



Christian Worship Resources for the Children's Sabbath

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

Following you will find:

- **Worship Suggestions:** Worship suggestions drawn from Children's Sabbath worship services celebrated by congregations all across the country. Use or adapt those that would be appropriate for your church.
- **Involving Children and Youths:** Suggestions for creative ways to include the children and youths of your congregation in the Children's Sabbath service. Remember: The Children's Sabbath should not be turned over to the children with adults only serving as "audience," since this is meant to be an intergenerational

event that underscores the role people of all ages have to play in meeting children's needs. At the same time, it is an important time to fully engage children and youths. Be sure to involve them in the planning and leadership of the day. Remember, too, that while worship is at the heart of the Children's Sabbath it should be a beginning and not an end, inspiring action to help children on the Children's Sabbath weekend and throughout the year. We must not love children in word alone, but also in deed.

- **Sample Worship Service:** *Pursuing Justice for Children and the Poor with Urgency and Persistence.* Use or adapt all or portions of the service as appropriate for your particular denomination or tradition.
- **Additional Worship Resources:** Prayers, readings, and music from a variety of traditions: Protestant, Catholic, and Episcopal. Use or adapt them as appropriate for your congregation's tradition.
- **Sermon Resources:** Notes on the texts designated in the Episcopal, Lutheran, Revised Common, and Roman Catholic lectionaries, two sample sermons, and a sample children's sermon.

Worship Suggestions

- **Invite members to light candles for the 40 days leading up to the Children's Sabbath**, as suggested by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the National Council of Churches, and then light a symbolic 40th candle on the Children's Sabbath. (For more information, visit <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/lightacandlebrochure.html>.) **Franklin Circle Christian Church in Cleveland, Oh.**, celebrated the Children's Sabbath for the first time in 2011, leading up to the Children's Sabbath with the Light a Candle for Children: 40-Day Vigil and culminating with a Family Fun Night in the park on Oct. 15 and a special worship service on Oct. 16.
- **The week before the Children's Sabbath, distribute copies of the Seven-Day Guide for Reflection and Prayer** (available for download from www.childrensdefense.org) to help adult congregation members prepare their hearts and minds for the Children's Sabbath. **First United Methodist Church of Georgetown, Texas**, distributed the daily devotional guide, focused their worship service on children's concerns, and included a presentation to the Methodist Federation for Social Action.
- **Leading up to and on the Children's Sabbath, distribute the bulletin inserts in the Promoting Your Children's Sabbath section available for download from www.childrensdefense.org**. If you don't use the bulletin insert, prepare your own announcement about the Children's Sabbath to include in the bulletin so that worshipers, especially visitors, will understand the special focus and significance of the service.
- **Invite on-site child care, Head Start, and school staff, administrators, parents, and children**, and others to attend your Children's Sabbath. **Bon Air United Methodist Church, Richmond, Va.**, joined the celebration of the National Observance of Children's Sabbath on October 2, 2011. The speaker for the service was the Director of Communities in Schools for Chesterfield County. Families from Bon View School for Early Childhood Education, an NAC accredited ministry of the church, were especially invited to the service.
- **Decorate the sanctuary** with images and materials that bring to life the focus on children and justice.
- **Use bulletin covers that emphasize the Children's Sabbath.**
- **On the Children's Sabbath, distribute the children's activity bulletins** at the end of this section, along with crayons, markers, or pencils.
- **Distribute special tokens to every child** attending the Children's Sabbath, such as ribbons or stickers.
- **Use or adapt some of the prayers and other worship resources provided in this section. Or, use readings from prayer and worship books that include a social action theme, or create your own materials** on the theme of pursuing justice as we seek to answer God's call to protect children and close the education achievement gap, end the criminalization of children, and assure that every child has an equitable and excellent education.
- **Explore the resources of other faith traditions** in this manual; some may be appropriate to include in your service.
- **Incorporate resources from your denomination** that focus on children, education, and justice.

