

Preschool Lesson Plan: Children of Promise

Theme: God promised Abram he would have as many children as stars in the sky. We can trust God to keep God's promises. Children are a blessing — a good gift from God. We can be a blessing to other children by being kind, loving and fair.

Materials:

- Story-telling materials (felt figures, picture Bible, Godly play figures or others).
- Photographic image of the night sky when many stars are visible.
- Blank stars, two per child (paper cut-outs or cardboard, foam or wooden stars from a craft store. Select ones that are an appropriate size for the activity described below).
- Glue or glue sticks.
- Markers or Crayons.
- Pictures of diverse children cut out from magazines.
- Newsprint or poster board, with the heading "Every Child Is Part of God's Promise" (feel free to jazz it up with glitter or other backgrounds).
- Dowels or pipe cleaners, two per child and tape (optional).
- Snacks (type that one child could easily serve to another, like a cheese stick).
- Two dolls or stuffed animals and other items (such as building blocks or crayons) for game.

Preparation:

- Review the lesson plan.
- Practice telling the story.
- Gather the needed materials and prepare the poster board or newsprint.
- If children will be invited to donate needed items, decide what items you will collect (for instance, canned food, children's books or diapers) and inform the parents or other caregivers in advance. If possible, have extras on hand for newcomers.

Gathering

Tell the children that today is a special day called Children's Sabbath. It is a day when we celebrate that God loves each and every child. It is a day when we are thankful for each and every child. It is a day when we remember that God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. It is a day when we think about what each one of us can do to be kind, loving and fair to all children.

In turns around the circle, invite each child to say her or his name followed by "God loves me!" Lead the rest of the children in responding "Your name is _____ and God loves you!" Begin yourself, to model what is expected. If you have an adult classroom helper, have them lead the children in the group response. (If needed, each child can repeat after you as you help them.)

Alternative: If the children were invited, the previous week, to bring in an item to donate (canned food, children's book or diapers) let each child put their item in the middle of the circle now. (If possible, have a few extra items for children who are new to the class or didn't remember to bring an item). Say, "We are bringing these things to share with other children who don't have enough food, or books to read, or other things they need. Sharing these things with other children is one way we can be kind, loving and fair to other children."

Telling the Bible Story: God's Promise of as Many Children as Stars in the Sky

Tell the story of God's promise to Abram (later called Abraham) that Abram would have as many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren as there are stars in the sky or sand on the beach. God promised that each one of these children would be a blessing — a good gift from God. It was hard for Abram to trust God's promise because Abram didn't even have one child at that time and he was very old. But Abram did trust God and God's promise came true. Abraham (his new name) had children, grand-children and great-grandchildren and on and on all the way to children today. Each one of us is also part of that promise from God. Each one of us is a blessing and can be a blessing to others.

If you have Godly play materials, a felt board or a picture Bible, use those as you tell the story.

Wondering

Show the children the photographic image of the night sky with many stars visible. Invite them to wonder with you, allowing plenty of time between each question.

- "I wonder how Abram felt when he looked up at the sky like this and saw more stars than he could count?"
- "I wonder how these stars are the same?"
- "I wonder how these stars are different?"
- "I wonder...."

Allow time for the children to wonder silently or aloud. This isn't about right or wrong answers; simply a time for wonder.

Activity: Children as Stars

1. Give each child a blank star (craft stores have many choices, including stars made from wood, foam and cardboard or you can cut out your own). Have each child draw a picture of herself or himself in the center of the star. (Alternatively, take instant photos of the children or arrange the week ahead of time for caregivers to bring in photos of their children for this week's lesson). Print each child's name on her or his star.
2. When the stars are completed, have the children stick them on the prepared poster board or newsprint under the title: "Every Child is Part of God's Promise." Read the title out loud to the children and talk about how each of them is a child promised by God. We say "thank you God!" for each child.
3. Now spread on the table the cut-out magazine pictures of children representing diverse ages, races, ethnicities, abilities and other differences. Say to the children, "Every child is part of God's good promise. Every child is a blessing from God. God loves every child. We say 'thank you God' for every child."
4. Have each child pick a picture of another child and glue it to another star. When these stars are completed, have the children stick them on the same prepared poster board or newsprint.
5. Say, "God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. We can promise God that we will always do our best to treat other children kindly and fairly, and never to hurt another child."

Alternative: Instead of sticking the stars onto poster board or newsprint, tape them onto pipe cleaners or dowels. During the Song (see end of lesson) the children can hold a star in each hand (one representing themselves, the other with the image of the child from magazines they selected) and either sit and wave the stars around to make them “twinkle” or dance around holding the stars.

Snack: Sharing

Say, “One way we can treat others kindly and fairly is to share. We can make sure that other children have enough to eat.”

Walk a basket or tray with snacks around to the children (seated at a table or on the floor, whichever is customary for your class) and invite each child to take a snack and give it to the child sitting next to them, so they are serving each other and not themselves.

Game: Make It Fair

Set up two dolls or two stuffed animals about four feet apart. Then take items (like building blocks or crayons) and pile most of them in front of one of the dolls (or stuffed animals) and just a few of the items in front of the other doll (or stuffed animal). Invite the children to look at the scene. Ask them what they see. Ask them what is different for each doll/stuffed animal. Ask, “Does that seem fair?” Ask, “How can we fix it, how can we make it fair?” Depending on their responses, involve the children in putting more of the items (like blocks or crayons) in front of the doll with few until they think it seems more fair. Or, if they suggest the two “play together,” help move the two dolls closer and join the piles of items into one. Repeat with another set of items, and once more.

