

Christian Worship Resources for the Children's Sabbath



Worship is at the heart of most Children's Sabbaths. It is in worship that we praise God who has blessed us with children and charged us with their care. It is in worship that we hear again the prophets and their warnings against injustice and their call to justice. It is in worship that we renew our commitment to follow Jesus who said to welcome the children because in doing so we welcome him and not just him but the one who sent him. As we go forth from worship in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we continue to praise God with our work to nurture and protect all children.

This section provides worship resources for Christian congregations. It includes:

- Suggestions for the worship service, including ways to involve children and youths
- Sample Children's Sabbath liturgies for Roman Catholic parishes, Episcopal parishes, and Protestant churches to use or adapt to be appropriate for your particular congregation
- Additional prayers and readings
- Sermon notes on designated readings in the Revised Common Lectionary (the cycle of designated readings for many Protestant denominations), the Episcopal Lectionary, the Lutheran Lectionary, and the Roman Catholic Lectionary
- A sample Children's Sermon
- A seven-day devotional guide which may be photocopied and distributed to congregation members the Sunday preceding the Children's Sabbath to help them prepare, in prayer and reflection, for the special occasion. It is available for download at www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths.

Worship Suggestions

- **Use the bulletin inserts** in the Promoting Your Children's Sabbath Section available for download at www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths.
- **Use or adapt one of the sample worship services** provided in this section.
- **Create your own materials on the theme** of children, justice, and God's call to cherish and protect all children."
- **Use readings from worship and prayer books** that include a social action theme.
- **Incorporate resources from your denomination that focus on children and child advocacy.** For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has a Vision Statement on ministry to children, The Episcopal Church has an Episcopal Charter for Children, The United Methodist Church uses The Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty, and the Roman Catholic Church has the Bishops' statement Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for our Church, Nation and World. These could be used in place of a more traditional affirmation of faith, as an act of commitment, or incorporated in another part of the service.
- **Select hymns and anthems that focus on children and our responsibilities to them.** (The sample worship services include music suggestions.)
- **Focus the sermon or homily on children and our responsibility to act on their behalf.** If appropriate, draw on the Sermon Notes on texts designated in the Revised Common Lectionary, Roman Catholic Lectionary, Lutheran Lectionary and Episcopal Lectionary for October 19, 2014 (the Gospel and Epistle readings coincide in all four lectionaries; the Old Testament lessons and Psalms differ).
- **Use or adapt the suggested Children's Sermon in this section.** Or, in a role reversal, have one of the children give an "Adult's Sermon"— a sermon from a child addressed to adults.
- **Include a commissioning service for educators or others who "minister" (in the broadest sense) to children.** Following the sermon, these professionals or volunteers (contacted in advance) may be invited to come forward for a brief service that recognizes their work as a form of ministry, with prayers for God's guidance in their work, and prayers for the children whom they serve.
- **Commission staff and board members of child-serving programs** affiliated with the congregation, and celebrate their work as part of the congregation's mission.
- **Include prayers for children who are in need.** Specifically name problems afflicting children in your community, as well as crises affecting children across our nation and throughout our world.
- **Invite a speaker from a program serving children** to deliver a "minute for mission" during your announcement time or to speak at another point in the service. Encourage the speaker to highlight opportunities for members to become involved themselves and to speak out for children.
- **Collect a special offering to benefit a program serving children or families,** such as an after-school program, mentoring and tutoring program, community health clinic, or Head Start program. Announce the offering in advance so that members will be prepared. Dedicate the offering during the service. The offering could be in the form of money or items such as children's books, diapers, or other needed items.

- **Invite on-site child care staff, administrators, parents, and children to attend your Children's Sabbath**, or invite the children, parents, staff, and administration from neighborhood schools.

Involve Children and Youths

The Children's Sabbath, unlike a traditional Youth Sunday or Children's Day, is intended to involve adults in the planning and leadership of the day. As members of the congregation, adults must recognize the challenges facing children in our nation, and their collective responsibility to respond. However, the Children's Sabbath is an important time to include children and youths in the planning and leadership of the worship service and all other events.

For example, children and youths can:

- Have an overnight "lock in" at the church beforehand to learn about worship and plan their parts in the Children's Sabbath.
- Design and paint the paraments (e.g., cloth draping the pulpit).
- Draw pictures for the bulletin cover.
- Assist and greet worshippers as they arrive or leave, light candles, or collect the offering.
- Begin the Children's Sabbath by entering in a procession. The children could carry a banner they made.
- Read prayers and scriptural passages and lead responsive readings.
- Write a prayer to be used in the service.
- Present a short drama or liturgical dance as part of the service.
- Sing a special anthem or play an instrumental piece, or perform a song in sign language.
- Remain throughout the entire service instead of departing for church school classes. If the children remain throughout, ensure that the worship service appropriately engages them.
- Have adults "adopt" children to sit with during the service.

Catholic Liturgy for Children's Sabbath

This sample liturgy provides suggestions for incorporating the focus of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths into the standard liturgy for the **29th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A, which falls on October 19, 2014.**

Introductory Rites

Entrance Song: All Are Welcome (Marty Haugen), God Is Here! (#667; this and all other hymn numbers refer to *Worship*, GIA Publications) or "Gather Us In" (#665).

Greeting

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

We have gathered on this day that marks the 23rd annual National Observance of Children's Sabbaths. Today we join our hearts, hands, and voices with people of faith in thousands of congregations across our nation to lift up the needs of children and commit faithfully to respond.

Pope Francis said, "The times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry."¹ Let us respond to that cry and work faithfully so that no child is hungry, all children have education, and no child is poor. As God's faithful people, let us answer the call to cherish and protect the children, because every child is precious in God's sight.

Penitential Rite

Priest: Coming together as God's family, with confidence let us ask the Father's forgiveness, for God is full of gentleness and compassion.

Lord Jesus, you came as a child in the fullness of humanity that we may know God's love for us.

Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: Lord Jesus, you called the children to you and blessed them that we may know God's love for children. Christ, have mercy.

People: Christ, have mercy.

Priest: Lord Jesus, you will judge us by how we care for the least of these our brothers and sisters.

Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.

People: Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, Meeting with Students of Jesuit Schools — Q & A, 6/7/13

Gloria

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.
Almighty and ever-living God,
our source of power and inspiration,
give us strength and joy
in serving you as followers of Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Liturgy of the Word

First Reading: Isaiah 45:1:4-6

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95

Second Reading: I Thessalonians 1:1-5

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Gospel Acclamation

Priest: Alleluia.

People: Alleluia.

Priest: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Lk. 9:37)

People: Alleluia.

Gospel: Luke 18:1-8

Homily

[See Sermon Resources later in this section.]

Profession of Faith: The Nicene Creed

General Intercessions (Prayers of the People)

My brothers and sisters, through this common prayer, let us pray to our Lord Jesus Christ, not only for ourselves and our own needs, but for all people, young and old, near and far, responding Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For the holy Church of God, that we more faithfully follow Jesus by serving the last, the least, the lost, and the littlest ones, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For all the peoples of the world, especially the millions of children enduring extreme poverty and excluded from school, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For our nation and our leaders, that we cherish and protect every child in both word and deed, with compassion and justice, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For all our brothers and sisters in need, especially the millions of children living in poverty, lacking early childhood support, and lagging in educational opportunity and achievement, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For ourselves and our community, that we join with people of all faiths across our nation to cherish and protect all children, precious in your sight, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

God of love, who shelters us like a mother hen and welcomes us like a father, hear the prayers of your Church, and grant us today what we ask of you in faith. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts

(You may wish to have children bring up the bread and wine or other gifts.)

Offertory Song: "Praise the Lord! You Heavens, Adore Him" (#529)

Prayer Over the Gifts

Lord God, may the gifts we offer
bring us your love and forgiveness
and give us freedom to serve you with our lives.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Eucharistic Prayer

Communion Rite

The Lord's Prayer

Doxology

Sign of Peace

Breaking of the Bread

Communion

Communion Song: "I Come with Joy to Meet My Lord" (#726)

Song of Praise: We Are Called (David Haas)

Prayer after Communion

Let us pray.

Lord, may this eucharist help us to remain faithful.

May it teach us the way to eternal life.

Grant this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Concluding Rite

Greeting

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Blessing

Bow your heads and pray for God's blessing.

Jesus taught us that whoever welcomes one such child in his name welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes not him but the One who sent him. May God grant you vision, compassion and courage to welcome, cherish, and protect every child, precious in God's sight.

May almighty God bless you,
the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Episcopal Liturgy for the Children's Sabbath

This sample liturgy provides suggestions for incorporating the focus of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths into the standard Episcopal liturgy **for Proper 24, Year A, which falls on October 19, 2014.**

Throughout the liturgy, we have provided two options, one from *The Book of Common Prayer* and the other from *Enriching Our Worship: Supplemental Liturgical Materials* prepared by The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music of The Episcopal Church.

