

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 do 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 by Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund
- 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
- For preachers who do not follow a lectionary, sermon notes on Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, the theme text for the 2015 Children's Sabbath.
- 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, ending child poverty, and bending the arc toward God's vision of justice for 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 18, 2015 (the Gospel and Epistle readings coincide in all four lectionaries; the Old Testament lessons and Psalms differ). For preachers who do not follow a lectionary, sermon notes are provided for Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-5, the theme text for the 2015 Children's Sabbath.
- **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 those whose work or volunteer efforts are devoted to ending child poverty.** 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 a program serving children in poverty, 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 B**, which falls on **October 18, 2015**.

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 in poverty and commit faithfully to respond.

Pope Francis has said, "Among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor." Today, on this weekend marked as Children's Sabbath in religious traditions across our nation, we unite to amplify the cry of the poor, to hear the children in poverty who wonder, "How long must I cry for help?" and to respond by committing together to bend the arc toward God's vision of justice.

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.

Gloria

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

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 53:10-11

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 32

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Gospel Acclamation

Priest: Alleluia.

People: Alleluia.

Priest: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

People: Alleluia.

Gospel: Mark 10:35-45

Homily

(See homily notes in this section.)

Profession of Faith

General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful):

Priest:

The love of God is manifest in the Word made flesh and revealed as God's own child. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, let us bring before God our prayer for all children, saying, "Lord, hear your children's cry for help."

For the holy Church of God, that we follow ever more closely Christ Jesus who taught us that whoever would be first must be last of all and servant of all, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

For all the peoples of the world, especially the billion children and families who live on less than one dollar a day, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

For our nation and our leaders, that they will hear the cries of the little ones above the lobbyists, the children above the corporations, and defend the youngest and poorest in our land, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

For all our brothers and sisters in need, especially the more than 14 million children living in poverty in our rich nation and the parents who work hard every day and still cannot make ends meet, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

For ourselves and our community, that we recognize your image in every child, that we work to bless each child as Jesus welcomed them, and that your spirit unites us to work for justice, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

For all who have died, especially the children who died from causes we could have prevented or injustice we could have ended, we pray to the Lord:

Lord, hear your children's cry for help.

Priest:

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 Brother. Amen.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts

(Involve children and youths in bringing up the bread and wine for the celebration of the eucharist and gifts for the needs of children in poverty.)

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 compassion and courage to bend the arc toward God's vision of justice for children.

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.

PovertyUSA is the domestic anti-poverty program of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. An initiative of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), PovertyUSA seeks to educate and promote understanding about poverty and its root causes. PovertyUSA has a variety of education programs and activities for children and adults that may be helpful additions to your celebration of the 2015 Children's Sabbath with our focus on ending child poverty. **Visit www.povertyusa.org**

"A way has to be found to enable everyone to benefit from the fruits of the earth, and not simply to close the gap between the affluent and those who must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table, but above all to satisfy the demands of justice, fairness and respect for every human being."

(Pope Francis, Address to the Food and Agricultural Organization, 6/20/13)

"Poverty calls us to sow hope. . . . Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures."

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

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 B**, which falls on **October 18, 2015**.

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. Where noted, hymn suggestions are from *Wonder, Love, and Praise: A Supplement to The Hymnal 1982* [WLP]; otherwise, hymns are from The Hymnal 1982.

The Word of God

Hymn: O Threefold God of Tender Unity (#743 WLP); 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); We Will Extol You (#404); 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, incarnate as a poor child, you have heard our cries of pain at injustice and told us through the prophets to write the vision and make it plain. Make our feet swift and our voices bold to proclaim your justice; make our hearts tender and our arms open to show your love for 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.

Option 3: (BCP)

Celebrant: God be with you.
People: And also with you.
Celebrant: Let us pray.

For Social Justice

Almighty God, who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Lessons

A Reading from Isaiah 53:4-12

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 Hebrews 4:12-16

Gospel: Mark 10:35-45

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 24-36)

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:

Prayers of the People

(The sung response O Lord Hear My Pray'r from Taize, #827, WLP may be substituted for the People's spoken response below).

On this day celebrated as Children's Sabbath in churches across the land, let us pray for the Church and for the world, saying "Hear your children's prayers."

Grant, O God, that all who gather in Christ's name will heed his words that to be first we must be last of all and servant of all.

Silence

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Guide our nation and its leaders, that they will hear the cries of our children before the corporations, the little ones before the lobbyists, and lead with justice for the sake of our children.

Silence.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Bless the families of our world, especially the billion who struggle to survive on just a dollar a day.

Silence.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Guide us as we seek the bend the arc toward your vision of justice for our children's sake.

Silence.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Comfort all who suffer, especially children in poverty and parents who work hard and struggle to make ends meet.

Silence.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Gather to yourself all who have died, especially those who died from poverty and other causes we could have prevented.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear your children's prayers.

Almighty God of justice and mercy, hear these the prayers of your children and grant them for the sake of your beloved child Jesus 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 Hymn: When the Poor One (#802 WLP), As Those of Old (#705)

(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 gave us Jesus Christ, born a poor baby, 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 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: Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service (#610), As We Gather at Your Table (#763 WLP), The Church of Christ in Every Age (#779 WLP), Lord You Give the Great Commission (#780 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)

The Wisdom of God
the Love of God
and the Grace of God
strengthen you
to be Christ's hands and heart in this world,
in the name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.
(source: Celtic)

The Dismissal

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

People: Thanks be to God.

2015 Children's Sabbath Protestant Service:

How Long Must I Cry for Help?