Song: Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, adapted

Sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with the children.

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.*

*Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.*

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.*

Remind the children that God promised Abraham there would be as many children as stars in the sky. Each of the children in the class is like a star, promised by God. Then sing this adapted version, having the children repeat each set of two new lines after you:

*Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How God loves you, as you are.*

*All around the world so wide,
Like God promised, side by side.*

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How God loves you, as you are.*

Movement

If you and the children like, after they have learned to sing the new version, you can add movement to the song:

When you sing *"Twinkle, twinkle, little star"* they can turn around and wave their arms.

When you sing *"How God loves you, as you are"* they can point to another child.

When you sing, *"All around the world so wide"* they can spread their arms wide.

When you sing *"Like God promised, side by side"* they can stand next to a classmate and link arms.

Repeat the first two motions for the last two lines of the song.

Alternatively, if the stars the children made earlier were attached to pipe cleaners or dowels, the children can dance with them or sit and simply wave the stars around to make them "twinkle."

Closing: Close with a short prayer, such as "Dear God, thank you for promising that every child will be blessing, a good gift from you. Help us to be kind, loving, and fair to every child. Amen."

Early Elementary Lesson Plan: Children of Promise

Theme: God promised Abram he would have as many children as stars in the sky. We can trust God to keep God's promises. Children are a blessing — a good gift from God. We can be a blessing to other children by being kind, loving and fair.

Materials:

- Story-telling materials (felt figures, picture Bible, Godly play figures or others).
- Photographic image of the night sky when many stars are visible.
- Blank stars, two per child (paper cut-outs or cardboard, foam or wooden stars from a craft store).
- Glue or glue sticks.
- Markers or Crayons.
- Pictures of diverse children cut out from magazines
- Newsprint or poster board, with the heading "Every Child Is Part of God's Promise" (feel free to jazz it up with glitter or other backgrounds).
- Snacks (type that one child could easily serve to another, like a cheese stick).
- Two dolls or stuffed animals and other items (such as building blocks or crayons) for game.
- Cardstock (or other heavy paper) cut into bookmark size strips, or paper or construction paper folded into half to be a card, one per child.
- Sheets of little stars with adhesive backs, enough so that each child has about six (or more) to decorate a bookmark or card.

Preparation:

- Review the lesson plan.
- Practice telling the story.
- Gather the needed materials and prepare the poster board or newsprint.
- Decide what items your class will collect (for instance, canned food, children's books or diapers) and where it will be donated. Inform the parents or other caregivers in advance about the collection so they can send an item in with their child. If possible, have extras on hand for newcomers or children who forgot to bring the item. Alternatively, announce the planned collection during class on the Children's Sabbath, and have the children bring the items in the following week.

Gathering

Tell the children that today is a special day called Children's Sabbath. It is a day when we celebrate that God loves each and every child. It is a day when we are thankful for each and every child. It is a day when we remember that God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. It is a day when we think about what each one of us can do to be kind, loving and fair to all children so that all children can learn and grow and become all God intends them to be.

In turns around the circle, invite each child to say her or his name followed by "God loves me!" Lead the rest of the children in responding "Your name is _____ and God loves you!" Begin yourself, to model what is expected. If you have an adult classroom helper, have them lead the children in the group response. (If needed, each child can repeat after you as you help them).

Telling the Bible Story: God's Promise of as Many Children as Stars in the Sky

Tell the story of God's promise to Abram (later called Abraham) that Abram would have as many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren as there are stars in the sky or sand on the beach. God promised that each one of these children would be a blessing — a good gift from God. It was hard for Abram to trust God's promise because Abram didn't even have one child at that time and he was very old. But Abram did trust God and God's promise came true. Abraham (his new name) had children, grand-children, great-grandchildren and on and on all the way to children today. Each one of us is also part of that promise from God. Each one of us is a blessing and can be a blessing to others.

If you have Godly play materials, a felt board or a picture Bible, use those as you tell the story.

Wondering

Show the children the photographic image of the night sky with many stars visible. Invite them to wonder with you, allowing plenty of time between each question. This can be a time to wonder in silence, or aloud. There are no right or wrong answers.

- "I wonder how Abram felt when he looked up at the sky like this and saw more stars than he could count..."
- "I wonder how these stars are the same..."
- "I wonder how these stars are different..."
- "I wonder how Abram felt while he was waiting for God's promise to come true..."

Activity: Children as Stars

1. Give each child a blank star (craft stores have many choices, including stars made from wood, foam and cardboard, or you can cut out your own). Have each child draw a picture of herself or himself in the center of the star. (Alternatively, take instant photos of the children or arrange the week ahead of time for caregivers to bring in photos of their children for this week's lesson. The children can glue these photos in the center of their stars). Have each child print her or his name on the star.
2. When the stars are completed, have the children stick them on the prepared poster board or newsprint under the title: "Every Child is Part of God's Promise." Read the title out loud to the children and talk about how each of them is a child promised by God. We say "thank you God!" for each child.
3. Now spread on the table the cut-out magazine pictures of children representing diverse ages, races, ethnicities, abilities and other differences. Say to the children, "Every child is part of God's good promise. Every child is a blessing from God. God loves every child. We say 'thank you God' for every child."
4. Have each child pick a picture of another child and glue it to another star. When these stars are completed, have the children stick them on the same prepared poster board or newsprint.
5. Say, "God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. We can promise God that we will always do our best to treat other children kindly and fairly, and never to hurt another child."