The Word of God

Hymn: Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee (#304), Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise (#423); God the Sculptor of the Mountains (#746, WLP)

Opening Sentences

Option 1:

(From *The Book of Common Prayer*, hereafter referred to as BCP)

Celebrant: Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

People: And blessed be His kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Option 2:

(From *Enriching Our Worship: Supplemental Liturgical Materials* prepared by The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, hereafter referred to as EOW)

Celebrant: Blessed be the one, holy, and living God.

People: Glory to God forever and ever.

Celebrant may say:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Song of Praise: God Is Love (#379); Creating God, Your Fingers Trace (#394)

The Collect of the Day

Option 1: (BCP)

Celebrant: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Celebrant: Let us pray.

Proper 24 (BCP)

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ who came as a child you have revealed your glory among the nations. Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

People: Amen.

Option 2: (EOW)

Celebrant: God be with you.

People: And also with you.

Celebrant: Let us pray.

On the Children's Sabbath

Eternal God, source of love and justice, you have created each of us precious in your sight. Instill in us hearts of compassion to cherish every child and voices of courage to protect every child; through Jesus Christ your Child who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

People: Amen.

The Lessons

A Reading from Isaiah 45:1-7

Option 1: (BCP)

After each reading, the Reader says:

The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Option 2: (EOW)

After each reading, the Reader says:

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

People: Thanks be to God.

Gradual Hymn

A Reading from I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

Option 1: (BCP)

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to St. Matthew.

People: Glory to you, Lord Christ.

Option 2: (EOW)

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, according to St. Matthew.

The Sermon

(See Sermon Resources on Pages 26-43)

The Nicene Creed

The Prayers of the People and Confession of Sin

Option 1: Form II, Form IV, or Form VI which follows: (BCP)

In peace, we pray to you, Lord God.

Silence.

For all people in their daily life and work;

For our families, friends, and neighbors, and for those who are alone.

For this community, the nation and the world;

For all who work for justice, freedom, and peace.

For the just and proper use of our creation;

For the victims of hunger, fear, injustice, and oppression.

For all who are in danger, sorrow, or any kind of trouble;

For those who minister to the sick, the friendless, and the needy.

For the peace and unity of the Church of God;

For all who proclaim the Gospel, and all who seek the Truth.

For [N. our presiding Bishop, and N. our Bishop(s); and for] all bishops and other ministers;

For all who serve God in his Church.

For the special needs and concerns of this congregation.

Silence.

The people may add their own petitions.

Hear us, Lord;

For your mercy is great.

We thank you, Lord, for all the blessings of this life.

Silence.

The people may add their own thanksgivings.

We will exalt you, O God our King;
And praise your Name for ever and ever.

We pray for all who have died, that they may have a place in your eternal kingdom.

Silence.

The People may add their own petitions

Lord, let your loving-kindness be upon them;
Who put their trust in you.

We pray to you also for the forgiveness of our sins.

Silence may be kept.

Leader and People

Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father;
In your compassion forgive us our sins,
Known and unknown,
Things done and left undone;
And so uphold us by your Spirit
That we may live and serve you in newness of life,
To the honor and glory of your name;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Option 2:

With all our heart and with all our minds, let us pray, saying "Lord, hear the prayers of your children."
For the body of Christ, that we more faithfully follow Jesus by serving the last, the least, the lost, and the
littlest ones, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For our nation and leaders, that we cherish and protect every child in both word and deed, with
compassion and justice, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For our world, especially the millions of children enduring extreme poverty and excluded from school,
let us pray, *

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For ourselves and our community, that we join with people of all faiths across our nation to cherish and protect all children, precious in your sight, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

On this Children's Sabbath day, we pray especially for the millions of children living in poverty, lacking early childhood support, and lagging in educational opportunity and achievement, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

For all who have died, especially those who died too young and too soon, from causes we could have prevented, let us pray,

Lord, hear the prayers of your children.

God of love, who shelters us like a mother hen and welcomes us like a father, hear the prayers of your Church, and grant us today what we ask of you in faith. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Absolution

Option 1: (BCP)

The Bishop when present, or the Priest:

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord, Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

Option 2: (EOW)

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through the grace of Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace

The Celebrant says to the people:

Let us share the peace of Christ with one another, and give thanks for the children among us who show us new ways to walk in peace together.

Option 1: (BCP)

Celebrant: The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People: And also with you.

Option 2: (EOW)

Celebrant: The peace of Christ be always with you.

People: And also with you.

The Holy Communion

Offertory: With Awe Approach the Mysteries (#759, WLP), For the Beauty of the Earth (#416), For the Fruit of All Creation (#424), Tell Out My Soul, the Greatness of the Lord (#438), Lord, You Give the Great Commission (#528; #780, WLP), We Are All One in Mission (#778, WLP)

(You may wish to include the Act of Commitment as a way for parishioners to make an offering of themselves — their time, commitment, voices.)

The Great Thanksgiving

Option 1: **Eucharistic Prayer C** (BCP)

Proper Preface for Children's Sabbath

Because you have blessed us with children and have given your own Child, the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, to reveal the fullness of your love and mercy.

Option 2: **Eucharistic Prayer for the Children's Sabbath**

Celebrant: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Celebrant: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Celebrant: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Celebrant: We give you thanks and praise, amazing God,
who made heaven and earth and sea, and
all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever,
who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry;
You watch over the strangers,
uphold the children and most vulnerable parents,
and have triumphed over sin and evil.
(from Psalm 146)

On this Children's Sabbath day, we give you thanks, O God, especially for children, for the blessing they are and the blessing we may be to them, as we seek to heed your prophets and beat swords into plowshares and do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.

And so we join the saints and angels in
proclaiming your glory, as we sing (say),

Celebrant and People:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power
and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The Celebrant continues:

We praise you, O God,
for sending your beloved child Jesus
born as a baby
nurtured by his family,
and protected by strangers,
who grew as a child
who was taught in his temple,
surrounded by his community,
and guided by his parents,
who became an adult
who loved and blessed the children,
who cared for those who were sick,
poor, and left out,
who taught that God loves us like a parent,
and who called us his friends.
This one who was born a baby needing us
died our Savior whom we all need,
triumphant even over death,
freeing us to live as your beloved children.

(At the following words concerning the bread, the Celebrant is to hold it, or lay a hand upon it; and at the words concerning the cup, to hold or place a hand upon the cup and any other vessel containing the wine to be consecrated.)

On the night before he died for us, Jesus was at the table with his friends. He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them, and said: "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. As you do this, remember me."

As supper was ending, Jesus took the cup of wine. Again, he gave thanks, gave it to them, and said: "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is poured out for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, remember me."

Around your table, as your children,
O God, we remember Jesus Christ,
Who came in love, lived in love, and died in love,
Who was and is and is to come.
We offer to you our gifts of bread and wine,
And we offer to you our lives.

Pour out your Spirit upon these gifts that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ, that they strengthen us to welcome the children, to show your love, to work for your justice, to bring your peace. Through Christ and with Christ and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to you be honor, glory, and praise, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Breaking of the Bread

Option 1: (BCP)

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;
Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

Option 2: (EOW)

We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ.
We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread.

Communion Hymn: As We Gather at Your Table (#763), Go Forth for God (#347), Now Let Us Rise the Hymn the Grace (#781, WLP)

Post Communion Prayer

Option 1: (BCP)

Let us pray.
Eternal God, heavenly Father,
You have graciously accepted us as living members
of your Son our Savior, Jesus Christ,
and you have fed us with spiritual food
in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
Send us now into the world in peace,
and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you
with gladness and singleness of heart,
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Option 2: (adapted from EOW)

Loving God,
we give you thanks
for restoring us in your image
and nourishing us with spiritual food
in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood.
Now send us forth
a people, forgiven, healed, renewed;
that we may proclaim your love to the world
through serving the children
and continue in the risen life of Christ our Savior.
Amen.

The Blessing (EOW)

May the blessing of the God of Abraham and Sarah, and of Jesus Christ born of our sister Mary, and of the Holy Spirit, who broods over the world as a mother over her children, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

The Dismissal

Celebrant: Remembering especially all our children, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Sample Protestant Service of Worship

For the 2014 Children's Sabbath

Precious in God's Sight: Answering the Call to Cherish and Protect *Every* Child

Call to Worship

(Leader parts may be read by one or more children or youths).

Leader: "...It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

People: **On this Children's Sabbath, we gather to praise God who created every wonderful child.**

Leader: "People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid hands on them, and blessed them." (Mark 10:13-16)

People: **We gather to follow Christ who cherished the children others would keep away.**

Leader: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

People: **We gather to be moved by the Spirit that we might be partners in the end of oppression.**

Leader: Come, let us worship God — Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit!