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- **Focus the sermon or homily on children and our responsibility to pursue justice and answer God's call to protect them.** Sermon notes on the designated lectionary texts for the Revised Common Lectionary, Roman Catholic Lectionary, and the Episcopal Lectionary for the third weekend of October are found in this section. There are also two sample sermons on other especially suitable texts for those who don't preach from the lectionary cycle. Other Children's Sabbath resources on CDF's website provide information and stories about children that you may want to include in your sermon or homily.
- **Invite guest speakers to preach or give another address on the needs of children and our call to respond.** Encourage the speaker to highlight opportunities for members to become involved themselves and to speak out for children. In 2011, the plight of children in **Durham, N.C.**, was discussed at **First Presbyterian Church** as part of Children's Sabbath observances. Ted Whiteside of Durham's Partnership for Children led a discussion on "The State of Durham's Children"....[including] issues related to child abuse and neglect, and poverty and health in Durham, with emphasis on birth to five years. They invited members of the community to attend in addition to congregation members.
- **Have a special "time with children" or Children's Sermon** during the service, so that the Children's Sabbath focus can be presented to them in an especially engaging and age-appropriate way. See the sample Children's Sermons in this section. Or, in a role reversal, have one of the children give an "Adults' Sermon"—a short message from a child to the adults.
- **Offer prayers for children.** Specifically name problems afflicting children in your community, as well as crises affecting children across our nation and throughout our world. Invite congregation members to pray for the children in your church, too.
- **Incorporate a special blessing of children.** For the altar call at **Trinity Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio**, all of the children and youth were asked to come to the altar. The adults were asked to surround them and a special prayer focused on children was prayed by a deacon.
- **Select hymns and anthems that focus on children and our responsibilities to them.** See the music suggestions in this section.
- **Dedicate ministries/programs serving children or commission staff and board members of child-serving programs** affiliated with the congregation and celebrate their work as part of the congregation's ministry. The 2011 Children's Sabbath service at **First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Tenn.**, included a time when the children of the congregation "adopted" a service project.
- **Honor people who are pursuing justice and answering God's call to protect children through their work or volunteer engagement.** At an appropriate point in the service, invite these professionals and/or volunteers (contacted in advance) to come forward for a brief time of recognition for their work putting their faith into action to seek justice for children, with prayers for God's guidance in their work and prayers for the children they serve. Present them with a flower, ribbon, or other token so that later others might identify them and offer personal appreciation.
- **Collect special offerings for children and families.** In addition to monetary offerings, consider collecting items to help children and families, such as school supplies, books, or warm clothing. One congregation held an "Undie Sunday" to collect new children's underwear and socks to donate to a homeless shelter. Announce the special offering in advance. **Good Shepherd + St. Mark's, affiliated with the**

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church, in Madras, Ore., collected toothbrushes, stuffed animals, and soft blankets for children in local foster care at their Children's Sabbath service. The items were brought forward during the offering and placed at the base of the altar as part of the worship. Or, collect a monetary offering designated to benefit an under-resourced school or an organization serving or working on behalf of children. **Wesley United Methodist Church in Morgantown, W.Va.**, made the Morgantown Ronald MacDonald House the focus of their Children's Sabbath caring response. They set a goal of filling the sanctuary with balloons on the Children's Sabbath, with each balloon signifying a donation to the Ronald MacDonald House in honor or memory of someone.

- **Create a Patchwork Quilt of Promise**, as did **Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Fremont, Calif.** Distribute a square of construction paper and a crayon to each person during the service, or in the bulletin, or place them in the pews in advance. At a designated time, invite each person to draw or write a response to "One thing I can do to pursue justice for children..." Then invite everyone to come forward (perhaps pew by pew) to tape their square on a paper quilt pattern.
- **Use various media to focus more powerfully on children and their needs.** Some congregations create PowerPoint presentations or slide shows with images of children in need.

CDF has provided two PowerPoint presentations that may be used in your Children's Sabbath worship service this year. The first, "Moments in America for Children," combines statistics about children, images of children, and a sung response by the congregation, and may be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/RDzr2n>. The second, "This Moment in America for Children," combines a quote by Pablo Casals with images of children, and may be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/Pgyhu3>.

- **Include a dramatic presentation** to especially engage children and young people, as well as adults. Some of the scripture passages designated in various lectionaries for the Children's Sabbath Sunday lend themselves to a dramatic reading with several readers taking part.

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.

Reports **St. John's Church in Westwood, Mass.**, about their fifth annual Children's Sabbath: "We celebrated the Children's Sabbath service on October 26th at St. John's Episcopal, Westwood. We had a children's sermon, and young people reading the scripture lessons and the prayers that they had written in class the week prior. We also conducted a project during the month of October: we collected school supplies for Epiphany, a tuition-free Episcopal middle school in Dorchester, Mass.... We worked hard to raise awareness about issues of poverty that affect children, and had our kids show the congregation what they had learned. We have found that the adults really listen when their kids are doing the teaching...especially when it is kids teaching about kids! Now that we have been participating in the Children's Sabbath for many years, we feel that folks of all ages are learning more about poverty in our city and are getting more involved in our various outreach programs."

For example, children and youths can:

- **Prepare for the Children's Sabbath during a "Kids' Night Out," overnight, or other event.**

Reports **Sts. James-George's Episcopal Church in Jermyn, Pa.**, of their fifth annual Children's Sabbath: "We always start our Children's Sabbath with a lock-in on Saturday during which the children practice for Sunday, bake for coffee hour, and make a craft to distribute to the congregation. This year, they decorated the bulletin board with helping hands—each naming a way they would help a child. They have snack, free time, and end with a movie. On Sunday, the children take the place of the choir, they read, collect the offering, and bring up the gifts."

- **Review the Children's Sabbath service and prepare the week before** (perhaps in church school classes). They can practice responses and hymns so they may join more fully in the Children's Sabbath service.