Snack: Sharing

Say, "One way we can treat others kindly and fairly is to share. We can make sure that other children have enough to eat."

Walk a basket or tray with snacks around to the children (seated at a table or on the floor, whichever is customary for your class) and invite each child to take a snack and give it to the child sitting next to them, so they are serving each other and not themselves.

Game: Make It Fair

Set up two dolls or two stuffed animals about four feet apart. Then take items (like building blocks or crayons) and pile most of them in front of one of the dolls (or stuffed animals) and just a few of the items in front of the other doll (or stuffed animal).

Invite the children to look at the scene. Ask them what they see. Ask them what is different for each doll/stuffed animal. Ask, "Does that seem fair?" Ask, "How can we fix it, how can we make it fair?"

Depending on their responses, involve the children in putting more of the items (like blocks or crayons) in front of the doll with few until they think it seems fair. Or, if they suggest the two "play together," help move the two dolls closer and join the piles of items into one.

Repeat with another set of items, and again if the children remain engaged.

Learning and Responding

Say something like:

"Today, things are not fair for many children in the United States. Some children and their parents don't have enough money to buy healthy food, or have a good home to live in, or enough money to pay for good babysitters or child care while the parents are at work."

"Today, things are not fair for many children in the United States. Some children go to schools that don't have enough books or good teachers. Some children go to schools where the adults don't even expect them to do as well as other kids. That's not fair."

"This weekend, Children's Sabbath, children and grown-ups all across the United States are praying and learning and thinking about how to make things fair for every child."

"One way that we are helping to make things more fair is by [*name the project your class is doing and describe how it will help other children. For instance, 'Collecting children's books that show all the different children God loves and giving them to a child care center so even little children see books that show how wonderful they are,' or 'Collecting diapers to give to a shelter where families live if they don't have enough money for their own house, so the parents can make sure the babies have clean diapers and use their money for other important things like food and clothes.'*]"

Let each child put their item in the middle of the circle now. (If possible, have a few extra items for children who are new to the class or didn't remember to bring an item).

Say something like:

“We are bringing these things to share with other children who don't have enough food or books to read, or other things they need. Sharing these things with other children is one way we can be kind, loving and fair to other children.”

(If you have decided on the alternative, which is to announce the collection today and have the children bring the items in next week, move to the next part of the activity — making a card or bookmark to go with the items they will bring in the next week).

Depending on the item collected for donation, have the children make cards or bookmarks to include with the items when they are donated to the child-serving program you selected. Have them print “You are a blessing!” on the cards or bookmarks, and decorate with sticky stars. Depending on the program to receive the donations, if appropriate the children can add additional messages or sign their first names to the cards.

Song: I Am a Promise

Teach the children the song “I Am a Promise” by Gaither Vocal Band — substitute “God” for “he” (as noted throughout below).

I Am A Promise

I am a promise
I am a possibility
I am a promise with a capital “P”;
I can be anything, anything God wants me to be...

You are a promise!
You are a possibility!
You are a promise with a capital “P”!
You are a great big bundle of potentiality!
And if you'll listen, you'll hear God's voice;
And if you're trying, [God'll] help you make the right choices
You're a promise to be anything [God] wants you to be!

You can go anywhere that [God] wants you to go,
You can be anything that [God] wants you to be --
You can climb the high mountain,
You can cross the wide sea,

You're a great big promise you see!

I am a promise,
I am a possibility
I am a promise with a capital “P”!
I am a great big bundle of potentiality!
And I am learning to hear God's voice and I am tryin'
To make the right choices;
I'm a promise to be anything God wants me to be!

So keep on list'ning, you'll hear God's voice,
And keep on tryin', [God'll] help you make the right choices --
You're a promise to be anything [God] wants you to be!
I'm a promise to be anything God wants me to be!
You're a promise to be anything, anything [God] wants you to be!

(Alternative Song: Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, adapted. See Preschool Lesson Plan for new lyrics and motions.)

Closing: Close with a short prayer, such as “Dear God, thank you for promising that every child will be blessing, a good gift from you. Help us to be kind, loving, and fair to every child. Amen.”

Older Elementary Lesson Plan: Children of Promise

Theme: We can trust God's promises. God promised that Abram would have many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The children would be a blessing, and Abram (later Abraham) would be a blessing to others. Children are a blessing. We can bless others. We can trust God's promises and keep our own promises.

Materials:

- Photographic image of the night sky when many stars are visible.
- Blank stars, two per child (paper cut-outs or cardboard, foam or wooden stars from a craft store, in a size appropriate for the activity described below).
- Small (about 2-3 inches) flat mirrors (available from craft stores).
- Glue or glue sticks.
- Markers or Crayons.
- Newsprint or poster board, with the heading "Every Child Is Part of God's Promise" (feel free to jazz it up with glitter or other backgrounds).
- Paper, stapler, pencils, markers and crayons to create books.
- Cardstock (or other heavy paper) cut into bookmark size strips.
- Sheets of little stars with adhesive backs, enough so that each child has about six (or more) to decorate a bookmark or card.