Bending the Arc toward God's Vision of Justice for Children

Call to Worship

We gather on this Children's Sabbath,
to hear the children who wonder, "How long must I cry for help?"
We gather to heed God's charge to write the vision and make it plain.
We gather answer Christ's call to serve the last, the least, and the littlest ones.
We gather to be strengthened by the Spirit to bend the arc toward God's vision of justice.
Come, let us worship God.

Hymn of Praise

Possibilities include: Bring Many Names; God, You Spin the Whirling Planets; For the Beauty of the Earth;
Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us; God of Great and God of Small

Call to Confession

Let us confess our sins first in the silence of our hearts and then aloud in one voice, trusting that God, who is merciful and just, will hear our prayers and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let us pray.

Prayer of Confession

Ever-present God, you have heard our prayers in the silence of our hearts and you hear us now. We confess that we have dulled our ears to the cries of children who are hungry. We confess that we have hardened our hearts to the plight of millions of children living in poverty and millions of parents struggling to make ends meet. We confess that we have dimmed our hopes for a more just world and our ability to make a difference.

Sharpen our ears, we pray, to hear the voices of children and your call to us. Soften our hearts to show compassion to families who are struggling. Raise our hopes for how we can help bend the arc toward justice and work for the world that you intend. These things we ask in the name of Jesus who blessed the children, sided with the poor, and reflected your intentions for the reign of God. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Listen! I have something to say! God sent God's own child Jesus that we might know ourselves to be loved and forgiven children of God.

Hear and believe the good news: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

The Peace

Time with Children/Children's Sermon

(See sample Children's Sermon in this section)

Anthem/Hymn

Prayer for Illumination

Living, Loving God, by your Holy Spirit whom Jesus called the Advocate, help us to hear and heed your Word read and proclaimed this day. Help us to be both hearers and doers of your word, for the sake of your beloved children. Amen.

Old Testament Reading

For those not following a lectionary, the suggested reading for the 2015 Children's Sabbath theme is Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-5.

New Testament Reading

For those not following a lectionary, one of the following readings would speak to the 2015 Children's Sabbath theme: Luke 6:20-26; Luke 16:19-31; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-25; Matthew 6:19-21.

Sermon

(See Sermon Resources in this section)

Hymn

Affirmation of Faith

(Select one from your tradition that most closely relates to the day's theme.)

Other Liturgical Responses to the Word

(According to your tradition, one or more of the following may be incorporated into the service: Act of Commitment, baptism, reaffirmation of baptismal vows, or other pastoral rite of the church.)

Offering

Suggested Offertory Hymn: Give Thanks

Prayers of the People

(The Prayers of the People may be led by three leaders — perhaps a child, a youth, and an adult — with the choir and/or congregation singing the chant from the Taizé Community “O Lord, Hear My Prayer” at the beginning, middle, and end as indicated. Alternatively, the Prayers of the People could be led by one person and the congregation could follow each petition with a spoken response, such as “God, hear the cries of your children.”)

Leader 1: O God, you are always more ready to hear us than we are to call on you. Hear us now as we turn to you.

Congregation and Choir (sing): O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. When I call, answer me. O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. Come and listen to me. (Text: Taizé Community, Music: Jacques Berthier.)

Leader 1: We pray that you will help us truly be your Church by seeking to serve those who are little, last, least, and left behind.

Leader 2: We pray for our world in which many starve and struggle to survive while others have far, far more than they need.

Leader 3: We pray for our nation and our leaders, that the cries of children will be heard above the clamor of corporations, the needs of the little ones will come before the desires of the lobbyists, the priorities of the poor will come before the positions of the powerful.

Congregation and Choir (sing): O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. When I call, answer me. O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. Come and listen to me.

Leader 1: We pray for our communities, that we move from complacency to caring and action to end child poverty now.

Leader 2: We pray for those in need, especially children in poverty and parents who struggle to find work or make ends meet.

Leader 3: We pray for ourselves, for the courage to care when discouragement overtakes us, for the energy to act for justice when day-to-day demands occupy us.

Congregation and Choir (sing): O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. When I call, answer me. O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. Come and listen to me.

Leader 1: These things we ask in the name of God's own beloved child, Jesus. Amen.

The Eucharist

(Congregations that will be celebrating the Lord's Supper should incorporate the appropriate liturgical material. See the Episcopal Liturgy. Good Communion Hymn options include For Everyone Born by Shirley Erena Murray and Give Thanks by Henry Smith.)

Litany: How Long? Not Long!

Every day in our nation, nearly fifteen million children are living in poverty.

Children in poverty wonder, How long must I cry for help?

Every day in our nation, nearly half of children in poverty and their families don't have enough food.

Hungry children wonder, How long must I cry for help?

Millions of children living in America are homeless or have unstable housing.

Children and their families without secure homes wonder, How long must I cry for help?

Nearly 70 percent of children in poverty have parents who work but don't earn enough to lift the family out of poverty.

Low-wage working parents wonder, How long must I cry for help?

In most states, center-based child care for babies costs more than in-state college tuition. Unaffordable child care keeps many parents from being able to work and keeps other working parents in poverty.

Parents wonder, How long must I cry for help?

In communities everywhere, families experience injustice.

We wonder, how long must we cry for help?

How long?

Not long! Because God surely hears our cries.

How long?

Not long! Because together our voices are stronger than one voice alone, and we will make the cries of children and families heard until our nation responds.

How long?

Not long! Because we know how to solve many of these problems and we *can* end child poverty.

How long?

Not long! Because the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice, and we will help to bend the arc.