For the 2011 Children's Sabbath at **First United Methodist Church of Oak Ridge, Tenn.**, the children drew covers for the bulletin, helped lead worship, third graders received Bibles, and sang. Two weeks before the Children's Sabbath they held a Pizza and Planning Party for the children to provide a fun and festive opportunity for children to learn about the roles they could play in the day and prepare for leadership.

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- **Design and paint the paraments** (such as the cloth draping the pulpit) **or make a special banner.**

For the third Children's Sabbath celebrated by **Asbury United Methodist Church in Gahanna, Ohio**, during the service a banner was presented to the church in honor of the Sabbath Day for the congregation to help end poverty in America, and a love offering was taken as well.

- **Draw pictures for the bulletin cover.**
- **Decorate the sanctuary** with drawings or banners that the children have made.
- **Bake the communion bread** (if appropriate for your tradition) or prepare food for the coffee hour following the service.
- **Assist and greet worshipers as they arrive or leave, light candles, or collect the offering.**
- **Lead a procession** to begin the Children's Sabbath.
- **Participate through music.** The children might sing a special anthem, play an instrumental piece, or perform a song in sign language.

Aldersgate United Methodist Church had its Young Dancers offer a Dance of Praise and all of its children's choirs came together to offer an Act of Praise in their 2011 Children's Sabbath service.

The **Lutheran Church of Honolulu** featured the musical gifts of children in its Children's Sabbath this past year.

- **Read prayers and scriptural passages** and lead responsive readings.
- **Write a prayer** to be used in the service.
- **Deliver the sermon** or other presentation.

A youth delivered the sermon at **St. James Episcopal Church's 2011 Children's Sabbath in Gales Ferry, Conn.** They then posted the young person's sermon on YouTube to spread the message further.

- **Prepare a dramatic skit for the service.**

The middle school children of **Cross Lanes United Methodist Church in Cross Lanes, W.Va.**, presented the "Witness to the Word" in the form of skits, while children in kindergarten through fifth grade served as liturgists, ushers, greeters, and instrumentalists for the prelude, offertory, and postlude.

- **During the offertory procession, place items on the altar** that serve to remind the congregation of the love and care our children require.
- **Invite friends to attend.**

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Congregations whose children usually depart for church school classes during the worship service (often after the Children's Sermon or time with children) will need to reflect thoughtfully about the plan for the Children's Sabbath.

- Some will choose to follow their customary schedule and have the children engage in the Children's Sabbath lesson plans while the adults remain in worship. This may free the preacher to speak more seriously to the adults about the plight of children and their responsibility to respond without concerns about trying to engage or upsetting the children. The children can learn about the concerns in an age-appropriate setting in their classes.
- Other congregations will see the Children's Sabbath as a good opportunity for the children to remain in worship throughout the service. If the children are not accustomed to this, however, it will require forethought. The whole service, including the sermon, can be carefully planned to be engaging and accessible to all ages. The more children are involved in the planning and implementation, the more interested they will be. Or, activity bulletins designed for children and other quiet activities can be distributed to engage the children during the sermon and other "listening" times.



Sample Children's Sabbath Service

Pursuing Justice for Children and the Poor with Urgency and Persistence

(modify as appropriate for your congregation)

Prelude

Call to Worship

(From Deut. 10:17-21, New Revised Standard Version)

"...[T]he LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing."

We come to praise God who executes justice for children and poor families and loves the stranger.

"You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

We come to follow God, seeking justice and showing love as God does.

"You shall fear the LORD your God; [God] alone you shall worship; to [God] you shall hold fast, and by [God's] name you shall swear. [God] is your praise; [God] is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen."

We come to worship and hold fast to God who is our praise and has done for us great things.

Hymn of Praise: (For example, *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*; *He Has Done Great Things*; or other appropriate hymn of praise.)

Time of Confession: Moments for America's Children

NOTE: A Powerpoint presentation for this Time of Confession: Moments for America's Children is available at www.childrensdefense.org/faith/childrenssabbaths

After the "moments" are read, let us respond together singing words from God of Justice, God of Mercy by Jane Parker Huber to the tune Hyfrydol

Leader: Every 29 seconds a child is born into poverty.

Leader: Every 67 seconds a baby is born without health insurance.

Leader: Every 85 seconds a baby is born to a teen mother.

(Together, sing)

God of justice, God of mercy,

Make us merciful and just!

Help us see all your creation

As from you a sacred trust.

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- Leader:** Every hour and a half a child dies from an accident.
Leader: Every 3 hours a child or teen dies from a gun.
Leader: Every 8 hours a child commits suicide.
Leader: Every 47 seconds a child is abused or neglected.
Leader: Every 5-and-a-half hours a child is killed by abuse or neglect.

(Together, sing:)

**And when people cry in anguish
For their own or others' pain,
Show us ways to make a difference,
O dear God, make us humane!**

- Leader:** Every second and a half during the school year a public school student receives an out-of-school suspension.
Leader: Every 8 seconds during the school year a public high school student drops out.
Leader: Every 30 seconds during the school year a public school student is corporally punished.
Leader: Every 17 seconds a child is arrested.