Preparation:

- Review the lesson plan.
- Practice telling the story.
- Gather the needed materials and prepare the poster board or newsprint.
- Make arrangements with leaders in the classes for younger children or in the nursery (or with parents of babies and younger children in the congregation) to bring the babies and younger children to the class at the appropriate time in the lesson for the "Word Rich" stations.
- If children will be invited to donate books, inform the parents or other caregivers in advance. Encourage them to select books depicting diverse children in positive ways.

Gathering

Tell the children that today is a special day called Children's Sabbath. It is a day when we celebrate that God loves each and every child. It is a day when we are thankful for each and every child. It is a day when we remember that God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. It is a day when we think about what each one of us can do to be kind, loving and fair to all children.

In turns around the circle, invite each child to say her or his name and something that she or he wants to learn how to do or what he or she wants to be.

Optional: If time and numbers will allow, you could have each child repeat the previous children's names and what they want to be or do, before adding their own. For example, the third child in the circle would say: "You're Owen and you want to play the trumpet next year, you're Marquis and you want to make the travel team, and I'm Shenice and I want to be a doctor." You may want to begin yourself, to model what is expected. If you have an adult or youth classroom helper, have them go next to demonstrate how the recitation will build

with each person. (Before you begin, if you think it is needed, remind that this is a safe, kind place and part of that is encouraging and helping each other if anyone has a hard time remembering).

Telling the Bible Story: God's Promise of as Many Children as Stars in the Sky

Tell the story of God's promise to Abram (later called Abraham) that Abram would have as many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren as there are stars in the sky or sand on the beach. God promised that each one of these children would be a blessing — a good gift from God. It was hard for Abram to trust God's promise because Abram didn't even have one child at that time and he was very old. But Abram did trust God and God's promise came true. Abraham (his new name) had children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and on and on all the way to children today. Each one of us is also part of that promise from God. Each one of us is a blessing and can be a blessing to others.

Wondering

Show the children the photographic image of the night sky with many stars visible. Invite them to wonder with you, allowing plenty of time between each question.

- "I wonder how Abram felt when he looked up at the sky like this and saw more stars than he could count..."
- "I wonder how these stars are the same..."
- "I wonder how these stars are different..."
- "I wonder what part of God's promise was hardest for Abram to believe."
- "I wonder."

Allow time for the children to wonder silently or aloud. This isn't about right or wrong answers; simply a time for wonder.

Activity: Children of Promise

1. Give each child a blank star (craft stores have many choices, including stars made from wood, foam and cardboard or you can cut out your own) and a small mirror. Have each child glue the small mirror in the middle of the star. Have the children write their names on the stars and, in each arm of the star, write a word or phrase about what they hope for their future — what they will be or do or become.
2. When the stars are completed, have the children stick them on the prepared poster board or newsprint under the title: "Every Child is Part of God's Promise." Read the title out loud to the children and talk about how each of them is a child promised by God and full of promise — meaning potential.
3. Now spread on the table the cut-out magazine pictures of children representing diverse ages, races, ethnicities, abilities and other differences. Say to the children, "Every child is part of God's good promise. Every child is a blessing from God. God loves every child. We say 'thank you God' for every child."
4. Have each child pick a picture of another child and glue it to another star. When these stars are completed, have the children stick them on the same prepared poster board or newsprint.
5. Say, "God wants every child to be loved, safe and treated fairly. We can promise God that we will always do our best to treat other children kindly and fairly, and never to hurt another child."

Learning and Responding: Making Children Word Rich

Say something like:

Even though every child is filled with God-given promise, both a blessing and meant to bless others, not every child has a fair chance or easy time. Some big problems, like not enough money in the family, can make it harder for some kids than others. Other children may have babysitters or parents who are working so long and hard that they don't have time to read or talk to their children as much as they should. Our congregation, with others all across the nation, wants to change that so every child has an equal chance to become all God intends them to be.

One thing that can help all children learn and grow and become all they want to be is to be "word rich" — that means that babies have people who talk to them right from the start, that babies and children have books read to them, that older children read lots of books and have books read to them, and that older children keep learning new words and having conversations and reading books that help their brains grow. That is being "word rich." *[Note to leader: the more specific concept is that a "word rich environment" supports early childhood development, but for simplicity's sake here the focus is on being "word rich." You may introduce the concept of a word rich "environment" if you think it would be helpful or appropriate to your students' understanding.]*

There is one kind of rich which means having lots of extra money; but today we are talking about how important it is to be "word rich," which means having lots of words in a child's life to make the child's brain grow.

Today, we are going to help make other children "word rich." You can choose which way you want to help.

If numbers, space and resources permit, set up several "stations" or options for the children to choose among. This will help children who are not themselves strong readers yet have an option that doesn't make them uncomfortable.

Word Rich Station 1: Read Aloud

Have a variety of short children's books. Invite the children to pair up and take turns reading aloud to each other. Even better, if possible arrange for children from one of the younger church school classes to come to your classroom and have your older children read aloud to the younger ones.

Ask the children if there are younger children in their family or neighborhood that they could read to, when they are not at church, to help making another child "word-rich."