May it be so. **Amen.**

Closing Hymn

Good options include: Called as Partners in Christ's Service (Jane Parker Huber); When the Poor Ones/Cuando el Pobre (Jose Anonio Olivar and Miguel Manzano); May the God of Hope Go With Us/Canto de Esperanza (Alvin Schumaat); The Church of Christ Cannot Be Bound (Adam M. L. Tice)

Charge and Benediction

Go forth to hear the voices of children made in God's own image;
Go forth to bear the love of Christ who sided with the poor;
Go forth to seek justice as the Spirit moves in and through you.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you and each child of God now and forever more. Amen.

Additional Worship Materials: Prayers by Marian Wright Edelman

Grant Us a Vision In Our Time

O God, grant us Your vision in our time.

Help us to write it so large that even a runner can see it.

Make it so compelling that even cynic will pause,

so convincing that a skeptic will risk trying to bring hope to others,
and so inspiring that the committed will stand courageously in faith,
leaving the results to You.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

The Measure of Success

God, help our children to learn what is real. Help them not to defer to people because they are powerful or rich but because they are good or wise or helpful or loving.

Help them not to defer to people because they are attractive or famous but because they share a mission, a life view, a commitment to something bigger than themselves.

Help them not to defer to people because of race or gender but because they are principled and honest.

Amen.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

O God, help our children to feel love and appreciation for all Your gifts of life.

Grant each of them a passion for peace and for justice,

kindness for those who are weak and needy and sad and afraid,

courage to stand up for right and to struggle against wrong, and

friendship and kinship with all who share the world You have created.

Grant our children faith to open the door of their souls wide to life and love as You intend.

Protect them against the worms of hate and the weasels of selfishness and envy.

Help our children to sing their own songs and to hear the songs of others in the spheres of the earth's firmament.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

Children — God's Sacred Inheritance

Reduced by too many from God's inheritance

to men's property

to women's burden

to society's problem

to workforce commodity

to a family value

to political photo op and prop

to fodder for military

to corporate marketing target

to parent nagger and persuader

valueless unless marketable

valueless unless problemless

valueless as vulnerable humans now
valueless as God's special creation and messengers of hope
until adults.

But children are the seeds of heaven
and stewards of tomorrow.

God's inheritance
squandered throughout the earth.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

Oh I Am Who I Am,
Hear the cries of Your children
who are ravaged by violence, poverty, racism and neglect,
scared, profiled, arrested, and imprisoned by those in authority,
ignored by those with power as they languish in crumbling schools and neighborhoods,
labeled often by some entrusted with their education as dumb, disruptive, retarded, and failures,
marginalized by those who vote and are elected because they cannot make campaign contributions,
resented by some of those forced to care for them in our often inhumane child welfare and juvenile justice
systems.

Hear our cries for our children, all-powerful God.

Fight their battles,

turn the hearts and transform the actions of those who will not let our children escape the darkness of
violence and drugs and poverty.

Open the Red Sea to their opportunity.

Send them Your manna in the wilderness and

lead us and our children into the promised land.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

God, please stop injustice,
the killing of innocent children
by violence at home and in far away lands.

God, please stop injustice,
the killing of innocent children
by poverty at home and abroad.

God, please stop injustice,
the assault on precious child dreams
by neglect and apathy near and far.

God, please stop injustice,
so our children may live
and love and laugh and play again.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

O God, forgive and transform our rich nation where small babies
die of cold quite legally.

O God, forgive and transform our rich nation where small children
suffer from hunger quite legally.

O God, forgive and transform our rich nation where toddlers and
school children die from guns sold quite legally.

O God, forgive and transform our rich nation that lets children
be the poorest group of citizens quite legally.

O God, forgive and transform our rich nation that lets the rich
continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.
O God, forgive and transform our rich nation which thinks
security rests in missiles and in bombs rather than in mothers and in babies.
O God, forgive and transform our rich nation for not giving You
sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread.
O God, help us never to confuse what is quite legal
with what is just and right in Your sight.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

God, is America's dream big enough for me?
For the little Black boy born the wrong color in the wrong place
to the wrong parents in some folks' sight?
God, is America's justice fair enough for me?
For the little Brown or White girl labeled from birth as second best?
God, is America's economy open to us?
For the many children who have to stay poor on the bottom so too few can stay rich on top?
God, does America have enough for me in a land of plenty for some,
but of famine for others?
God, is America's dream large enough for me?
I who am poor, average, disabled, girl, Black, Brown, Native American, White?
Is America for me?

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

Sermon Resources for the Children's Sabbath

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.

Sermon Notes on the Lectionary Texts: The lectionary texts designated for this Children's Sabbath Sunday, October 18, 2015, offer deep connections and powerful messages related to the Children's Sabbath themes.

- Episcopal Lectionary—Proper 24: Ps. 91; Isa. 53:4-12; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:35-45
- Lutheran Lectionary—22nd Sunday after Pentecost: Ps. 91:9-16; Isa. 53:10-12; Hebrews 4:9-16; Mark 10:35-45
- Revised Common Lectionary—29th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Job 38:1-7; Ps. 104; Heb. 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45:
- Roman Catholic Lectionary—29th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Responsorial Psalm: 32; Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

Sermon Notes on Children's Sabbath Theme Text from Habakkuk: 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 Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-5, the 2015 Children's Sabbath theme text. Additionally, the reflections in the 2015 Children's Sabbath Seven Day Guide for Prayer and Reflection may spark sermons on other texts.

Children's Sermon: 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."

Sermon Notes on the Lectionary Texts for October 18, 2015

The following texts are the designated readings for the churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary, the Episcopal Lectionary, the Lutheran Lectionary, and the Roman Catholic Lectionary.