(Together, sing)

**How can we, as people chosen
by your grace for service here—
How endure another's hardship
without offering hope or cheer?
God, forgive us, we beseech you,
When our love fails to empower.
Teach us how to be more faithful
In this present crucial hour.**

(Time for silent prayers.)

**Grant all people work with meaning,
Strength to care for those they love.
Food for table, truth for telling,
Challenges to rise above.
But remind us, God of justice,
This is now our work, our call!
Changing life's oppressive systems
Into ones empowering all.**

New Testament Reading: Luke 18:1-8a (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them.

Old Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-20 (NRSV)

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Sermon on God's Call to Pursue Justice

Prayers of the People

Leader: Let us now pray to God, Lover of Justice, Protector of the Poor, trusting Jesus' promise that God will grant justice to God's people who cry to God. For the faithful, that we rightly worship God by doing justice for the poor, loving kindness and caring tenderly for the children, and walking humbly with God, let us pray to the Eternal,

People: **Lover of Justice, hear our prayer.**

Leader: For all peoples of the world, in which disease knows no boundary, suffering is a shared language, and poverty is a common pain, that we come together to work so that no one suffers injustice or oppression, let us pray to the Eternal,

People: **Protector of the Poor, hear our prayer.**

Leader: For our nation, especially our elected leaders and those who would serve, that we uphold peace with justice, unite instead of divide, and demonstrate greatness by serving the last, the least, the lost, and the left behind, let us pray to the Eternal,

People: **Lover of Justice, hear our prayer.**

Leader: For ourselves and our community, that we work passionately for justice with our voices and our votes, that we reach out with tender kindness and care for children in need, and that our hearts faithfully seek to do God's will for the children and the poor, let us pray to the Eternal,

People: **Protector of the Poor, hear our prayer.**

Leader: For all children, especially those who long for justice or kindness or someone to believe in, that we and our leaders and our nation hear their cries, meet their needs, and help them to know that they are beloved by God, let us pray to the Eternal,

People: **Lover of Justice, hear our prayer.**

Leader: We offer these prayers in confidence that God hears our prayers before they even reach our lips, and that God charges us to make our lives a living prayer for justice.

People: **Amen.**

Congregational Song: Somebody Prayed for Me

Verses 1, traditional Spiritual. Sung by young voices.

Verses 2-5, adapted. Congregation invited to join in.

Somebody prayed for me,
had me on their mind,
they took the time and prayed for me.
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed for me.

**Somebody cared for me,
Had me on their mind,
They took the time and cared for me.
I'm so glad they cared,
I'm so glad they cared,
I'm so glad they cared for me.**

**Somebody spoke for me...
Somebody served with me...
Somebody stood with me...**

Prayer before the Offering

Christ Jesus,
 you look with favor
 on any gift given from the heart.
You praised the generosity
 of the despised Samaritan.
You rejoiced when Zaccheus turned
 from grasping wealth.
You marveled at the widow
 who shared out of her poverty.
You blessed the apostles
 who had neither silver nor gold,
 but the desire to share
 your healing power.
Teach us gratitude for the gifts
 of others and for our own;
that, respecting the variety of gifts,
 we might ever grow
 in our ability to give
 as well as to receive.
In the name of God,
 giver of every good gift; Amen.

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Affirmation of Commitment

Leader: Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral spoke to the urgency with which we must pursue justice when she wrote:

*Somos culpables de muchos errores y faltas,
pero nuestro mayor delito es abandonar los niños, descuidando las fuentes de vida.
Muchas cosas pueden esperar.*

El niño no.

*Ahora es el momento en que sus huesos se forman,
su sangre se constituye y sus sentidos se desarrollan.*

No les podemos contestar mañana.

Su nombre es hoy.

*We are guilty of many faults and errors,
but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life.*

Many things we need can wait.

The child cannot.

*Right now is the time his bones are being formed,
his blood is being made and his senses are being developed.*

To [the child] we cannot answer "Tomorrow."

[The child's] name is "Today."

Leader: Friends, the one we call Holy, the Eternal Source of Love and Justice, calls us to pursue justice with urgency and persistence for all children whose name is "Today."

How will you speak out with and for children and families whose voices have too long been ignored, who struggle in poverty, without health coverage, in a chasm of inequity and a widening academic achievement gap, at risk in the Cradle to Prison Pipeline? How will you speak out with them for justice?

People: "With urgency and persistence!"

Leader: How will you reach out to children who need our care—those vulnerable to abuse and neglect, those who are hungry and homeless, those who are suspended and incarcerated? How will you reach out to children who need rich early learning experiences, strong schools, and caring communities?

People: "With urgency and persistence!"

Leader: How will you pray for children being left behind?

People: "With urgency and persistence!"

Leader: How will you pursue justice so that every child has a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life?

People: "With urgency and persistence!"

Leader: The pursuit of justice is a marathon, not a sprint. Let us draw on our own deep commitment, on the support and companionship of others in the race, and on the guidance and sustenance of the Holy as we look to reaching the finish line so that every child of God experiences love and justice.