Word Rich Station 2: Baby Talk

If there are babies in the church nursery or the church, arrange for an adult to bring one of the babies to your classroom. Have the children talk to the baby. Have the adult explain that we don't have to just talk nonsense "baby talk" ("goo goo, gaa gaa") to babies, but we can use real words to explain the world around them. Even though babies won't understand it all, it helps their brains to grow. They can even read books to the baby.

Have the children discuss if there are any babies in their family or neighborhood that they can talk to, when they are not in church, to help that baby become "word-rich."

Word Rich Station 3: Making Books or Book Marks

Have paper, markers, crayons and other materials for the children to make books (that they write) to give to a younger class.

If your class brought in books to donate to a program serving children, they could make book marks to insert into each of the books donated. They could print "You Are a Blessing!" on each bookmark and decorate with little sticky stars.

Song: I Am a Promise

Teach the children the song "I Am a Promise" by *Gaither Vocal Band*—substitute "God" for "he" (as noted throughout, below).

I Am A Promise

I am a promise
I am a possibility
I am a promise with a capital "P";
I can be anything, anything God wants me to be...

You are a promise!
You are a possibility!
You are a promise with a capital "P"!
You are a great big bundle of potentiality!
And if you'll listen, you'll hear God's voice;
And if you're trying, [God'll] help you make the right choices
You're a promise to be anything [God] wants you to be!

You can go anywhere that [God] wants you to go,
You can be anything that [God] wants you to be --
You can climb the high mountain,
You can cross the wide sea,

You're a great big promise you see!

I am a promise,
I am a possibility
I am a promise with a capital "P"!
I am a great big bundle of potentiality!
And I am learning to hear God's voice and I am tryin'
To make the right choices;
I'm a promise to be anything God wants me to be!

So keep on list'ning, you'll hear God's voice,
And keep on tryin', [God'll] help you make the right choices --
You're a promise to be anything [God] wants you to be!
I'm a promise to be anything God wants me to be!
You're a promise to be anything, anything [God] wants you to be!

Closing: Close with a short prayer, such as

"Dear God, thank you for promising that every child will be blessing, a good gift from you. Each one of us is rich with your love and full of wonderful possibility to be all you want us to be. As part of our love for you, help us to make other children rich with words so they too can be all they want to be. Help us to be kind, loving, and fair to every child. Amen."

Middle School Lesson Plan: Children of Promise

Theme: We can trust God’s promises. God promised that Abram would have many descendants. The children would be a blessing, and Abram (later Abraham) would be a blessing to others. Children are a blessing. We can bless others by working so that every child can learn and succeed in supportive schools.

Materials

- Large sheets of paper (newsprint, flip chart paper, or poster board).
- Sticky notes (such as PostIts) in three colors (green, pink/red, and yellow are used in descriptions below; you may substitute three different colors if desired) – three of each per student, a total of nine sticky notes sheets for each student.
- Butcher paper or other long roll of paper, or several sheets of newsprint taped together.
- Markers and/or crayons.
- Optional: Assorted materials for the “Path of Promise and Pitfalls,” such as egg cartons, scissors, newspapers and magazines.

Preparation

- Review the lesson.
- Gather the needed materials.
- Write headings to two sheets of newsprint/flipchart paper: “Path to Promise” and “Pitfalls on the Path to Promise”
- Secure any needed permission to display the completed “Path” (see below) in a gathering spot for the congregation to view before or after services in the coming weeks.
- If possible, ahead of time make some preliminary calls or do some online research to explore opportunities to support schools in greatest need in your area — whether with items, volunteers or other ways. Find out what key issues have come before the school board recently that may relate to issues the students identify.

Gathering:

As you begin, remind the students that this class is part of the National Observance of Children’s Sabbath, saying something like:

“This year marks the 25th anniversary of the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths celebration. The 2016 Children’s Sabbath is titled ‘Children of Promise: Closing Opportunity Gaps.’ We are joining synagogues, churches, mosques, temples and other places of worship all across our nation in the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths celebration. On the Children’s Sabbath, people are united in concern for problems children face like poverty and the need for better child care and schools. On the Children’s Sabbath, people are joining in commitment to justice and care for all children, creating change so that all children can reach their God-given promise or potential.”

Introduce the Bible Message

In Genesis, God says to Abram (later renamed Abraham), “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” The central fulfillment of God’s promised blessing was children, grandchildren and countless generations to follow. God invites Abram and us, however, to consider how we will be a blessing. All with which we have been blessed — families, resources, skills, talent, energy, vision, commitment — is intended not for our self-gratification, not for our hoarding, but to be used to bless others

Tell the story of God’s promise to Abram (later called Abraham) that Abram would have as many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren (descendants) as there are stars in the sky or sand on the beach. God promised that each one of these children would be a blessing — a good gift from God. Abram was told that he would be blessed to *be* a blessing.

It was hard for Abram to trust God’s promise because Abram didn’t even have one child at that time and he was very old. But Abram did trust God and God’s promise came true. Abraham had children — first Ishmael, then Isaac — and grand-children and great- grandchildren and on and on all the way to children today. *(Depending on time and how extensively your class typically explores the text, you could look in more depth at Genesis 21:8-21 and discuss the gap — through no fault of the children — between the resources provided to Isaac and what was provided to Ishmael and his mother.)*

Whether privileged or facing problems (or both), each one of us is also part of that promise from God. Each one of us is a blessing and can be a blessing to others.