Suggested Opening Hymn All Are Welcome (text and music by Marty Haugen, GIA Publications), **Gather Us In** (Words and Music: Marty Haugen) or, **Now Praise the Hidden God of Love** (Words: Fred Pratt Green, Music: English Folk Melody)

Call to Confession

Sisters and brothers, we are precious to God, but not perfect. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin, God who is merciful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Trusting in that promise, let us confess our sins before God and one another. Let us pray:

Prayer of Confession

God of all, we confess that we love too few and too little.
We fail to glimpse your image in each and every child.
We cherish our "own" children but don't value others'.
We keep silent when children's needs cry out for help.

O God, in your tender mercy,
Open our eyes to see every child as a reflection of you.
Open our hearts to cherish each child as we would love our own.
Open our mouths to speak your word of justice to protect children in harm's way.

These things we pray as your imperfect but precious children,
in the name of your beloved Child, Jesus. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Sung Response: Jesus Loves Me

Responsive Reading: Precious in His Sight

[Have children sing through the song once, then have a piano or other instrument softly play the tune as readers lead the following three sections:]

Children sing:

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red or yellow, black or white,
They are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Reader 1: Each day in America,
7 children or teens are killed by guns
1,392 babies are born into extreme poverty
1,837 children are confirmed as abused or neglected
2,857 high school students drop out
16,244 public school students are suspended.

Reader 2: Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Do *we*?
What are we going to *do* to show in word and deed Jesus' love for every child?

Reader 3: Prayerfully consider:

How will you reach out to cherish children? *[Time for silent reflection]*

How will you speak out to protect children? *[Time for silent reflection]*

What change will you pray for in yourself to help you fulfill those commitments? *[Time for silent reflection]*

Together:

Because Jesus whom we seek to follow loves all the children of the world, so shall we.

Let us join together to sing:

**We will love the little children,
All the children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in God's sight,
We will love the little children of the world.**

Prayer for Illumination

Tender God, by your Spirit
help us calm and quiet our souls
like a child with its mother
so that we may hear your Word to us this day
and respond in faith. Amen.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7 *(Suggested text for those not following a lectionary)*

But now thus says the Lord,
[God] who created you, O Jacob,
[God] who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for your.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14, 18-19 (CEB) *(Suggested text for those not following a lectionary)*

God, give your judgments to the king.
Give your righteousness to the king's son.
Let him judge your people with righteousness
and your poor ones with justice.
Let the mountains bring peace to the people,
let the hills bring righteousness.
Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;

let him save the children of those who are needy,
but let him crush the oppressors!

Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has compassion on the weak and the needy;
he saves the lives of those who are in need.
He redeems their lives from oppression and violence;
their blood is precious in his eyes.

Bless the Lord God, the God of Israel—
the only one who does wondrous things!
Bless God's glorious name forever;
let [God's] glory fill all the earth!
Amen and Amen!

New Testament Reading: Matthew 19:13-15 (or 19:13-26)

(Suggested text for those not following a lectionary)

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Sermon

(See pages 26-35 for sermon notes on the lectionary texts designated for the Children's Sabbath weekend. Those who do not follow a lectionary may find suitable texts and reflections to support sermon preparation in the Children's Sabbath Daily Devotional Guide. Suggested texts for those not following a lectionary are also noted above and sermon notes on those texts may be found on pages 36-43.)

Affirmation of Faith, Responsive Prayer of Commitment, or Other Response to the Word

Prayer of Commitment: O God of All Children

O God of the children of Somalia, Sudan, and Syria, of South Africa and South Carolina,
Of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and of India, Iraq, Iran, and Israel
Of the Congo and Chicago, of Darfur and Detroit
Of Myanmar and Mississippi and Louisiana and Yemen
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of Black and Brown and White and Albino children and those all mixed together,
Of children who are rich and poor and in between,
Of children who speak English and Russian and Hmong and Spanish and languages our ears cannot discern,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of the child prodigy and the child prostitute, of the child of rapture and the child of rape,
Of runaway or thrown away children who struggle every day without parent or place or friend or future,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of children who can walk and talk and hear and see and sing and dance and jump and play and of
children who wish they could but can't,
Of children who are loved and unloved, wanted and unwanted,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of beggar, beaten, abused, neglected, homeless, AIDS-drug-violence-and hunger-ravaged children,
Of children who are emotionally and physically and mentally fragile, and of children who rebel and
ridicule, torment and taunt,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of children of destiny and of despair, of war and of peace,
Of disfigured, diseased, and dying children,
Of children without hope and of children with hope to spare and to share,
Help us to love and respect and act to protect them all.

By Marian Wright Edelman

Hymn: O For a World (Miriam Therese Winter)

Benediction

Go forth knowing that you are a precious child of God.
Go forth to cherish every child of God,
Go forth to protect and seek justice for children.

May the love of God who created you,
the grace of Christ who blessed the children, and
the communion of the Spirit whom Jesus called the Advocate,
be with you and every child of God this day forth and forever more. Amen.

Suggested Sending Hymn: The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve (Words: Delores Dufner, OSB, Music:
U.S.A. Folk Melody) Or: **Sent Out in Jesus' Name** (Enviado Soy de Dios) Words: Anon trans by Jorge
Maldonado; Music: Traditional Cuban

Additional Worship Resources

Call to Worship

We gather to worship God
who entered our world as a poor baby,
We gather in the name of Christ who
as a child grew in mind, body, and spirit,
and as an adult welcomed and blessed the children.
We gather, called together by the Spirit whom Jesus called the Advocate.
Come, let us worship God on this Children's Sabbath day!

Call to Worship

We gather to worship God who created each and every child in God's own image.
We gather in the name of Christ who welcomed and blessed the children.
We gather empowered by the Spirit who moves in and among us as we work for justice.
Come, let us worship God!

Prayer of Confession

God, You send us Your prophets and we ignore or kill them.
You send us Your children and we neglect and abuse them.
You send us Your Son, whom we worship and adore but fail to follow.
God have mercy on us sinners.

By Marian Wright Edelman

Prayer of Confession

Lord, we have pushed so many of our children into the tumultuous sea of life in leaky boats without survival gear.
Forgive us and help them to forgive us.
Help us now to give all our children the anchor of faith, the rudder of hope, the sails of education, and the oars of family to keep them going when life's sea gets rough.

By Marian Wright Edelman

Prayer of Commitment

God, help us to be honest so our children will learn honesty.
Help us to be kind so our children will learn kindness.
Help us to be faithful so our children will learn faith.
Help us to love so that our children will be loving.

By Marian Wright Edelman (adapted)

A Parent's Pledge*

I promise to...
Listen to my children
Communicate with my children
Teach my children right from wrong and be a good role model for them
Spend time with and pay attention to my children
Educate my children in mind, body, and soul

Work to provide a stable family life for my children
Pray for and see God in my children and in all children
Vote for my children to ensure them fair opportunity
Speak out for my and other people's children's needs

** Joined as a family of faith, each one present may affirm their commitment to children of the congregation, community, and beyond — whether they are a parent of children or not.*

Charge and Blessing

As we prepare to depart on this Children's Sabbath day,
to cherish and protect children, all precious in God's sight,
hear these words from Joshua:

“Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed,
for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who blessed the children,
the love of God who made each child in God's own image, and
the communion of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus called the Advocate,
be with you and each child of God this day and ever more. Amen.

Prayers of the People

(Before the prayers of the people, pass baskets containing crayons, pencil stubs, chalk, Band-Aids®, pennies, and pens along the pews. Invite each congregation member to take one item. These items will be referenced in the Prayers of the People. Afterward, encourage members to take the item home and to pray for those it symbolizes.)

Almighty God, the challenges facing children and those who care for them can seem so huge and so abstract that we lose touch with reality. Help us to remember that the needs and prayers of each child, each parent, each teacher, each caring person are as real and as individual to you as the items in our hands.