Job 38: 1–7 (34–41)

Isaiah 53:4–12 (or Psalm 104:1–9, 24, 35c)

Psalm 91:9–16

Hebrews 5:1–10

Mark 10:35–45

These lectionary texts designated for the Sunday on which Children's Sabbath falls, October 18, 2015 present both opportunity and challenge for the preacher as we look at the call to end child poverty.

The opportunity is to acknowledge that suffering exists; all who care about children know too well that children suffer. Children in poverty face hunger, inadequate housing, and deficits in early childhood development; children are sick and injured and millions lack access to health care; children are pushed along a pipeline to prison by poverty, lack of health and mental health care, abuse and neglect, failing schools, and too few positive role models — finding themselves in despairing acceptance of a seemingly limited future.

We may not know the reason why, but we do know through Christ's suffering with and even for us that God knows our pain intimately and loves us through it. Furthermore, we recognize through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that God calls us as the body of Christ to serve the last, the least, and the left behind and stand with and for all children who suffer, embodying God's love and will for justice.

The challenge, on the other hand, is to ensure that worshippers do not take away a message that suffering is simply to be accepted obediently and we should not ask the deep "why"s. In an age when we find it all too tempting to distract ourselves with nonstop entertainment, it would be tragic if Christians failed to hear the clear call to act vigorously to relieve the unnecessary and immoral suffering our indifference inflicts on innocent children. We may not be capable of ending all suffering, but we are surely called to end the suffering we *can* affect — and there is enough of that in our own communities to keep us busy for the rest of our lives.

Job 38:1–7 (34–41)

The book of Job begins with the question posed by the satan: Is Job faithful because of his good fortune? Will he lose faith when he loses those blessings? At its heart lies the question of suffering. Job speaks for all of us when he asks why people suffer. The Children's Sabbath asks more particularly, why do children suffer, what does it mean for our faith, and how are we to respond in this world in which children suffer?

Throughout the book, we hear different approaches as those involved seek answers, from the three friends' conventional wisdom and theology to Job's challenging God to a debate in the style of a trial. Elihu offers unconventional answers as well. Finally, in our passage, God begins to provide a response. At the end of the book, however, we are not left with certainty that the divine speech is the definitive answer or with a clear understanding of what the "right" answer to the question of suffering is, in part because God affirms that Job has spoken rightly (42:7) and events turn out as the friends predicted. Notes Carol Newsome:

“To deny that there is a single definitive answer is not to say that one cannot gain insight into the problem of suffering in a world created by a loving God. What the book of Job models is a community of voices struggling to articulate a range of perspectives, each one of which contains valid insights as well as blindness to other dimensions of the problem. At different times and in different circumstances, one or another of the voices may seem more powerful, may be the word we need to hear in order to work our way through a particular experience. By refusing to give the book a neat resolution and declare one of the perspectives to be *the* solution, the book of Job draws us toward a recognition that our craving for an answer is an attempt to evade what we know to be true. Especially in times of religious crisis, richness of meaning and even a sense of peace are not to be found in a pre-packaged answer but emerge from wrestling with God.”⁶

The book of Job raises the tension between our desire for a predictable world ordered by God that fulfills our expectations and the reality of unexpected events out of our control that create anxiety and uncertainty. In our passage from Job, God gives examples of God's creative capacity beginning with laying the very foundation of the earth. Interestingly, the examples God gives underscore the existence of chaos in God's creation. “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?” (v. 8) We are reminded of not only God's order but also the chaos that exists in our world.

Job gives voice to all of us who wonder about suffering in our world, all who wonder why, in the well-worn words, bad things happen to good people. When children suffer, especially, we are driven to ask with Job, why, why, why? How can one who is innocent, defenseless, vulnerable be burdened with such suffering? How can over 5.2 million children be without health coverage and unable to see a doctor when they are sick or injured? How can 14.7 million live in poverty in the richest nation on earth? How can a Black boy born in 2001, already face a one in three chance of imprisonment in his lifetime, or his Latino age-mate face one in six odds of imprisonment? How can this be? Where is God in all of this suffering?

God is where God has always been: God is with us. God's heart is the first to break. Friends who give us alternative explanations may do so to comfort themselves, not to comfort us. The whole of the biblical witness is that God will go to any lengths to save us. And to be God's followers is to go to any lengths to save those who suffer, especially those who do not have any capacity to save themselves.

At the end of the book of Job, as Job's family and friends gather to share a meal, offer true comfort, and provide him money and gifts, we find that God works through us as the community to provide support and help restore the fortunes of those who have suffered.

Isaiah 53:4–12

Location

Our passage is part of the fourth and last of the “servant songs.” This fourth servant song begins in Isaiah 52:13 and concludes with our text. The verses at the end of Chapter 52 state that the nations and their leaders will finally have their eyes opened, “*So shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.*” (52:15)

The passage immediately preceding our text tells of the servant in his earliest years: “*For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.*” (53:2–3)

In our passage, which traditionally serves as the Old Testament reading for Good Friday, we encounter a portion of the fourth Servant Song that captures the major themes of the whole. One commentary notes, “1) The basic message is stated at the outset and reiterated in the conclusion (53:12a): God will vindicate and exalt his Suffering Servant. That point, not only in the original context but in all others, is a reversal of expectations, including those of the disciples in Mark 10:43–45. God’s power and authority are manifested in weakness; God acts through one whose suffering made him repulsive to all who saw him. 2) We are asked to identify with the life of the innocent sufferer, recounted here from youth (53:2) through a trial and death (53:7–8). 3) The servant’s life of suffering and humiliation is both vicarious and efficacious. It is on behalf of others, and it effectively removes their sin (53:6, 8, 12). 4) Not only will the servant be vindicated before the whole world, but also his suffering is on behalf of the transgressions of all (“the many,” 53:12).⁷