Learning and Responding

Say something like the following, adapting as appropriate to fit your voice and students’ understanding:

Every child enters the world full of promise or possibility. Every child is both a blessing and one who can bless others. Even though every child is of equal worth, cherished by God, the circumstances into which a baby is born or grows can make it harder for some children to become all God intends them to be. Every one of us can be a blessing by working to make sure that every child has an equal opportunity to learn and grow, to close the gaps between the privileges some children enjoy the problems other children face. Whether we are one who is enjoying privileges or experiencing problems (or some of each), each one of us can make a difference and create positive change.

On this Children’s Sabbath, congregations are looking at opportunity gaps created by poverty, lack of early childhood development and inadequate schools. Today our class is going to consider how we can close gaps so that schools help every child succeed.

The Children’s Defense Fund (called CDF) is an organization that works to ensure every child has a *Head Start* and a *Fair Start*, and attends a warm, welcoming and productive school that prepares the child for education beyond high school, careers and 21st century citizenship. Since CDF’s first report in 1974, *Children Out of School in America*, CDF has worked to ensure children are not excluded from school because of their family income, race, disability or home language. CDF advocates for policies that provide fair education funding, support positive and just school climates, hold all children to high expectations, and provide them appropriate supports to meet those expectations.

Unfortunately, across almost every indicator of school success, CDF sees significant gaps between how students are performing, and where they need to be. For children of color, children with disabilities, and children who are poor, these gaps are even more dramatic. Education should be the great equalizer, leveling the playing field for all children. Too often, however, our system of education reinforces, instead of removes, barriers created by poverty and racism. (See more at:

<http://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/elementaryandsecondaryed/>)

Today, we are going to think about what makes a school a good place to learn where all children can succeed and what makes a school a place where only some children can learn and succeed, or where few do.

Promise and Pitfalls

Give every student three green sticky notes (like PostIts) and three pink or red sticky notes. (Let them know that the responses will be shared with the group but not identified with the students' names. Ask them not to use specific names of others in their responses, either, to keep the focus on the experience and not specific personalities.) *If you think it would be helpful, you can do the exercise yourself ahead of time, and share one or two of your own responses as an example.*

Invite the students to think about their own experiences of school (all the way back to kindergarten to now). Ask them to think about three aspects or experiences of school that helped them learn or feel like they could succeed. Ask them to write a word or phrase about each of the three aspects or experiences on the three green sticky notes. *(For example, one note might read "Nice second grade teacher." Another might read "Being moved into the higher math group." A third might be "Choir because I like to sing.").*

Then ask them to list three aspects of school or experiences in school that made it hard to learn or made them doubt whether they could succeed. *(One might read "Getting suspended," another might be "Being bullied when I was in fourth grade," and "A science teacher who yells.").*

After everyone has had a chance to write, have them hand the sticky notes to you. (This will keep the responses from being identified with individual students.) Ask for two volunteers to stick the notes on two sheets of newsprint: green sticky notes on the sheet headed "Path to Promise" and the red/pink sticky notes on the sheet headed "Pitfalls on the Path to Promise".

Give all of the students time to read the collection of notes without comment, just absorbing.

Handout three yellow sticky notes to the students and invite them to add additional ideas of what they think are positive helps or negative pitfalls for other students — not necessarily themselves — and in other schools — not necessarily their own. After they have written them, they can add those notes to the appropriate sheet of newsprint.

All in This Together:

Invite the students to think about common themes in the positive sticky notes and come up with headings. For instance: Supportive Teachers, Leadership Opportunities, extras beyond Academic Subjects.

Invite the students to think about common themes in the sticky notes identifying challenges or pitfalls and come up with headings. For instance, Discipline Policies, Bullying, and Poor Relationships with Teachers.

Roll out a long length of paper (like butcher paper) or tape several sheets of newsprint into one long length. Have the students design a “path to fulfilling our promise.” They can write in the headings the group came up with, and re-stick the appropriate notes under each. They can draw a “pit” or “stumbling block” along the way — or draw a second path that goes different direction from the main path — labelled with the headings from the pitfalls/problem list and post the appropriate sticky notes there. Depending on time, interest and materials on hand, the students can make the path 3-D, for instance with cut-up eggshell cartons representing pits or obstacles, words clipped from newspapers emphasizing positive or negative aspects of the path, textured materials outlining the path, and so forth.

Respond to the Message

Say something like:

“Malala Yousafzai, the young girl who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous stand for education, wrote ‘One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.’ What do we think we could do individually or together to help put more children on a path of promise and help get rid of the pitfalls that are making it hard for some children to learn and succeed?”

Depending on the size of your group, either together or in small groups, brainstorm ways to act for change to remove some of the pitfalls students face and work so that every child has more positive experiences of school as a path to success.

Record the ideas on newsprint. Talk about what steps, time and resources each might take. Discuss what the group or individuals would like to tackle. (If possible, ahead of time make some preliminary calls or do some on-line research to explore opportunities to support schools in greatest need in your area — whether with items, volunteers, or other ways. Find out what key issues have come before the school board recently that may relate to issues the students identify).