Song: Guide My Feet

Guide my feet, while I run this race.
Guide my feet, while I run this race.
Guide my feet, while I run this race,
for I don't want to run this race in vain.

Search my heart...
I'm your child...
Hold my hand...

Charge and Benediction: *This Moment for America's Children*

NOTE: A Powerpoint presentation for this Charge: *This Moment for America's Children* is available at <http://bit.ly/RDzr2n>.

Leader: Hear these words from cellist and composer Pablo Casals as we prepare to pursue justice for children with urgency and persistence:

*Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe,
a moment that will never be again.*

*And what do we teach our children?
We teach them that two and two make four,
and that Paris is the capital of France.*

*When will we also teach them what they are?
We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are?
You are a marvel. You are unique.
In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you.
Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move.*

*You may become a Shakespeare, a Michaelangelo, a Beethoven.
You have the capacity for anything.
Yes, you are a marvel.*

*And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel?
You must work, we must all work, to make the world worthy of its children.*

We don't have a minute to wait or a child to waste. May each of us go forth to work to make this world worthy of our children.

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who cherished and blessed the children; may the love of God who created each child in God's own image; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus called the Advocate, be with you and each child of God now and forevermore. Amen.

Postlude

Additional Worship Resources

Following are additional Christian worship resources from a variety of sources. Use or adapt any of the following resources that would be appropriate for your tradition. In addition, you may want to consider the prayers and other worship resources from other faith traditions available for download from CDF's website to see if any would be appropriate for your service. **Unless otherwise noted, all prayers are written by Shannon Daley-Harris.**

Call to Worship (from Psalm 99:2-5)

Before starting, have the worship leader tell the children that the congregation's response will be "Holy is God!" so that they can join in the call to worship.

Leader: God is great in our land;
God is supreme over all the peoples.
Let everyone praise your great and awesome name.

People: Holy is God!

Leader: Mighty Ruler, lover of justice,
you have established fairness;
you have done justice
and goodness in those who have gone before.

People: Holy is God!

Leader: Praise our God;
worship before God's throne.

People: Holy is God!

Call to Worship

Leader: Jesus said, Let the little children come to me...

People: We come, each of us a child of God.

Leader: Jesus said, Do not stop them.

People: We come to remove obstacles before children.

Leader: Jesus said, It is to such as these that the reign of God belongs.

People: We come to recognize that each child is already part of God's realm.

Leader: Jesus said, Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the reign of God as a little child will never enter it.

People: We come to worship with the trust and vulnerability and dependence of a child.

Come, let us worship God.

Call to Worship

Leader: Come praise God the Creator who made each child in God's image!

People: We will praise our Creator by recognizing each child's sacred worth.

Leader: Come praise the Christ who blessed the children!

People: We will praise Christ by being a blessing to children in need.

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Leader: Come praise God the Holy Spirit who moves among us!

People: **We will praise the Holy Spirit by working for justice.**

Leader: Come praise the triune God who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us!

People: **We will praise God by putting our faith into action to seek justice for children.**

Call to Confession

Like the prodigal son, we stray from the lives God wants us to lead and follow our own selfish pursuits. When we recognize that we have lost our way, God welcomes us with open arms and joyous celebration. So with confidence, let us confess our sins before God and one another.

Prayer of Confession

For our incapacity to feel the suffering of others,
And our tendency to live comfortably with injustice,

God forgive us.

For the self-righteousness which denies guilt,
And the self-interest which strangles compassion,

God forgive us.

For those who live their lives in careless unconcern,
Who cry out "Peace, peace" when there is no peace,

We ask your mercy.

For our failings in community,
Our lack of understanding,

We ask your mercy.

For our lack of forgiveness, openness, sensitivity,

God forgive us.

For times when we are too eager to be better than others,

When we are too rushed to care,

When we are too tired to bother,

When we don't really listen,

When we are too quick to act from

Motives other than love,

God forgive us.

(Based on Jeremiah 6:13-15; 8-11, from the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, South Africa)

Prayer of Confession

Creator God, you have made each of us in your image, and yet we fail to reflect your love and justice. You have created every child in your image, and yet we don't treat every child as a precious reflection of you. We see some children as valued treasures, and others as lost causes. We invest our time, money, and hopes in some children, while we squander the great potential of others. Open our eyes, we pray, to see that every child is made in your image and belongs to you. Help us to love, protect, and nurture all children. We pray these things in the name of the One who came to us as a child. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Listen! I have something to say! Our past is behind us. We are free to live new lives, be new people, try again to be who God intends us to be. Rejoice! I say again, rejoice!

Call to Confession

Jesus told this story: if a shepherd had a hundred sheep, and one of them was lost, the shepherd would go out and look for the one that was lost. When the shepherd found the lost sheep, the shepherd would carry it home rejoicing. Jesus told this story so we would know that God rejoices when we, who have lost our way, turn in a new direction and feel ourselves caught up in God's loving embrace. Let us now confess our sins with confidence that God rejoices when we turn in a new direction.