Turning Things Upside Down: Reversal of Expectations

The reversal of expectations noted in the first point provides a meaningful reinforcement of the message in the passage from Mark also designated by the lectionaries (see discussion below) and relevant to the Children’s Sabbath. We have to let go of our world’s notions of the greatest and the least, the powerful and the powerless, the first and the last. The ones who suffer will be exalted. The last will be first. A little child will lead them. We need to be able to open our eyes to God acting through those we least expect. Can we see God acting through the hurting children who call to us? Can we see God acting through the poor, Black, and Latino children who are most likely to live in poverty, go without needed health care, and wind up incarcerated at some point in their lives? If the life of Jesus has shown us anything at all, it is that God is most likely to be present to us in the most unexpected of persons, and to call us to a ministry borne not of power but of love.

Can we accept the invitation not to power or safety or comfort, but to servant leadership, risk, and even our own suffering? Are we ready to turn things upside down? Are our nation and its leaders ready to see and finally comprehend the nature of servanthood?

Identifying with the Innocent Sufferer

Many children and youths might well identify with the experience of the suffering servant. Too many of our children are trying to take root and grow in the dry ground of poverty, dangerous, substandard housing, unsafe neighborhoods and schools, abuse and neglect, and lack of health care and mental health care. Struggling just to survive rather than thrive, too many of our children have no outward “form or majesty;” our casual glance sees not a child of God but a scrawny kid, a sickly or wheezing teenager, a baby dulled forever by lead poisoning, a child tormented by depression or other untreated mental illness. Too many of our children and youths are despised and rejected, feel society’s contempt and rejection that allows it to accept poverty as their lot, to observe preventable illness and deprivation without taking action, to assume prison as an acceptable outcome for so many. Far, far too many of our children have suffered and are acquainted with illness and infirmity. If you look at the plight of over 5.2 million children in our nation without health care coverage, you might agree that they are “held...of no account.” If you look at the plight of our nation’s one in five children who is poor, you might agree that they are “held...of no account.” If you consider the likely fate of one in three Black boys who will be incarcerated in their lifetime unless we dismantle the pipeline to prison, you might agree that they are “held...of no account.”

⁷ *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B* by Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993) p. 444.

While children in our nation today are suffering, and may identify with the suffering of the servant, our passage does not ask them to suffer. Although the suffering of children in our nation today is *because of* others, we cannot say of our children that it is *on behalf of* others. That is, our children are not meant to be suffering servants because of our apathy, inaction, and lack of care. Their suffering is neither vicarious nor efficacious — it is not on our behalf and it does not remove our sin. Rather, it highlights the sin of a nation that does not protect the young, weak, and powerless. It is we who are adults, it is we who are strong, it is we who are powerful that are called to servant leadership and to make the suffering of others our own. The plain truth is that we either respond to that call, or we reject it. The integrity of our faith lies in the balance — our very ability to say we are “Christian” without taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Psalm 91:9–16

This psalm's assurance of God's protection against enemies, disease or sickness, and all evil (v. 3, 10) stands in tension with the reality that illness does strike us, even children, even the “innocent,” even the faithful. With the reality that every day, through no fault of their own, small children are endangered by the enemy of poverty that chases them from an empty breakfast table, through substandard housing, through unsafe neighborhoods, to a failing school, and is waiting when the school day is over to continue to hunt and haunt them. With the reality that every day, the pipeline to prison acquaints too many children with the evil of poverty, of low academic expectations and high dropout rates, of abuse and neglect, of racism, of violence that surrounds them in their neighborhoods, in the culture, in the most prevalent role models.

Standing in the good news of the resurrection's ultimate triumph over death and promise of new life in the Risen Christ we can trust in that final assurance that “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation.”

Hebrews 5:1–10

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” (5:7)

This passage is a powerful reminder that in Christ we have one who knows first-hand what it means, in the flesh, to be human. He probably winced over a stubbed toe, grimaced when a sharp rock sliced into his foot. He may have known the throb of a toothache. We know that he suffered the most extreme pain and suffering on the cross. Having been in the flesh, Christ knows what it is like for children today who gasp for breath against asthma's tight grip. He knows what it means for a baby crawling in a lead-laced apartment to stick chubby fingers in her mouth and become lead poisoned over time. He knows what it is like for an uninsured child to go years without seeing a doctor or dentist. He knows what it is like for a child to be in aching need of medical care but have parents who delay seeking it because they don't have the money. He knows what it is like for a youth to be in a pit of depression so deep that no one hears the cries for help. He knows what it is like to experience hunger and poverty, to be reviled and rejected, to be imprisoned and accused. He knows. He knows. He knows us and our hurts from the days of his flesh.

In Christ we have one who knows what it means to pray for relief, to pray for release from pain, to pray for an end to suffering. When we offer up prayers for ourselves or for children who hurt, who are haunted by mental illness without care, who endure worsening conditions without needed treatments, Christ hears our prayers as one who has offered up his own prayers and supplications. When we sit hour after hour in an

emergency room, finally seeking treatment that can no longer be delayed, with fervent prayers in our hearts, Christ hears. When we face unpayable bills and wonder in anguish how we will keep our children fed and housed, Christ hears. When we anguish over children who are accused and imprisoned, Christ understands.

Christ knows what it means to scream prayers for healing in anguish. To yell prayers for relief in anger. To shout loud prayers that demand answers. To sob prayers for healing in desperation. To cry prayers for the end to our child's suffering. To whisper prayers for hope when despair is overwhelming. To have a prayer so big that it can't even fit into words. Christ knows.