(Holding up a crayon)

And so we pray this day for the child care providers and parents who provide safe, warm, stimulating environments to spark a love of learning and fuel the curiosity of our youngest children as they scribble with crayons, pet the hamster, and try to taste the Play-Doh®. We pray especially for those providers who are underpaid and undervalued, for those parents who can't find quality, affordable care for their children while they work, and for the children whose potential is squelched in poor care. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

(Holding up a piece of chalk)

We pray for the teachers, covered in chalk dust, who devote themselves to educating our children and helping them flourish to their potential. For their dedication, imagination, and concern we give you thanks. We pray especially for those teachers who have given up on themselves or on the children, those who feel unsafe, those who feel unappreciated. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

(Holding up a pencil stub)

We pray for students gripping pencils as they strive to learn, especially those faced with the challenges of disability, unsafe schools, low expectations from their parents, teachers, and selves, and inadequate resources. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

(Holding up a Band-Aid®)

We pray for children who are sick and injured, whose ability to learn is hampered by vision and hearing problems or illness. We pray especially for those children who don't have health insurance to get the care they need, and for their parents who worry about what to do, who rely on temporary solutions when prevention or treatment is needed. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

(Holding up a penny)

We pray for the youths who are preparing for the world of work, that you will guide them in discovering their gifts and talents, skills and aptitudes, and surround them with teachers and adults who will get them ready to succeed. We pray especially for those young people who fear they will not be able to find work and earn a living, who don't have adults to help them prepare, and who despair of ever succeeding. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

(Holding up a pen)

We pray for our leaders in government, business, and the media, that the laws they write, the bottom lines that are inked, and the stories they pen will demonstrate an investment and priority in our children today for our future tomorrow. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Act of Commitment

(If desired, children could develop a dramatic scene to accompany the reading of Greenless Child by Ann Weems below. Perhaps one child would be dressed in drab gray, while the other children are dressed in bright oranges, yellows, and other vibrant colors and carry streamers. These children could dance and swirl bright streamers while the child in gray sits quietly and forlornly. On the last line, she could look straight out at the congregation. Any number of people, of a variety of ages, could take turns reading the leader lines.)

Leader:

I watched her go uncelebrated into the second grade,
 A greenless child,
 Gray among the orange and yellow,
 Attached too much to corners and to other people's sunshine.
 She colors the rainbow brown
 And leaves balloons unopened in their packages.
 Oh, who will touch this greenless child?
 Who will plant alleluias in her heart
 And send her dancing into all the colors of God?
 Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on
 the kitchen table —
 Too dull for anyone to take the trouble?
 Does God think we're her keeper?

Leader: Who will touch the greenless children, and work to see that every child enters school ready to learn, with strong early childhood experiences that are safe and nurturing?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will believe, and act on the belief, that all children can succeed and perform at high levels?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will work to support children, parents, teachers, and principals to make the best educational decisions possible?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will support quality teaching and let our teachers know their work is valued?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will see that children and schools have the resources they need to prepare every child to learn and succeed?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will support families in times of crisis so the needs of the children will not be neglected?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: Who will work to involve our whole community — health care providers, police, social service agencies, neighborhood groups, voluntary organizations, and other congregations — to see that our children get what they need to learn and succeed in school and beyond?

People: We will, with the grace of God.

Leader: We are called to covenant with God and with one another. God will be with us as we help all children, especially the greenless children, to learn, succeed and fulfill their God-given potential.

Hymn: “Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds” or “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord”

Charge and Blessing

(Based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

Go forth into the world for your work of faith and labor of love on behalf of the children. Do everything with a steadfastness of hope, imitating Christ's love for the children, that you may be an example for all people.

And now may the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
be with you
and with all children, beloved by God,
this day and evermore. Amen.

Sermon Resources

The sermon or homily is one of the most powerful opportunities to proclaim God's love and concern for all of God's children and God's call to us to put our faith into action by loving and protecting children.

The lectionary texts designated for this Children's Sabbath Sunday, October 19, 2014, offer deep connections and powerful messages related to the Children's Sabbath themes. Even pastors who do not follow a lectionary will find rich food for thought and study in these two sermon resources.

- The Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock, Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Emeritus, in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University and Director of The Craddock Center, has prepared sermon notes on the Revised Common Lectionary texts: First Thessalonians 1:1-10, Exodus 33:12-23, and Matthew 22:15-22.
- The Rev. Margaret Schwarzer, Episcopal Chaplain at Boston University and Director of The Micah Project, an internship program of service and discernment for young adults in Boston, Mass., has prepared homily notes on the homily notes on two texts in the Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic Lectionaries: Isaiah 45:1-7: "Cyrus, God's Instrument," and Matthew 22:15-22: "Give to God the Things That Are God's."

Of course, countless other biblical passages also illuminate our call to nurture and protect every child. For those who do not follow a lectionary, sermon notes are provided on three texts which speak to the 2014 Children's Sabbath theme, Precious in God's Sight: Answering the Call Cherish and Protect *Every* Child: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 72; and Matthew 19:13-15. Additionally, the reflections in the Daily Devotional Guide in this section may spark sermons on other texts.

A sample Children's Sermon follows these sermon resources for use with the children of the congregation in a special conversation or "time with children."

Revised Common Lectionary Notes for the Children's Sabbath

By the Reverend Dr. Fred B. Craddock

First 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

While it is sometimes a stretch for a preacher to move from a biblical text to the current need to be addressed, such is not the case today. Directly and indirectly, all these texts (Exod. 33:12-23; 1 Thess. 1:1-10; Matt. 22:15-22) speak to the concerns of the Children's Sabbath. In fact, the Epistle lesson, 1 Thess. 1:1-10, contributes the theme. It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin our reflections on the texts with 1 Thessalonians, moving then to Exodus and to Matthew, rather than in the usual order of Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel.

We look at 1 Thess. 1:1-10 first through a wide-angle lens. The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) ended with the conclusion that Jews and Gentiles alike had equal access to the grace of God. Paul, a missionary to Gentiles, must have been pleased, but he knew that there is often a great distance between official church pronouncements and the lives of parishioners. Paul's subsequent confrontation with Simon Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21) is a case in point. Even so, with zeal to continue his work, Paul chose Silvanus (Silas, Acts 15:22) and later Timothy (Acts 16:1-5) to join him in establishing churches in Europe, beginning in Macedonia and Achaia (comprising modern Greece). Moving from north to south they worked primarily in the larger cities: Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth (Acts 15:40-18:21). Paul was only briefly in Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, a large multi-cultural city and the seat of Roman government for the area. Paul was concerned about his brief stay lest they think he was one of those popular preachers going from town to town lining his pockets. Unable to return himself (1 Thess. 2:18; he was now in Athens), Paul sent Timothy (1 Thess. 3:1-6) who returned with good news of the health of the church. Paul and companions moved farther south to Corinth where he wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, probably 49-50 CE. This letter is the first of Paul's epistles and, therefore, the earliest Christian document in existence.

Now we zoom in for a closer look at the text. In 1:1-10 we meet what became Paul's trademark epistolary beginning: the signature, address, and salutation "Grace and peace," a joining of the common Greek and Hebrew greetings; in other words, total inclusivity. Then follows the Thanksgiving (1:2-10), a common feature of correspondence of the day, but in Paul's hands, a summary of praise to God, recital of his relation to the readers, their situation, and the work before them. The letter was to be read in the worship service of the church. However, the most striking feature of the Thanksgiving (1:2-10) is that Paul has already settled on a way of framing the Christian life, which he was to repeat in this and later correspondence: the triad of faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 5:8; Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6). But in this his first letter he is clear that faith, love, and hope are not to be understood by his readers as personal qualities, virtues to be cultivated in private exercises of polishing one's soul, of thinking good thoughts, of feeling good within one's self. Faith, love, and hope are not qualities to be possessed but tasks to be done. Putting too much stress on the inner life can be paralyzing, resulting in a subjective captivity of the Gospel.

It is not so with Paul; for him these words have perspiration on them, working not watching, emptying their pockets for other people's children. These words are not standing still. Listen to Paul: "Your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope" (v.3). When Paul repeats the triad later he uses verbs,

not nouns: to turn, to serve, to wait (v.9). The church, which uses this triad to understand itself will not, cannot, be content to sing "Jesus loves the little children of the world"; it will not, cannot, simply pray for the children; it will not, and cannot, only shed a tear in sorrow for the children. That church will act out of faith, serve in love, and anticipate a better future with steadfastness.

Exodus 33:12-23

This extraordinary text consists of a conversation between God and Moses, a conversation which takes place at a very critical time in the life of Israel. God heard the cries of Israel in bondage and delivered the people from the Pharaoh of Egypt. On their way toward the land of promise, they arrive at Mount Sinai where, through their leader Moses, they receive the commandments by which they are to live as the people of God (Exod. 20-23). A covenant is sealed between God and Israel (Exod. 24) and all seems well. Instructions are given for building the tabernacle, a sacred place of meeting between God and the People (Exod. 25-32).

Then everything breaks loose. Moses is on the mountain forty days and nights receiving revelations, but that is a time too long, say the people. They feel abandoned by God and Moses and revert to idolatry. Aaron, the priest and brother of Moses, leads Israel in this violation of the law and the covenant (Exod. 32). Aaron is the epitome of those clergy in every age who cater to the worst in people for the ego satisfaction and monetary gains that follow. Moses is angry, coming down the mountain, shattering the two tablets containing the law. God is angry, ready to destroy the people and begin anew with Moses to create a new people (Exod. 32).