Confession

God of new beginnings, we confess that we are stuck in our old ways. You taught us about an upside down reign, and yet we still live our lives seeking power, wealth, and status. We have failed to protect those who are most vulnerable, to stand with and for those who live in poverty, to put children first. Forgive us, we pray. Shake us up, open our hearts and our hands, our eyes and our ears that we hear again your calling and live our lives in grateful obedience. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Like a parent racing out to welcome home the prodigal child who had lost his way, God greets our return with joy and love. Friends, believe the good news of the Gospel: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, you call us to the hard work of justice, and we look for an easier task. You expect us to persist and we want to give up. You call for courage and we worry about criticism. You ask us to protect the most vulnerable, and we mostly look out for ourselves and our "own." Forgive us we pray. Instill in us determination, persistence, courage, and selflessness, that our lives may be a more true reflection of the one we claim to follow and in whose name we pray, your own beloved child Jesus.

Call to Confession

"Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus told his followers. He wasn't telling us to act playful or childish; he was telling us that until we recognize our utter reliance on God, our weakness and vulnerability and inability to "earn" our way into God's grace, we'll never enter God's kingdom. But, once we recognize our dependence on God, once we drop the illusion that we can be perfect enough or worthy enough to merit God's grace, that's when we will experience God's grace, freely given as we are fully forgiven in Christ's name. Children of God, let us confess our sins before God and one another.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, you call us to create change for children, but we're comfortable with the status quo. You call us to work for justice today, but we put it off until another day. You call us to bring hope, but inside we've really given up on making a difference. You call us to believe in a better tomorrow, but we don't always believe that it is possible.

Forgive us, we pray, for our apathy, for our procrastination, for our resignation and our limited vision. Change our hearts, O God, so that we may live boldly into your vision of justice and compassion for every child, for a bright and hopeful tomorrow that we can work for today. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

God who makes all things new, we confess that we cling to the comfortable, fall back on the familiar, and allow apathy to dull our hearts and our commitment. We shrug our shoulders and say that poverty is inevitable even as it deprives children of the fullness of life that you intend and they deserve. We throw up our hands at the number of children without health coverage and accept what is unacceptable. We shake

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our heads over the bursting prisons but turn away from the things that push children toward prison rather than keeping them on the path to success.

Forgive us, we pray, for callousness instead of compassion, for discouragement instead of determination, for selfishness instead of service. Change our hearts, we pray, so that we can create change for your beloved children and help bring the hope and better tomorrow that you intend. These things we pray in the name of your beloved child, the hope of the world. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Beloved, we are God's children now. Hear and believe the good news:

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Amen.

Litany

Leader: In this season of vineyard labor, let us call to mind the prophet's vision: If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

People: Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and [the Lord] will say, Here I am. [Isaiah 58:9]

Leader: Let us pray, O God, you are the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life; hear, now, the prayers of your people for the hungers of this world.

People: God, have mercy upon us.

Leader: We remember all who labor but go hungry to their rest;

We remember those who cannot find work for their hands;

We remember the children who go unfed, and we ask:

People: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: We remember all who hunger and thirst for justice;

We remember the victims of oppression;

we remember those who have placed their trust in you, and we ask:

People: Christ, have mercy.

Leader: We remember all who live upon the bread of affliction; we remember those whose tears are their food;

we remember the homeless and the poor, and we ask:

People: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: As we remember the suffering and want of others, we acknowledge our own hunger and need.

People: When we are empty of hope, fill us;

when we are worn from care, renew us;

when we fail to love, forgive us.

Leader: Bring us to your table and feed us with bread for the journey. Strengthen us and gladden our hearts; that we might taste and see your goodness, that our lives might be as bread that is broken and wine that is poured, and that we might work in hope for the day when all are fed. This we ask in the name of Christ;

People: Amen.

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Prayer for Illumination

O God, you speak to us in so many ways: through the voices of children, in the stirrings of our hearts, in the silence after the last bedtime story has been read. By your Holy Spirit, speak to us now through the Word read and proclaimed that we may hear and heed your call on behalf of the children. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Eternal God, we hear your Word of love in a parent's conversation with a child. We glimpse your Word of hope as a young person gets a fresh start. We encounter your Word of justice as people stand with and for those in poverty. By the power of your Spirit, attune us this day, in scripture read, proclaimed, and lived, to hear your Word of love, hope, and justice. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Living God, by the power of your Spirit let your Word ring in our ears, open our minds, and set our hearts afire so that we are transformed from hearers into doers of your Word. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

As we hear your word read, O God,
By your Spirit
Tug on our hearts, like a child tugging a parent's sleeve,
Whisper in our ear, like a child sharing an important secret,
Clamor for our attention, like a young one who can't wait any longer,
Redirect our sights, like a child pointing out a wonder we almost missed.
Don't let us miss your Word to us this day, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, by your Spirit help us to listen for your word to us today
With the openness and trust of a child
With the questioning mind of a youth
With the discerning heart of one grown to maturity
With the wisdom of one seasoned by years. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

O God who came as a baby when we were expecting a king,
who called us to be last when we were expecting to be first,
who welcomed a child when we thought grown-ups were more important,
who rose to new life when we thought death had the last word,
surprise us again this day with what you have to say to us.
By your holy spirit, open our ears and our eyes and our hearts
to find you where we least expect you, to be led where we least expect to go,
through the reading and proclamation and the living of your word. Amen.