Christ knows, first-hand, from his own prayers and supplications, with his own loud cries and tears, that faith does not spare us from suffering but that we can trust in God's steadfast presence through it all.

This passage is frequently used in ordination ceremonies and goes to the heart of the question of vocation. From it, on this Children's Sabbath day, we may ask ourselves what it will mean for each of us to serve, to minister to children as ones who know first-hand their hurts, their prayers for help, and their tears and cries for relief.

Mark 10:35–45

Location

The location of our passage from Mark is worth noting for it reinforces a consistent witness to the nature of the ministry and service to which we are called. Earlier in this chapter we find that well-known passage in which Jesus instructs his disciples to let the children come to him, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. That scene is followed by Jesus' instructions on wealth and discipleship, and then we begin the third and final passion prediction in the verses immediately preceding this lectionary passage. Immediately following our passage is the healing of blind Bartimaeus. In just one chapter we encounter Jesus' teaching on the importance of serving those who are young, poor, and in need of healing.

Turning now to our passage, there are two themes that emerge and lend themselves to preaching on the Children's Sabbath: suffering and servant leadership.

Theme of Suffering

James and John are looking for glory and good times, and Jesus asks them if they are prepared to drink the cup that he drinks and be baptized with the water that he is baptized with. The cup is a powerful metaphor for suffering, recalling for the reader the blood Jesus will shed, his anguished prayer to God that the cup might pass from him if God wills, and even Old Testament references to the cup as a metaphor for divine wrath. (*The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VII, p. 653*) Linked in this passage with the cup, baptism too becomes a metaphor for suffering (with its own echoes of the overwhelming flood in Ps. 42, 69, and Isa. 43). James and John's glib assurances that they are able are met with Jesus' somber affirmation that they will indeed share that cup and baptism. And, although they do abandon Jesus at the end of his days, they will indeed later share his suffering.

There are important connections to be made on this Children's Sabbath, which looks at the suffering of children who go without the health care they need and endure pain unrelieved, illness untreated, suffering unabated. Children who suffer poverty through no fault of their own. Children who are born into a pipeline to prison, with the odds stacked against them before they can even comprehend what that means. For these children, such suffering is often preventable and needless.

We who would follow Christ are called to share his passion and his compassion — his suffering with and even for others. Do we share the suffering of children without health care in our nation? The suffering of children in poverty? The suffering of children born into the pipeline to prison? Are we feeling that pain as our own and responding as we would to our own? Are we bringing a message to all children who suffer that God knows and shares their pain, God is present with them and will not abandon them even in their most painful times?

Theme of Servant Leadership

The second theme that emerges in this passage is servant leadership. Jesus chides, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Vv. 42–45)

The disciples were as susceptible as most of us are to being influenced by conventional notions of status, standing, honor, and power. That’s why angling for the best seats seemed important to James and John, and why the other disciples were so upset about being one-upped. Do you recall one of the disciples’ earlier arguments about who was the greatest, in Mark 9:33–37? Jesus responded to that argument, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” and then put a child among them and took it in his arms saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Such a lesson was — and is — hard to absorb, running so counter to the world’s reckoning of who is important, who has priority. In the very next chapter of Mark, the disciples still view children as lowly annoyances not worthy of Jesus’ time, so that again he must instruct the disciples to let the children come to him, for in fact the kingdom of God belongs to such as these — those without power, standing, pride of place, or prestige in the world’s eyes. How hard it is for us to remember that when for six and a half days a week we hear and witness exactly the opposite! No wonder true discipleship is so difficult — so very, very difficult.

In fact, Jesus’ instructions on servant leadership and true greatness are found throughout all four gospels in several places in each: Matt. 20:24–27; 23:11; Mark 9:35; Luke 9:48; 22:24–27; John 12:24–26; 13:12–16; 15:20. It was clearly a message that the earliest followers, and we who would be followers today, need to hear.

In our day, as in Jesus’, those who are young, poor, without power are likely to be trampled in the stampede for the best seats, the most power, the most privilege, the most wealth, the greatest advantage.

The needs of children in America, especially the needs of one in five children in poverty, one in nine children without health care coverage, and one in three Black boys at risk of imprisonment in their lifetime, call us to demonstrate our greatness through servant leadership and service. We know that this country can afford to give them what they need. What we cannot afford is to look the other way, hiding from our calling or feeling that we are not equal to the task. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

Mother Teresa, who embodied servant leadership and greatness through service, once said, "Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service. Try to give unconditionally whatever a person needs in the moment. The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions by giving your time. Sometimes this may mean doing something physical (such as we do in our homes for the sick and dying) or sometimes it may mean offering spiritual support for the shut-ins... If an ill person wants medicine, then give him medicine; if he needs comfort, then comfort him."⁸

The service we are called to is not only to reach out with a touch of love, but also to change the structures and systems that are hurting and failing children. When children are the poorest group of Americans, when 14.7 million children are poor, there is a need for change to our nation's structures and systems. When over 5.2 million children do not have health coverage, there is a need for change and for justice on a broader scale. When the odds are stacked against our nation's Black, Latino, and poor children, shunting so many of them into the pipeline to prison, we need to change that system that works against their success and positive futures. Into this work for justice we also take the Gospel's teaching on suffering, for, again in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable.... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

We recall finally the words of St. Francis of Assisi that speak to the profound reversals of first and last, serving and being served, that Jesus calls us to:

Lord, make me a channel of Thy peace,
That where there is hatred, I may bring love;

That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit
of forgiveness;
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony;
That where there is error, I may bring truth;
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith;
That where there is despair, I may bring hope;
That where there are shadows, I may bring light;
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy;
Lord, grant that I may seek rather than to comfort
than to be comforted;
To understand than to be understood;
To love than to be loved.
For it is by forgetting self that one finds;
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven;
It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

⁸ *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path* compiled by Lucinda Vardey, p. 114.