Now comes the conversation between God and Moses (Exod. 33:12-23). The conversation is possible because they are not strangers: God and Moses have been talking since the experience of the burning bush. The conversation is vigorous because they have a history of trying to persuade each other. They, in fact, argued. This vigorous feature of Jewish prayer life is often missing from Christian piety which embraces silent acquiescence as the better expression of faith. We might do well to recapture the prayer life of Moses, and of Jacob who wrestled all night, or of Paul who asked the church in Rome to "Agonize with me in prayer" (Rom. 15:30), or of Jesus who pictured prayer as a widow with bloody knuckles knocking on the locked door of a heartless judge (Luke 18:1-18). Harsh as it may sound, maybe the prayer life of silent acquiescence is born not so much of reverence but of a hesitation to include in our time of study and meditation the really tough issues that hurt and destroy life. Small matters can be handled, thank you, Jesus, but 12.9 million children in gnawing poverty, that is too big as a prayer alone; it is also an assignment. And since first grade we have resisted assignment. It is easier to argue over prayer in public school than it is to see that all children are able to go safely and happily to school.

Read again Exod. 33:12-23. Moses has two issues to be taken up with God: Will God continue to lead the people to the land of promise, and will God assure Moses that Moses is in God's favor? Both are critical matters. The first because God has become angry with unfaithful and idolatrous Israel and has threatened to end their relationship here and now. Moses knows that God has both wrath and mercy, that God's moral imperatives are to be obeyed or dire consequences will follow, but also that God shows mercy and forgives, entering into new covenants with the very people who broke the old. Moses presses God: Will you in your wrath remember mercy? "Mercy it will be," says God, and "I will be with my people as the journey continues."

In other words, the leader of the people is their intercessor, their mediator. No, he is more than that: he is their advocate. The leader of a faith community has no more important role than this. On critical issues that face the faith community, or rather the whole nation, the leader cannot be content to moderate a mild afternoon debate; the leader must speak a Yes or a No; must advocate, not moderate. Especially when there are millions who have no voice unless it is the voice of an advocate.

The second issue in the conversation between Moses and God is also important: Will God give Moses personal assurance of favor? This is not a selfish request. Moses knows the continued effectiveness of his work is directly dependent on his own relation to God. The leader is not a retailer of religion to others. Many a pastor has suffered the slow death of the soul while busy as a bee taking care of the souls of others. As a civil rights worker sighed over the failure of a major project: "We had too many people sign up to do the Master's work who didn't know the Master."

Matthew 22:15-22

We come now to the Gospel reading, a reading which speaks to the theme of Children's Sabbath with yet another voice, not that of Paul or of Moses but of Jesus himself.

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem in the manner commemorated by the church on Palm or Passion Sunday. The days that follow are filled with a number of controversies between Jesus and lay and clergy leaders of the religious establishment. These verbal clashes are not true debates that function to inform an audience or to pursue the truth. Rather, these skirmishes are designed to ensnare Jesus in a wrong or at least an unpopular answer. The goal is to paint Jesus into a corner and then to say triumphantly, "Gotcha!" Jesus, Matthew says, was fully aware of the malicious intent of his interrogators (v.18). Their transparent flattery when approaching Jesus hardly concealed their motive (vv. 16-17).

The question brought to Jesus was one which, when free of traps and snares, deserved serious consideration. Very likely it was addressed frequently by rabbis and scribes knowledgeable in the law of Moses. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" A straightforward answer would be, "There is nothing in the law of Moses that forbids the payment of tribute to the governing authorities." However, Jesus is not engaged in a straightforward discussion but one filled with strong emotion and treacherous intent. Consider the tax itself. The "census" or "head" tax was instituted in 6 CE when Judea became a Roman province. The tax was offensive; that it could be paid only with a Roman coin was doubly offensive. Adding insult to injury was the inscription on the coin: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest." Mention the tax and emotions boiled. More than anything else, this tax created the nationalistic Zealot movement, the activities of which led to the 66-70 CE war and the destruction of Jerusalem. The moment Jesus met his questioners could have been incendiary.

Who were these interrogators? Matthew says they were disciples of the Pharisees along with Herodians. Unfortunately, "Pharisee" is among many Christians a pejorative term when, in fact, they were in many ways kin to Jesus. They focused on Scripture and considered it primary that God's people know and do God's will. As all Christians are not alike, neither were all Pharisees, and some of them intensely disagreed with Jesus' interpretation of certain Scriptures and with the company Jesus kept. To these, Jesus destabilized the religious community. Surprisingly, they join forces with Herodians, supporters of the Herod dynasty, more political than religious, and unlike the Pharisees, probably supported the tax.

What a strange sight! Here stands Jesus in the temple area, teacher, healer, lover of the least and the lost, embracer of the poor and the marginalized, friend of sinners, and toward him comes an angry coalition. Pharisees and Herodians, in other words, church and state temporarily dropping their differences to join forces in order to get rid of Jesus. They think they have him in the crossfire; however he answers the question will be wrong. He will either be not religious or not patriotic. Their question is not, "Jesus, what can we do to help the painfully needy in our community?" Their question is rather, "Jesus, what do you think about the tax?" Pardon me, but is not the question not "what do you think about ---?" but rather "what are you doing about ---?" Somehow all this sounds too familiar.

Jesus is patient with his opponents, although he must have enjoyed the moment when he asked for a coin and they produced the very coin that was the issue, and there in the sacred temple. Jesus' answer, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" was not a clever move, not an attempt to be evasive, not a definition of how one handles church and state. What he says is that in every situation, each person must make the decision about priorities. The decision is mine; not even Jesus can decide for me.

Sermon Notes on Texts in the Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Lectionaries

By The Reverend Ms. Margaret K. Schwarzer

Isaiah 45:1-7 Cyrus, God's Instrument

Nature, Style, and Context of the Passage:

The book of Isaiah's prophetic voice expresses outrage over the numerous injustices of Israel's society and consistently holds the people of Israel accountable to God for these injustices. Israel's disobedience, God's judgment, and God's redemption are frequent themes in Isaiah.

To fully appreciate Isaiah 45:1-7, we need to remember that at the time of this prophecy the city of Judah lay in ruins. Even Jerusalem's temple, their once magnificent symbol of national power and godly favor, had been destroyed. Furthermore, the leaders of Judah and most of the populace were in exile in Babylon, where public foreign rites declared that the Babylonian God Marduk had crushed Yahweh and his people. Despair ran rampant throughout the scattered Jewish community.

In Isaiah 45:1-7, the prophet declares that despite apparent failure, neither Yahweh nor his people have been defeated. Israel correctly understands that Yahweh is the one and only omnipotent deity, and that Israel's exile results from Yahweh's decision to discipline his people for their callous treatment of the poor and needy. For Isaiah, the seemingly hopeless situation of Israel's exile contains both God's chastisement of Israel and God's plan to restore her. Isaiah asserts that it is precisely because Yahweh is so powerful that he can use people like Cyrus, who do not worship him, to bring a reign of righteousness, justice, and mercy to Israel. Cyrus, a political-military leader who was impressing the ancient world with his successes, was first and foremost an instrument of Yahweh: "... for the sake of Israel, my chosen... I call you (Cyrus) by name, though you do not know me." (Isaiah 45:4)

Theological Themes:

Human sin and God's desire for justice

Much of the book of Isaiah is devoted to spelling out the corrupt and selfish actions of Israelite society and the inevitable punishment God would visit upon them. During Isaiah's time, a new elite class had developed, and the gap between rich and poor had become enormous. Greed for luxury goods and material possessions blinded people to the acute need and abiding hunger of the poor. Widows and orphans were mistreated in the law courts, innocent people were abused in public, and many people were dishonest in their daily dealings. Finally, Israel had developed a false sense of security, arrogantly imagining that her intimate relationship with God made her invincible. Isaiah is clear that God desires Israel to turn from her selfish ways and return to providing justice and care to her poorest and most vulnerable members.

God cannot be thwarted or controlled

The Book of Isaiah affirms that God acts in history and that God's actions unfold in the public areas of society, economics, and politics, as well as in the private areas of prayer, friendship, and family life. Because nothing is more powerful than God, neither human beings nor their false idols can control God or triumph

over God. No force of nature can compete with God's omnipotence; no greed, or fear, or cruelty is stronger than God's ability to overcome it or create a true good from it. No false idol — such as wealth, power, or prestige — can stand up to the cosmic power of God. Because of this omnipotence, God can act in surprising ways, using unexpected events or people to teach God's people. Individuals who appear strange or foreign to us, like Cyrus, can be messengers of God's redemption and God's blessing.

God's abiding love for God's people

According to Isaiah, God drives his people into exile in order to discipline them, not to forsake them. God's actions, however mysterious, are undertaken in order to restore Israel, not to destroy her. Throughout her exile, God continues to yearn for Israel's transformation into a community of righteousness and wholeness. Because of his love for them, God will never abandon God's people.