Prayers of the People

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

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

(Holding up a crayon)

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

(Holding up a piece of chalk)

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

(Holding up a pencil stub)

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

(Holding up a Band-Aid®)

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

(Holding up a penny)

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

(Holding up a pen)

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

Prayers of the People

(If the spiritual "Thank You, Lord" is not familiar to your congregation, have the choir sing the refrain with the leader at the beginning. In each instance, the people's response will be sung.)

Leader: Let us join our hearts in prayer, responding in song: Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. Thank you Lord, I just want to thank you, Lord.

For the blessing of children—from newborn to almost grown, and for the sacred charge to nurture and protect them, let us lift our hearts to God:

People: Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord, I just want to thank you, Lord.

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Leader: For the love of parents, a love shown in its perfect form in God, let us pray:

People: **Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord, I just want to thank you, Lord.**

Leader: For the families who work hard yet struggle every day to make ends meet and provide for their families:

People: **Bless them, Lord. Bless them, Lord. Bless them, Lord. Help us be a blessing too.**

Leader: For the children who are beaten down by poverty and homelessness and hunger and who suffer in innumerable ways, let us pray:

People: **Bless them, Lord. Bless them, Lord. Bless them, Lord. Help us be a blessing too.**

Leader: For the children who are abused and neglected, for those who are shuffled through the foster care system and those who wait longingly for permanent families, let us pray:

People: **Love them, Lord. Love them, Lord. Love them, Lord. Help us to love all of them, too.**

Leader: For the children who are victims of violence and for the children who turn to the violence they see glorified in our culture, let us pray:

People: **Love them, Lord. Love them, Lord. Love them, Lord. Help us to love all of them, too.**

Leader: For the leaders of our nation who have the choice to stand for the powerful or the powerless, the rich or the poor, the corporations or the children, let us pray:

People: **Guide them, Lord. Guide them, Lord. Guide them, Lord. Help us work to guide them too.**

Leader: For ourselves, that we find the vision, commitment, skills, and persistence to work for justice in our nation so that we truly leave no child behind.

People: **Guide us, Lord. Guide us, Lord. Guide us, Lord. Help sustain and guide us now.**

Leader: Amen.

Litany of Commitment

God did not call us to succeed,

God called us to serve.

God did not call us to win,

God called us to work.

God did not call us to live long,

God called us to live for God.

God did not call us to be happy,

God called us to be hopeful.

God did not call us to fame,

God called us to faith.

God did not call us to seek power,

God called us to seek peace.

God did not call us to loot the earth and each other,

God called us to love our earth and each other. Amen.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

¹ From *Reaching for Rainbows*. © 1980 Ann Barr Weems. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press. www.wjkbooks.com

Act of Commitment

The following Act of Commitment was prepared by a coalition of Durham children's organizations (Durham's Partnership for Children, End Poverty Durham, and Durham Congregations in Action) for their 2011 Children's Sabbath. Adapt this for your own place of worship, or use it as inspiration to create your own.

2011 CHILDREN'S SABBATH CELEBRATION

**“Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue:
Answering God's Call to Protect Children”
Durham County, North Carolina**

“One dollar up front prevents the spending of many dollars down the road.”

Marian Wright Edelman

Will you answer God's call to protect children? Children wait for our answer. Children, caught in the crossfire of wars that are raging in our neighborhoods and nations, wait for peace. Together, places of worship and people of faith must commit to working for peace in neighborhoods and among nations. Will you answer the call?

YES, WE WILL.

Children, caught in the jaws of poverty that impacts bodies, minds, and spirits, wait for justice. Together, places of worship and people of faith must commit to working to end poverty so that every child's needs are met, and so that, from food and housing to quality healthcare, child care, and education, children are able to attain everything they need to survive and thrive.

Will you answer the call?

YES, WE WILL.

Children, caught in the stranglehold of racism that chokes hopes, opportunity, dignity, and dreams, wait for love and respect. Together, places of worship and people of faith must commit to challenging racism and assuring that every child is treated as a beloved child of God, given the love, respect, and opportunities they deserve. Will you answer the call?

YES, WE WILL.

We celebrate children as sacred gifts, and our solemn responsibility to nurture and protect every one of them - not just those who are born into our families or are a part of our congregation.

GOD CALLS US TO SHOW HIS GREATNESS THROUGH OUR LOVE FOR ALL CHILDREN.

Your voice and resources are needed to lift children and families out of poverty in Durham and around the world. Will you use your voice and the resources you have as people of faith to protect our children through answering God's call?

YES, WE WILL.