⁹ *Jeremiah: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, R.E. Clements (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

Sermon Notes on 2015 Children's Sabbath Theme Text— Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-5

For those not preaching on lectionary texts, the following notes suggest show one might link this year's theme on ending child poverty to Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-5. Options for a New Testament text to accompany the reading from Habakkuk include Luke 6:20-26; Luke 16:19-31; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-25; Matthew 6:19-21.

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-5

¹The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. ²O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous — therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

²I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me, and what [God] will answer concerning my complaint. ²Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own." (New Revised Standard Version)

Context:

The book of Habakkuk, one of the twelve "minor" prophets (called "minor" because of the length of the books, not the prophets' importance), likely emerged in the late seventh century BCE or early sixth century BCE. The book references the Chaldeans (or "neo-Babylonians") who ruled the ancient Near East from 612 to 539 BCE — sacking Jerusalem in 597 and completely destroying it in 586 BCE. It also mentions Jehoiakim, the Judean king who ruled between 609 and 598 BCE. The book opens with a dialogue between the prophet Habakkuk and God, continues with a sequence of five prophetic "woes", and concludes with an extended psalm or prayer. Habakkuk raises timeless questions of justice and injustice, urgency and expectation, vision and faith, and reveals the experience of protest and lament, prophetic speech, to prayer in the life of God's people.

A Closer Look at the Text:

Prophetic Burden: The book opens with the superscription, 1:1 "The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw." Alternative translations for the word translated "oracle" are "pronouncement" or "burden." Writes Marvin A. Sweeney in "Habakkuk" in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*,

"The word 'pronouncement,' frequently translated as 'burden,' refers to a type of prophetic oracle that attempts to explain the manner in which God's purposes are manifested in human affairs. It is generally spoken by a prophet in response to an inquiry of complaint concerning a particular situation."¹

¹ Sweeney, M. A. "Habakkuk." *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*. Edited by J. L. Mays. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988. P. 668.

For us today, the notion of an “oracle” sounds mystical and far removed from our own experience. A “pronouncement” may sound somewhat stodgy or official. But a “burden” may come close to our own very human experience of seeing injustice, perceiving how far off we are from what God intends for our life together, wondering why suffering and poverty exist, feeling reluctant to complain to God, and experiencing anxiety about naming injustice to our leaders, neighbors, community. “Burden”—perhaps we can connect with this passage when we think of ourselves, like Habakkuk, as being burdened by the need to proclaim prophetic pain and promise.

“Violence:” In our day, we read the word violence and typically think of bloodshed and interpersonal violence such as gun violence or perhaps terrorism. However, “violence,” used six times in Habakkuk (a tenth of all the times that the word appears in the Bible, observes Judith E. Sanderson in “Habakkuk” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*²) is “always signifying confusion and the disruption of order” notes Kent Harold Richards.³ Adds McCormick Seminary Professor of Old Testament Theodore Hiebert:

“For a variety of reasons...the injustice Habakkuk deplors in this speech is best understood as the abuse of power in the administration of King Jehoiakim...In the first place, the exploitation of the poor and the less privileged by the rich and powerful is a fundamental concern among Israel’s prophets, and the language Habakkuk uses here is appropriate for documenting such a situation. The terms ‘violence’ (*hamas*) and ‘destruction’ (*sod*; better ‘plunder’ in 1:2-3) are used as a pair by other prophets to describe the ruthless accumulation of wealth by political officials (Ezek 45:9; Amos 3:10; cf Mic 2:4). Even the verb ‘cry’ (*za’aq*; ‘[I] cry to you “Violence?”’ [v. 2]) is customarily used in the Bible as an appeal for help by the oppressed (e.g., Exod. 2:23; Ps 22:5; cf. Isa 5:7, where another form of the same word occurs). The words ‘strife’ (*rib*) and ‘contention’ (*madon*) derive from the legal sphere of Judean society. They appear to describe stresses in Judah’s judicial system brought on by irresponsible litigation or the failure to administer justice properly.

“Even Habakkuk’s use of the term ‘righteous’ (*saddiq*) for the victims of such abusive policies may identify them as society’s poor and marginalized. Although a general, nonspecific term in itself, ‘righteous’ occasionally refers to the poor in prophetic discourse (e.g., Isa 29:20-21; Amos 2:6-7; 5:1)”⁴

“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets so that a runner may read it.” Alternative translations include “...so that a reader can run with it.” Commentaries offer differing explanations about who is running and who is reading. Some suggest that the vision is to be written so plainly that someone running by could read it. Others suggest that the vision, once written, would be carried by a herald or prophet — running to spread the message. Either way, what is clear is that the vision is intended to be seen and spread. How will we make the vision of God’s justice so visible that even those hurrying through their daily routines or running in fear could see it? How will we take and spread the message as we make our way through our days, heralds of the good news of God’s intended justice for children?

² Sanderson, J. E. “Habakkuk.” *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by C. A. Newsome and S.H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. P. 238.

³ Richards, K.H. “Habakkuk.” *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. Edited by W.A. Meeks et al. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. P. 1397.

⁴ Hiebert, T. “The Book of Habakkuk.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VII*. Edited by L. E. Keck et al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. P. 631.