Preaching the Lesson:

Standing strong in the face of injustice

Since the times of Isaiah, people have wondered whether forces of evil, or bad luck, or blind fate have taken control of their lives when they are faced with desperate situations.

When violence or tragedy devastates communities, good people ask if God has forsaken them, and some despair. It is tempting, and even understandable, to give in to despair. During the Babylonian exile, many did despair; in our own day, in the face of natural disaster, human evil, and seemingly random tragedy, many still do despair.

Nevertheless, as people of faith, we are called upon to make a different choice. We are called upon to persevere in the face of injustice, and to stand strong while we address the violence of our own day. We are called upon to proclaim our Christian conviction in God's final victory of justice over evil. We are meant to emulate Isaiah's unyielding conviction that God's final plan is a restored world of righteousness and mercy.

When we resolve to persist, we are empowered to seek out the injustice that afflicts our communities and replace it with just and merciful options. As God exposes the failures of our society, our trust in God allows us to use the tools of truth and justice to act as agents of restoration.

Much of the violence in our own day is targeted at children. Our nation allows millions of children to be hungry, homeless, uninsured, abused, and at high risk for a violent death. The Children's Defense Fund compiles shocking facts about the devastation in the lives of America's children. Among them are:

- Persistent Hunger – day after day, hope-draining hunger affects the lives of 8.3 million American children.
- Deep Poverty – the humiliations and pains of abiding need haunt the lives of 7.1 million children in our rich nation.
- Gunfire Violence – suicides, accidents, and homicides take the lives of seven children a day.

Some will respond to these facts with apathy or despair; we know a better way.

As people of faith, we can dare to comprehend the scope of injustices our children face because we know that, with God's help, we can address them. We can help to bring about change and restoration. The Children's Sabbath is a good opportunity to reassess the needs of children in your church, community, and state. You

and your congregation can use this manual to expand your knowledge and inspire your action. The lions of justice in our past century — Bishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi — did not succumb to persecution, or to powerful forces of injustice, or to personal doubts; they were agents of transformation because they dared to be. Some were Christians, some, like Cyrus, worshipped other Gods, but the presence of God in their lives was unmistakable. Like them, we are actual human beings with the full range of strengths and weaknesses, and like them, we are called to be God's agents in the world. We don't need to be perfect; we need to be perfectly ready to act. We are all called to participate in God's plan of compassionate restoration. God never forsakes us, and we need not forsake each other.

Matthew 22:15-22: "Give to God the things that are God's."

Nature, Style, and Context of the Passage:

According to Matthew, the question of paying Roman taxes is brought to Jesus by a coalition of Herodians and Pharisee. The Herodians, supporters of Herod the Great's successor to rule Palestine, were pro-Roman, and favored the tax. The Pharisee tended to be silent objectors who deeply resented the Roman occupation but accepted it as a necessary evil. They counseled their people to submit to the tax, but viewed it as an unjust burden. Both groups came together because of their common opposition to Jesus. They intended to place Jesus on the horns of a dilemma in a public place. If he argued against paying the taxes, they would be able to accuse him of anti-Roman behavior and report him to Pilate. If Jesus supported the tax, he would lose favor with much of the general public, for whom the tax was an economic hardship and a hated example of their submission to Rome.

Jesus doesn't take the bait; instead of discussing the legal issues of their question, he moves the conversation in a different, and more profound, direction. "Whose head is on the coin?" he asks. His opponents answer, "Caesar's." A good paraphrase of Jesus' final reply to them might be: "Then give to Caesar the things stamped in his likeness that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are stamped in his likeness that are God's."

Jesus' response carries us all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where Genesis 1:27 teaches us that men and women were created in the image of God. In his slightly cryptic answer to the Pharisee and Herodians, Jesus wants his audience to understand that just as coins stamped with Caesar's image belong to Caesar, so do human beings, stamped with God's image, belong to God. Jesus is telling his audience to treat Caesar's coins as Caesar would have them be treated, and to treat God's "coins" (human beings) as God would want them to be treated. In Jesus' response, the question of taxes becomes a trivial matter, and the imperative shifts to focus upon the hearer's responsibility to provide justice and mercy to God's people.

Theological Themes:

Human beings have value beyond measure

In a moment of petty squabbling about taxes, Jesus pulls his audience back into considering the cosmic mystery of men and women being minted in God's image. Then God said, "Let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness." (Genesis 1:26) If we accept that God's likeness dwells within human beings, then we must also acknowledge the sacredness of all human life. Not just some of us, but all of us are sacred. Each child on this planet is of infinite value. Stamped with God's image, each of us is indescribably precious, valuable beyond our earthly ability to measure value.

Since the days of Tertullian and other early church fathers, interpreters of scripture have heard echoes of Genesis 1: 26-27 in Jesus' words and found great comfort in them.

Doing God's will is better than doing well

When we do well, we increase our own financial standing; when we act with justice, mercy, and compassion, we change lives for the better, often changing our own in the process. Some of the Pharisee, anxious to trap Jesus, argue about Caesar's taxes, but Jesus refuses to weigh in on either side of the argument. Instead, he reframes the argument to focus on what is most important to God. Jesus deftly points out to his adversaries that they are busy splitting hairs over a political question when they should be focusing on the larger issues of serving their neighbors and living in right relationship to God. In effect, Jesus is saying, "If Caesar wants a few pieces of silver from you, give them freely. Your act will remind you that a person's value is not determined by the amount of their material goods." Real abundance is found only in living in accordance with God's will.

Creative Kingdom Thinking

It is the responsibility of every person of faith to participate in God's restoration of the world, but sometimes we can find ourselves paralyzed by doubts or frozen by some intense infighting within our own communities. Jesus models for us the focused mind and the humorous attitude which can bypass trivial battles, damaged egos, or the general malaise of the status quo. With the flip of a coin, Jesus breaks free of the traps meant to damage him and refocuses himself and his community on how to fulfill God's will.

Preaching the Lesson:

Choose Life

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Jesus' response does not offer us clear-cut guidance on how to balance secular and religious commitments; it does not tell us how much we are to contribute to the poor and the needy. Instead, it pulls us more deeply into discerning for ourselves what we owe to beings who carry God's image within them. Jesus isn't saying, "There is a secular realm and there is a religious realm and equal respect can be paid to each." For Jesus, there is no neutral territory; there is no place on heaven or earth where God's justice and mercy are not meant to reign. Jesus' statement leaves us with a question: When, in God's name, will we give up our blindness to injustice, and our docile relationship to the status quo? It is hard to engage the broken places of creation, but that is one of the tasks God gives us.

The people of Haiti live in grinding poverty; they live in the poorest of the poor countries in the Western Hemisphere. They understand what the poorest children in our nation live without. When asked by tourists to explain how God could permit such great misery, they often answer with a proverb: "Bon dye konn bay men li pa koon separe." In literal translation it means "God gives, but doesn't share." What it means is "God gives us human beings everything we need to flourish, but God isn't the one who is supposed to divvy up the loot. That charge is laid upon us." (Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, p. 79)

Restoration, hope, life for our nation's at-risk children is possible, but we must pray for it, work for it, even sacrifice for it. Mahatma Gandhi tells us "Be the change you wish to see in the world." We can be; all we need to do is to look around our church, our community, or our state and take on one new action on

behalf of children. Your congregation can choose to reinforce or expand the work it already does to help children and families. What new opportunities are there for individuals in your church, or the congregation as a whole, to bring justice to children in need? This manual has a whole section dedicated to follow-up possibilities for your congregation to consider. (See Actions for All-Faiths section) Food pantries, clothing and book drives, educational circles, and legislative lobbying work are some of the options.

We do not have to be cynical or carelessly optimistic about the needs of America's poor children. The psalm appointed for today, Psalm 96, exhorts us to "Sing a new song," and we can, if we choose to do so. When we can dare what we haven't dared before we begin to transform both the world and our own hearts. Each action we take to improve the lives of at-risk children will bring both them and us one step closer to compassionate and righteous restoration.

Out of clutter,
Find simplicity.

From discord,
Find harmony.

In the middle
Of difficulty,
Lies opportunity.

(by Albert Einstein)

End notes — Cites:

Kidder, Tracy, Mountains Beyond Mountains, The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a man who would cure the world; Random House, New York, NY, 2004, Page 79.