One way of making a difference is raising awareness. As a group, take the completed “Path” down to a common area in the congregation’s buildings (with permission secured in advance from the appropriate person) to display for the next few weeks. You may even want to have students volunteer to be “interpreters” standing by the “Path” to explain it and the class discussion to adults when they view it.

Closing: If customary for your class, close with a prayer. You might make it a collective “popcorn” style prayer where you offer the opening and closing with students invited to offer a word response. For instance,

“God of promise, we thank you for the blessing of all children and the chance to be a blessing to others. Help us bless others by working for change so that every student has what they need. Hear now as each of us offers a word that describes what we hope every student will experience:

allow time for responses

Amen.

High School and Adult Lesson Plan for the 2016 Children's Sabbath

Preparation

Review the session plan. Gather the necessary materials.

Make photocopies of the handouts — located at the end of this lesson — (*Handout 1* is a single side; *Handout 2* should be copied front and back).

Optional:

If desired, before the session begins place a low table in the center of the circle of chairs. Put several stalks of bamboo (if possible, some straight and some curly), available at many florists, garden sections of home improvement stores and elsewhere, or other plant on the table. Or, place photographs or cut-out magazine and newspaper images of children on the table. You may even want to invite, ahead of time, participants to bring photos of children with them to the class to place on the table to keep children visible throughout the session.

I: Gathering (5 minutes)

As the session begins, according to what's customary for your congregation, open with prayer.

Introduce the focus and purpose of the session. For instance,

“This year marks the 25th anniversary of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths celebration. The 2016 Children's Sabbath is titled ‘Children of Promise: Closing Opportunity Gaps.’ This morning we are gathering to learn more about the opportunity gaps that many children face, to reflect on a passage from the prophet Isaiah, and to respond with commitments to action to improve the lives of children.

As we do so, we are joining places of worship all across our nation in the National Observance of Children's Sabbath celebration — united in concern for the opportunity gaps children face especially related to poverty, early childhood development and education, and united in shared commitment to closing those gaps and creating change so that all children can reach their God-given promise.”

Invite those gathered to briefly share why they chose to participate in this session, and one problem facing children that concerns them most. (If the group is small, you can have participants share their responses with the whole group. If the group is large, have participants share their response with the person next to them).

Optional:

If you have the bamboo stalks, you may want instead to have participants think of the plants as a metaphor for our children. Invite them to share their initial reflections: What do all children need to survive and thrive? What factors shape how our children grow and develop? What makes it hard for some children to grow into the fullness of all that God intends?

II: Introduction to the Text (5 minutes)

Invite two volunteers to read the passage aloud while others follow along on the handout.

¹ *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

² *The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

³ *His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the
wicked.*

⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

⁶ *The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷ *The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

⁸ *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the
asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.*

⁹ *They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of
the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

After the reading, invite participants to voice words, phrases or images that stood out for them in the reading. Allow these responses to bubble up. It is OK for participants to repeat the same word or phrase. These responses do not need comment; simply allow all in the room to hear what struck others.

III: Engaging the Text (15 minutes)

Introduce this section by saying something like:

“The 2016 Children’s Sabbath is looking at many dimensions of ‘promise.’ It celebrates the promise or potential in every child. It also looks at the promises we make — as adults, citizens, candidates and leaders — to nurture and protect children. And it looks at God’s promises and how they shape and guide us as God’s people. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* notes, ‘Many of the promises in scripture are not named explicitly as promises but nonetheless convey the promised future God intends,’ and cites our text today, Isaiah 11:1-9, as one example. This passage invites us, with its rich imagery, to consider the future God promises and the kinds of leaders, community and relationships it will include. What will it be like for children in God’s promised future? Let’s turn together to considering the promises in the text.”

Invite responses to the following questions, looking first at the text and then beginning to apply it to our experience today:

- What kind of leadership is promised? What are the qualities or characteristics of the leader/s?
- How does the leader respond to oppressors?
- What is the vision or promise for the world? What qualities or characteristics stand out in what is intended for our life together, for the relationships?
- What is God's promised future like for children?
- How are the leadership qualities identified important in leaders in various spheres (for instance religious, political and community) today?
- How should we respond to oppressors in our day?
- How are the qualities or characteristics of the community relationships important for our life together today? How do our community, nation and world reflect or fail to reflect that vision? Where have we come closest? Where are we furthest from it?
- How does the present experience of children relate to the vision or promise for children?

IV: Considering Our Context (30 minutes)

Introduce this section of the session by saying something like:

“The promised community in the vision set forth in Isaiah is one in which the gaps have closed — between the powerful and vulnerable, the grown and the young, and the different sorts who are living in one seamless, safe, secure community led by a child. The babies, toddlers and preschoolers are safe in places that used to do them harm. In the promised community, there is no place where God's vision, God's intentions for us and our life together is not known and lived.

Today, we know there are places and ways that we are far from that vision, where gaps separate us and children are not safe. We've begun to discuss them. Now we are going to look more specifically at some of the gaps children face and how we can close them.”

The Gulf between Promise and Fulfillment

Invite volunteer readers to read aloud from the handout, *The Gulf between Promise and Fulfillment*, while others follow along.

Invite participants to name additional gaps or harm facing children today. List them on newsprint or invite participants to jot them down on the handouts.