Preaching Themes:***Standing with those in Poverty and the Courage to Challenge those in Power:***

Theodore Hiebert reflects in *The New Interpreter's Bible*:

“One of the great legacies of the prophetic movement, reflected clearly in Habakkuk’s opening critique of Judean society, is its absolute commitment to social justice. Authentic religion, according to the prophets, was not merely a matter of personal spirituality or of the ritual activity of worship. It required a public dedication to principles of fairness and equity in political, judicial, and economic life. Habakkuk’s central theological concerns involve public affairs often relegated today to the secular world: the inequities in the judicial system, the economic exploitation of the poor by the wealthy, the breakdown of social order. Habakkuk considered these ‘secular,’ social affairs to be those in which God held Judah primarily responsible for its ethical behavior.

“Moreover, the prophets demanded such standards of fairness and equity especially of those who wielded political and economic power: Israel’s kings, priests, judges, and its wealthiest citizens. When social unrest increases, it is easy for a society to blame its poor, who are often disproportionately involved in crime and in prison populations. It requires much more courage to hold accountable, as did Habakkuk, society’s elite and powerful figures and organizations, who customarily protect the privileged and institutionalize the disparity between rich and poor. In the eyes of Israel’s prophets, the real cause of social conflict was to be placed, not at the feet of the poor, but in the corridors of power, where the policies that structure a society, in just or unjust ways, are formulated and executed.”⁵

Will we today stand with children in poverty and their families and have the courage to hold accountable those in power whose policies are creating economic injustice? Will we prophetically call for change in policies to end child poverty?

Writing the Vision:

As noted above, there are different perspectives about what the instructions about running and reading mean. What is clear is that we are instructed to “write the vision and make it plain.” If the prophet’s complaint was about the violence of injustice, inequality, the abuse of power and the pain of those in poverty, what is the vision God calls us to write? What will it look like when that injustice and economic inequality are ended? What will it look like when those in poverty come first instead of those in power? What will it look like when we *end* child poverty?

There is pressure, in modern life, to set “reasonable goals,” or “reachable targets,” to avoid sounding idealistic or naïve. But the vision that the prophet hears God calling us to write isn’t about compromises or constraints, how small or sensible we can be. It is to be a big vision, one that is not instantly or easily at hand but that draws us forward to help create a future that looks like God’s intention for our life together. Perhaps here — writing the big vision of God’s justice that we will work and wait for — is where adults can best be led by children and young people. One of the gifts of children is their capacity to be visionary, not cynical. What would it look like for your church to engage in a visioning process where children’s voices and views are heard first? What might they set as goals for our nation, community, and congregation to change so it looks like what God would want? I wonder....

⁵ Hiebert, T. “The Book of Habakkuk.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VII*. Edited by L. E. Keck et al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. P. 632.

Patience and Persistence:

The prophet Habakkuk's anguished cry, "How long, O Lord, must I cry to you for help?" has reverberated from the time of the psalmists to our own day. The continued first-hand experience of oppression and the on-going awareness of others' suffering alike cause the faithful to cry out and wonder aloud: how long will it go on?

On the steps of the Capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama, after the conclusion of the Selma march fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized that the question, "How long?" remained in the hearts of the faithful but weary children, youths, women and men spanning race, religion, age, and geography who gathered there. Dr. King, near the end of his remarks, said:

"I know you are asking today, 'How long will it take?' Somebody's asking, 'How long will prejudice blind the visions of men?' I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, 'cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord....His truth is marching on. ...Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him. Be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on. Glory, hallelujah. Glory, hallelujah. Glory, hallelujah. His truth is marching on."⁶

In Habakkuk, the prophet perceived God's counsel and comfort: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

The counsel to "wait for it" does not appear in isolation but directly follows on the direction to take action — to spread the vision. Our souls should be swift to answer God's call; our feet jubilant to spread the good news of God's justice. Achieving God's intended justice for our world calls for our active participation, our work to help bend the arc of the moral universe toward God's vision of justice for our children.

Gardening is an example of "active waiting." Gardeners may have to wait for seeds to sprout in the spring, but that waiting does not — in fact, cannot — be passive. There is work to do while we wait: sowing seeds, fertilizing, mulching, weeding, watering, keeping away predators. So too, as we wait for the realization of God's vision for our world, there is much work for us to do — ensuring that children do not go hungry, child poverty is ended, working parents are supported to find good care for their children, and so much more.

⁶ King, M.L. "Our God Is Marching On!" *A Testament of Hope*. Edited by J.M. Washington. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986. P. 230.

Sample Children's Sermon

"How Long Must I Cry for Help?"

Tell the children:

"Today is part of a special weekend called Children's Sabbath when people everywhere are remembering that a person's a person, no matter how small, and each of us is important to God. We want to listen to and help children who are having a hard time. On Children's Sabbath, we remember that every person, including the smallest of all, can make a difference and help others.

"Many stories in the Bible help teach us this — like the time that Jesus' friends tried to keep the children away from him and Jesus said, "Let the children come to me," and he held them and blessed them. In another story, we hear about how a child shared his bread and fish and Jesus used that food to feed many, many hungry people.

"Today, we are going to hear the message about how important every person is to God, no matter how small, and how each of us — no matter how small — can make a difference, in a story by Dr. Seuss!"

Read Horton Hears a Who to the children. If you need to shorten the reading, omit the 12th through 16th pages of text (beginning "But just as he spoke to the Mayor..." through "...Had picked, searched, and piled up, nine thousand and five.") and summarize those pages in a sentence or two.

After you read the story, close with a prayer:

Dear God, thank you for caring about each of us, no matter how small. Thank you for reminding us that each of us can make a difference, even the smallest of all. Help us to use our voices to speak up for what is right. Thank you for sending us Jesus to show us that you love each and every one of us, young and old, big and small. Amen.