Suggested Sermon Notes for Children's Sabbath

By the Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris

Sermon notes are provided on the following texts which may be suitable for the 2014 Children's Sabbath, Precious In God's Sight: Answering the Call to Cherish and Protect *Every Child*:

- **Isaiah 43:1-7**
- **Psalm 72**
- **Matthew 19:13-15**

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7 (NRSV)

*But now thus says the Lord,
[God] who created you, O Jacob,
[God] who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for your.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."*

Context of the Passage:

This passage is the work of Second Isaiah, a prophet writing around 540 B.C.E., to a community devastated by the fall of Judah and Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. and enduring the exile of some to Babylon. The political defeat and exile caused the community to question God's love, power, and presence. Second Isaiah's writing, coming some 200 years after the prophet Isaiah known as "First Isaiah," includes chapters 34-35 and 40-55 and seeks to offer comfort to those who are suffering and a means to understand the political events and consequences. The chapters immediately preceding our passage, 41 and 42, offer the concept of Israel as God's servant (see 41:8 and following), chosen and called.

A Closer Look:

Our passage has at its heart the declaration to a people who are suffering that they are precious in God's sight, honored, and loved. Paul D. Hanson in *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66* summarizes the meaningful structure of Isaiah 43:1-7:

"It is framed (v. 1 and v. 7) with a depiction of God as creator of Israel. The next level of its envelope structure (vv. 1b-3 and vv. 5-6), introduced by the assurance, 'Do not fear' describes God's redemptive action within history. Finally, lying at the heart of the hymn like a pearl in its shell, is a moving personal confession in which God reveals the basis for God's creative, redemptive acts on Israel's behalf: 'Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you' (v.4)."

Those who suffer, who are devastated by political upheavals, displaced and dispersed, enduring exile and a sense of abandonment, hear these astounding words: each is created by God; each is comforted and redeemed by God; each is precious in God's sight, honored, and loved. God comforts and redeems us, gathers us in, cherishes and protects us, not because of anything we have done or will do but because of who God is—God loves us and we are precious in God's sight.

Preaching Themes:

Created, Comforted, and Cherished by God

Imagine the children and families in our day who are suffering, powerless in the face of overwhelming political forces, displaced and feeling abandoned. How do we communicate not only through our words but more importantly through our actions that they are precious in God's sight, honored, and loved?

Every child is *created* by God in God's own image. If we truly believe that, why are we not acting more powerfully and persistently to change our rich nation's unacceptable child poverty rate that leaves one in 5 children in the United States — 16.1 million — without the necessities to survive and thrive and reach their God-given potential? Almost half of children in poverty are *extremely poor* which means living at half the poverty level or less — that's \$11,746 a year for a family of four. Children of color are disproportionately poor and the youngest, most vulnerable children are the poorest age group — more than one in four children under 5 — during their years of greatest brain development. How can we let any child, created by God in God's image, struggle without what is necessary to survive and thrive? If we want all children to know that they are created by God, what will we *do* differently? What conditions or life circumstances do we believe that each and every child of God — created for God's glory — deserves?

If we want every child to be *comforted* by the promise of God's presence with them through the scariest, most difficult times in their lives, what will we do? Children are passing through rising waters of poverty, through the raging rivers of homelessness and hunger. They are walking through the fire of gun violence and feeling the flames of racism. We know that child poverty creates unacceptable child homelessness and hunger. Nearly 1.2 million public school students were homeless in 2011-2012 and one in nine children in America lacks adequate food, according to the latest CDF *State of America's Children Report*. How do we embody God's comfort for children in these terrible circumstances, how do we live out the promise that they will be protected, and how do we embody God's justice to create lasting change so no child has to endure them at all? What would that look like? Is it serving as a CASA volunteer — a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in the system? Is it starting or supporting a Freedom School Program in a juvenile detention facility or in a community facing many challenges? Is it ensuring that hungry children in your community have access to the Summer Food Program during long summer months when they won't have school breakfasts and lunches?

If we want all children to know that they are *cherished* — *precious in God's sight, honored and loved*, what will we do? How can we help children from their earliest days have nurturing and supportive experiences at home, in child care, and in early childhood programs such as Head Start, Pre-K, and Kindergarten?

“Lack of cost effective investments deprives countless children of supports in the critical early years,” reports the Children's Defense Fund. “Early Head Start funding serves only 4 percent of the 2.9 million eligible poor infants and toddlers and Head Start funding serves only 41 percent of the 2 million eligible poor 3- and 4-year-olds. Less than half of all 3- and 4-year-old children were enrolled in preschool on average from 2009-2011. The quality of such programs varies dramatically across the country. There were about 224,000 children and families on waiting lists to receive public child care assistance in 2013, with many more not served due to frozen intake at the state level.”

The Strong Start for America's Children Act encourages expansion of support for high quality home visiting programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten (pre-K), and quality kindergarten programs to reach poor and low income children birth through age 5. For instance, it encourages continued funding for the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program offers voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs for young children and their families to promote the health of mothers and children, improve school readiness, prevent child abuse and neglect, support family economic self-sufficiency, reduce crime and delinquency, and support community resources.

Can you imagine how positive, nurturing early childhood experiences at home and in child care and other settings might help children have a sense of being cherished, honored, and loved? Can you imagine the difference that a high quality home visiting program might make, when a new, fragile or struggling parent gets caring support to become the best parent they can be for their newborn? How might that baby then grow with a more secure experience of being cherished and loved?

What does your congregation already do to create early experiences of nurture and care for children within the congregation and beyond? Perhaps your congregation houses a weekday child care program or provides volunteers for a local Head Start program. What else can we do as congregations and communities to support families and their children so that all experience a sense of being cherished, loved, and honored by God

and by us?

Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14, 18-19 (CEB)

*God, give your judgments to the king.
Give your righteousness to the king's son.
Let him judge your people with righteousness
and your poor ones with justice.
Let the mountains bring peace to the people,
let the hills bring righteousness.
Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;
let him save the children of those who are needy,
but let him crush the oppressors!*

*Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has compassion on the weak and the needy;
he saves the lives of those who are in need.
He redeems their lives from oppression and violence;
their blood is precious in his eyes.*

*Bless the Lord God, the God of Israel —
the only one who does wondrous things!
Bless God's glorious name forever;
let [God's] glory fill all the earth!
Amen and Amen!*

Context of the Passage:

The date and authorship of this psalm, ascribed to Solomon, cannot be determined decisively. However, it is generally recognized as dating before the Babylonian exile and end of the Davidic kingship. This psalm was likely used at the coronation of Davidic kings or at annual commemorations of their coronations. As such, it is not specific to one particular ruler but focuses instead on the office of kingship. The psalm's location at the end of Book II of the Psalter means that its final verses of doxology (vv. 18-19) serve not only as the end of the psalm but also as the close of the book. These concluding lines direct our attention to God as the source of all good, the One who alone is worthy of our praise.

A Closer Look:

The psalm focuses on justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*sedeq*). These concepts set the frame for the psalm in the first verse and then appear repeatedly throughout. Justice and righteousness describe God's will and characterize God's reign. Human rulers are then expected to live out God's justice and righteousness in their human leadership. Even as the human ruler is charged with enacting a rule that reflects God's priorities, the psalmist reminds us that the people do not belong to the human ruler but instead belong to God: the psalmist prays to God, "Let [the ruler] judge *your* people with righteousness and *your* poor ones with justice." (v. 2, emphasis mine.)

Observes James L. Mays in *Interpretation: Psalms*, "Justice and righteousness became the first and organizing

responsibility of the king upon which all else depended. They are not one item in a list but the foundation on which the other possibilities rest” (Mays, Page 237). In verse 4, the psalm emphasizes that the justice the human ruler is charged with bringing is expected to come first to those who are in poverty, children, or those who are in some sort of need. The ruler is also expected to stop those who oppress others (vv. 5-11). The psalmist looks for such a reign of justice and righteousness to extend in time and reach, not as a result of military might but as a result of righteousness; “Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper.” (v. 12)

The leadership called for, prayed for, in this psalm reflects the character and action of God. The ruler is one who “has compassion on the weak and the needy,” who “saves the lives of those who are in need,” and who redeems their lives from oppression and violence.” Their lives are “precious in [the leader’s] sight.”

Preaching Themes:

Principles, Priorities, and Persistence: The psalm makes clear that the highest principles for leaders here, as they are for God, should be justice and righteousness. Further, the psalm is clear that the highest priorities for leaders, as they are God’s priorities, should be children, those in poverty, and those in need or experiencing oppression.

