or find specific images in the book that have significance for them. Children's books are excellent sources for Bible stories – but find good authors/illustrators, and check the story for its authenticity.

Sixth and Seventh Grade

- **Translations:** Provide students with a variety of translations and let them work in small groups (pairs or triads) to read the same passages but using a variety of translations. Can students find similarities and/or differences? Which is easier for them to understand? Which translation helps them understand the main concepts in today's lesson focus? Have students read aloud from their versions in unison. This approach may sound "noisy," but is actually beautiful to the ear and can help us hear differences in the passages.
- **Faith Questions:** Your curriculum focus is *excellent* to help young adolescents process major issues of faith alongside reformed theology. The use of videos, music, books (including children's picture books) are superb methods for helping young people personalize their faith and live into the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. At this age, reading or telling a story is insufficient. Adolescents need to think, verbalize, ask questions, and occasionally shock us.