The Vision for Our Day:

Next, invite participants to either close their eyes or, if they prefer, to direct their gaze down and imagine what this vision looks like in our day. Encourage them to dream with the expansiveness, completeness and expectation that Isaiah shared. Provide several minutes for participants to do so.

Then, give participants a few minutes to jot down words, phrases or images from their envisioning.

Then, invite those who wish to share what they envisioned.

Closing the Gaps to Achieve the Vision

Invite participants to brainstorm ways to close the gaps to create a safe and seamless community in the spirit of the vision promised in Isaiah. What can you do, alone and with others, to work toward your vision this month, this year?

- How can we close gaps created by poverty?
- How can we close gaps in early childhood development?
- How can we close gaps in education?
- How can we close gaps created by racism, fear, violence and/or oppression?
- What kind of leadership can we provide ourselves and can we promote that will help move us toward that vision?
- By the next Children's Sabbath, in 2017, what do you want to have achieved?
- What is the first step for you, for us, to get into action to achieve what we have envisioned?

If you wish, write the ideas down on newsprint as they are being named.

If your group is large, you may want to divide into small groups, with one group focusing on closing the poverty gap, one group focusing on closing early childhood development gaps and one group focusing on closing education gaps.

If possible, include an opportunity for immediate action. This could be emailing or writing a letter to your elected Representative urging her or his leadership to close opportunity gaps for children. Visit the Children's Defense Fund's website at www.childrensdefense.org/take-action for urgent, timely actions the class participants could take. Or, contact your faith group's Washington office for an action alert related to children, poverty, early childhood development and/or education.

V: Closing (5 minutes)

According to what is customary for your group, close with prayer or concluding words.

For instance,

“Eternal our God, let your spirit rest on and fill each of us so that righteousness and equity inform our decisions. Help us to call on our leaders to uphold those values too. Help us to behold, believe, and become part of your vision for our world in which no gaps separate us one from another or from you. Amen.”

Handout 1: Isaiah 11:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

- 1** A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- 2** The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- 3** His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
- 4** but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- 5** Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- 6** The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
- 7** The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8** The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- 9** They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Handout 2: The Gulf between Promise and Fulfillment

Reader 1: For children to be all they are meant to be, to fulfill their promise, we as adults, as a nation and as communities of faith need to keep our promises to them. Otherwise, gaps in opportunity and achievement will remain and grow.

Reader 2: *All children deserve a Fair Start* so they can live up to their potential. More than 14.5million children in America are living in poverty, most in working families. Poverty can cause children to lag behind other children in many ways beyond income.

Let's promise to end child poverty. Let's work so that all parents and caregivers have the resources to support and nurture their children: jobs with livable wages, affordable high-quality child care, supports for working families like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, and safety nets for basic needs like nutrition and housing assistance.

Reader 3: *Every child deserves a Head Start* to live up to their potential. Children's brains are developing rapidly in their first 5 years as they build a foundation for all future outcomes in school and in life. Far too many children in the United States lack access to quality care, especially poor children and other vulnerable children who stand to benefit the most. Access to high-quality early childhood opportunities is all too often determined by parental income and geography; and federal programs designed to support high-quality early learning and development are too underfunded to serve all eligible children.

Let's promise to ensure every child in our rich nation has access to high-quality early childhood development and learning. Let's work to ensure access to quality home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, quality child care, preschool and full-day kindergarten so all young children have a *Strong Start* to life that can propel them to a productive life in school and beyond.

Reader 4: *Every child deserves a Fair Start* that includes attending a warm, welcoming and productive school that prepares him or her for college, career, and adulthood. However, there are significant gaps — too many children of color, children with disabilities, and children who are poor attend high-poverty schools with fewer resources, less experienced teachers and fewer opportunities for educational enrichment. Education should be the great equalizer, leveling the playing field for all children. Too often, however, our system of education reinforces, instead of removes, barriers created by poverty and racism.

Let's promise to work for schools that help every child succeed. Let's work for policies that provide fair education funding, support positive and just school climates, hold all children to high expectations and provide them appropriate supports to meet those expectations.

Reader 5: *Dr. Martin Luther King was aware of the huge gulf between what we as a nation, our elected leaders, and our citizens promise and what we do.* In his last Sunday sermon, preached at Washington National Cathedral, Dr. King announced that in a few weeks he would be coming back to Washington leading a Poor People's Campaign. He said:

"We are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses . . . We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives . . . We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty.

We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."

"We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action . . . And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."

Reader 6: Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, observed:
"As always Dr. King's voice and vision were prescient and right — and speak to where our nation is today.

On the Children's Sabbath weekend and throughout the year and years to come, we — along with people of faith and goodwill across our nation — will be putting our bodies and souls in motion to curb morally obscene child poverty rates; wealth and income inequality; massive miseducation of poor children of color; preventable hunger and homelessness; mass incarceration and unjust criminal justice systems that criminalize the poor; and bullying and demagogic politicians encouraging assault of nonviolent protesters.

The time is ripe right now to do what is right and reject the ugliness, violence and greed that have permeated too much of our political discourse. We need to move forward and not backward and teach our children we can disagree strongly without disagreeing wrongly."

Reader 7: Let this be the time that we close the gap between what we say and what we do, close the gaps our children face so that every child reaches her or his full potential or promise, fulfilling our promise as communities of faith and as a nation.