We, as God’s people who live in an earthly realm with all too human rulers, have a role to play, too. The psalm, scholars suggest, was used not only at a coronation but also at the annual celebration or commemoration of the coronation. Then, as now, it is not enough to simply install a leader in office (whether through coronation then or election now.) The people need to be persistent, regularly reminding the leaders of their charge, their responsibility, and that we — and God — are both affirming the priorities and attending to how they measure up in fulfilling those duties. We can’t simply elect officials and then turn our attention elsewhere. We must persistently remind them of the call to lead with justice and righteousness. We must stand with and for the children and those in poverty to remind leaders that they are the most urgent priority. As Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller is quoted in *The New Interpreters Bible*, “Psalm 72 finally calls us as citizens of God’s realm to remind every human ruler, politician, and government that ‘the way to peace and well-being is found only when power assumes responsibility for justice and is clothed in compassion, regarding as precious and valuable the life of every citizen in the land.’” (NIB, Page 965)

So how are our elected leaders at every level — federal, state, and local — doing in seeing their first responsibility as justice and righteousness, and ensuring that the first recipients are children and people in poverty? Are they voting to ensure food, early childhood development, and strong schools for our children or are they voting to protect the interests of the wealthy? Are they investing in our children and families in poverty or are they looking after the lobbyists and monied supporters? Do their arguments sound like the psalmist and the prophets who prayed that justice would roll down like waters or are they making the case for “trickle down” that gives to the wealthy first?

On Prayer:

We know that even as humans strive to fulfill God’s will and embody God’s priorities, we are all too human and will fall short. Observes James L. Mays: “Such seems the best we can hope for in any ruler, leader, or governor — partial success and eventual failure at fulfilling the ideal of his [or her] vocation. The New Testament exhorts us to pray ‘for kings and all who are in high positions’ in a keen awareness of their need

and the consequences for the welfare of all in the way they use power (I Tim. 2:1-4). We do pray for leaders because we want them to be drawn by divine help as close as possible to the model of God's rule." (Mays, Page 238) On this Children's Sabbath weekend, we pray for leaders as well as for ourselves, that each of us might come closer to cherishing and protecting children as God intends.

Precious:

The Children's Sabbath theme this year is "Precious in God's Sight: Answering the Call to Cherish and Protect *Every* Child." The psalm prays for the leader's continued rule "because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper. He has compassion on the weak and the needy; he saves the lives of those who are in need. He redeems their lives from oppression and violence; their blood is precious in his sight." Imagine how different the priorities in our nation would be if we considered precious the lives of those who are oppressed and subjected to violence, if we considered precious those who have less political power and experience need, if we considered precious those who are living in poverty. What would change in our communities, states, nation, and world if we no longer treated some children as trash and others as treasure? What would change if our leaders treated every one of the more than 16 million children living in poverty as *precious*? What would we do differently if we treated as *precious* the child or teen who will be killed or injured by guns every 30 minutes as things stand right now? What would our leaders do differently if they regarded as *precious* every baby, infant, and toddler, including the one in four who is living in poverty? What kind of early childhood investments do such precious little ones deserve?

New Testament Reading: Matthew 19:13-15 (or 19:13-26)

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Context of the Passage:

In her chapter, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, Judith M. Gundry-Volf offers two useful summaries — first, of the place of children in life at Jesus' time and second, of the place of children in the Gospels. On the place of children in Jesus time, Gundry-Volf writes:

"There were two contrasting sentiments toward children in a first-century Greco-Roman context. On the one hand, parents loved and took pleasure in their children...; they valued children as necessary to their economic survival and well-being and as heirs in whom they would live on after death. The state considered children indispensable for economic, cultural, and military purposes. On the other hand, childhood was viewed largely negatively as a state of immaturity to outgrow. The standard measure was the free adult male Roman citizen....[P]eople considered children fundamentally deficient and not yet human in the full sense.In light of these attitudes, it is not surprising that children occupied a low rung on the social ladder. The most powerful evidence for this low status is the legal position of children and the brutal practices toward children allowed by Roman law." (Pages 31-32, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," by Judith M. Gundry-Volf in *The Child in Christian Thought*, Marcia J. Bunge, ed. Grand Rapids:

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001)

In summarizing themes of the place of children in the Gospels, Gundry-Volf writes:

“There are five main ways in which the significance of children is underscored in Jesus’ teaching and practice. He blesses the children brought to him and teaches that the reign of God belongs to them. He makes children models of entering the reign of God. He also makes children models of greatness in the reign of God. He calls his disciples to welcome little children as he does and turns service of children into a sign of greatness in the reign of God. He gives the service of children ultimate significance as a way of receiving himself and by implication the One who sent him.”
(Page 36, Gundry-Volf.)

The final context to consider is where in the Gospel of Matthew our passage appears. Most of Jesus’ ministry has already happened — the preaching and teaching, the calling and healing. The final days in Jerusalem are fast approaching. As our scene unfolds, Jesus has just left Galilee where he had answered the disciples’ question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven by placing a child in their midst, where he taught them it is better to have a millstone around one’s neck than to cause a little one to stumble, where he taught them that God doesn’t want to lose one of these little ones, not one lamb, where he taught them about forgiveness. Now in Judea, surrounded by large crowds, he responds to testing questions from religious leaders before the children are brought to him for blessing. Just after the blessing, he responds to the questions of the young man with many possessions by telling him to keep the commandments and to sell what he owns, give the money to the poor, and to follow him. In the next chapter Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, and the chapter after that records his entry into Jerusalem.

A Closer Look:

Notes Mark Allan Powell in “Matthew” (*Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor), “The phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ is often used in Matthew and is synonymous with the phrase ‘kingdom of God,’ which is used in other Gospels and occasionally turns up here (6:33)...Either phrase refers to the reality of God ruling, a phenomenon not limited by space or time. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is not just the place where God lives, but is the sphere of God’s influence; it is found wherever and whenever God’s will is done. In Matthew, Jesus declares the accomplishment of God’s will to be on the brink of fulfillment. He frequently speaks of the kingdom as a present reality (11:2, 13:38), but he also instructs his disciples to seek the kingdom (6:33) and to pray for it to come (6:10).” (Page 869)

Preaching Themes:

“Remembering Not to Forget”

The timing of this story is significant. The disciples didn’t push the children away because the disciples were new on the job, or because Jesus had forgotten to tell them about the special standing of children. No, they’ve been following him for a while. They’ve heard before about the place of children in the reign of God. And they still got it wrong. The disciples needed to remember not to forget what Jesus said about children.

In our nation today, in our communities and even in our congregations — we need to remember not to forget. We need to remember that how we treat children is how we treat Jesus and the One who sent him.

We need to remember that letting a child stumble over obstacles that we leave in their way — say, poverty, violence, or lack of early childhood care — is cause for us to suffer. We need to remember that the intention of the one we claim to follow is that all children experience blessing, all children feel precious, cherished and protected.

How do we help our elected leaders remember not to forget? Does the politician who kisses babies and pauses for photo-ops with them during the campaign remember them when the budget is being debated? How do we help our legislators remember the children? Do we visit them with children and families affected by their decisions? Do we send our elected representatives letters, children's drawings, and emails? Do we and our children call them when they are making decisions that will impact the most vulnerable children in our state and nation? What will we do to remind them?

So how will we remember not to forget? How will we remind each other and ourselves what it means to live out Jesus' command to welcome the children and remove stumbling blocks in their way? How will we remember that Jesus intends for children to be fully brought into the embrace of blessing. Children's Sabbath is one weekend a year, but the aim is to inspire and sustain our faithful action throughout the year. How will you and your congregation sustain the Children's Sabbath focus, concern, and action in the months to come? How will you remember not to forget?

Sample Children's Sermon

Leave No Child Behind

Have you ever felt left out? Have you ever been told you are not old enough or big enough to do something? Have you ever been told you were too little to be included? Maybe you have big brothers and sisters who go off to school, but you are not old enough for school yet. Maybe you've been to an amusement park where the rides have a sign that say you have to be this big to go on the ride. Maybe there's been a time when grown-ups were having a conversation and you were not included. Maybe there has been a time when some children were playing together and that didn't let you play. Being left out never feels good. Being left out can feel pretty crummy.

One time, some parents were bringing their children to see Jesus. The parents wanted Jesus to hold the children and pray for them and bless them. The parents knew Jesus was special and they wanted their children to be included in the group of people that was with Jesus.

But — uh oh — some of Jesus' friends and helpers, called disciples, made a mistake. They thought Jesus was too busy to spend time with children. They thought Jesus was too important to spend time with children. And so Jesus' helpers tried to keep the children away, to leave them out.

Do you know what Jesus said? Jesus said, let the children come to me! Jesus didn't want any child to be left out. Jesus held the children in his arms, he prayed with the children, and he blessed them. Jesus knew that every child is special and no child should be left out.

Today is a special day called Children's Sabbath. It is a day celebrated by lots of people who love God — people who pray in churches, and synagogues, and mosques, and other places. It's a day when we are all remembering that God wants every child to be loved and protected and no child should be left out. Every child should have important things like good food and a chance to learn and grow, a home to live in and a doctor when they are sick. Every child should be safe. We want all children to have these blessings. We don't want to leave any child out so our church is working with others to make that happen.

Let's have a prayer:

Dear God, thank you for loving every single child. Remind us to be loving, too. Help us to include others so no child feels left out. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.