There are 25,218 children birth to age 5 in Durham County. Half of our community's children live in low income homes, one quarter live in poverty. Without a healthy start and a safe environment children will not live to their full potential. Let's commit to helping families give their babies a healthy start so each child can fulfill their dreams.

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Prayer

O God, help us to recover our hope for our children's sake.
Help us to recover our courage for our children's sake.
Help us to recover our discipline for our children's sake.
Help us to recover our ability to work together for our children's sake.
Help us to recover our values for our children's sake.
Help us to recover our faith in Thee for our children's sake. Amen.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

Prayer for Children²

Great God,
guard the laughter of children,
Bring them safely through injury and illness,
so they may live the promises you give.
Do not let us be so preoccupied with our purposes
that we fail to hear their voices,
or pay attention to their special vision of the truth;
but keep us with them, ready to listen and to love,
even as in Jesus Christ you have loved us,
your grown-up, wayward children. Amen.

(*The Book of Common Worship*)

A Prayer for Parents³

Almighty God, from whom we receive our life,
you have blessed us with the joy and care of children.
As we bring them up, give us calm strength and patient wisdom,
that we may teach them to love
whatever is just and true and good
following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

(*The Book of Common Worship*)

Prayer for Teachers and Students

Holy and life-giving God,
the source of all wisdom and understanding:
enlighten by your Holy Spirit those who teach
and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth,
they may worship You with joy,
proclaim the Good News with faithful obedience,
and serve you from generation to generation;
through the one who came among us as your Wisdom incarnate, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

(From the 1998 installation of the academic dean at Wesley Theological Seminary)

² From *The Book of Common Worship*

The Children⁴

Rushing to school, their faces red and expectant,
Dancing and smiling through the classroom doors,
Hopeful for another day, another chance
To live, to grow, to learn.

Many come from loving families,
Eager for new adventures.
For others, school is a welcome change,
A haven from chaos and fear.

A few come in anger and rage,
Daring another one to disappoint,
Afraid to try, to trust, to care
Their hatred masking years of hurt.

How to reach you, little child,
How to touch your heart with peace,
How to remove the hurts ingrained,
How to give your spirit release.

Our God, the answers lie with you.
Let your love and wisdom flow through me.
I place each precious one in your hands.
Give me courage and strength to do your work.
(By Celeste Rossetto Dickey)

Charge and Blessing

Go forth to answer God's call;
Go forth to protect children;
Go forth to pursue justice.
Now may the blessing of God who calls us,
Of Christ who welcomed the children into his protective embrace,
And of the Spirit who moves in and through us as we work for justice
Be with you and every child of God now and forever more. Amen.

Charge and Benediction

Go forth recognizing each child as a blessing from God.
Go forth knowing yourself to be blessed by God.
Go forth to be a blessing in God's name.

Now may the blessing of God
Who created each child in God's image
Who redeemed us through God's own Child,
Who works through us to seek justice for every child
Be with you and every child of God this day and ever more. Amen.

³ From *The Book of Common Worship*. © 1993 Westminster John Knox Press. Used by permission. www.wjkbooks.com

⁴ Celeste Rossetto Dickey, reprinted with permission of the author cdickey@uoregon.edu

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Charge and Blessing

Go forth to create change for children made in the image of our Creator;
Go forth to bring hope, in the name of the one who is the hope of the world;
Go forth to work for a better tomorrow, empowered by the spirit, the advocate, who unites us in community.
Now may the blessing of our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Advocate be with you and every child of God this day and ever more. Amen.

Sample Greeting (Catholic liturgy)

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 greet you on this day that is celebrated as the Children's Sabbath by congregations of many faiths across our nation. On this Children's Sabbath, we hear anew God's charge to pursue justice and our solemn responsibility answer God's call and to protect children, especially those who are not receiving the education they need to fulfill their potential. As our Lord Jesus Christ said to those who would be his followers, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Sample Greeting (Catholic liturgy)

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 special day to mark the 20th National Observance of Children's Sabbaths. Today, we join our hearts, hands, and voices with people of faith in thousands of congregations nationwide to lift up the needs of children and commit faithfully to respond to God's call to pursue justice and protect children. Every child is wonderfully made in God's image. Yet for millions of children in our nation, the bright promise of childhood is dimmed by struggling schools, lack of access to Head Start, poor quality child care, poverty, violence, and lack of health care. Let us be the people of God who recognize that all children are wonderfully made in God's image. Let us offer our prayers and our promises to remove these obstacles and help all children learn and succeed.

Penitential Rite (Catholic liturgy)

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

Lord Jesus, you gathered the little children to yourself and blessed them.

Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: Lord Jesus, you warned us not to put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in you. Christ, have mercy.

People: Christ, have mercy.

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Priest: Lord Jesus, you called us to welcome children in your name.
Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

Penitential Rite (Catholic liturgy)

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

Lord Jesus, you came as a child in the fullness of humanity that we may know the Father'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.

Gospel Acclamation (Catholic liturgy)

Priest: Alleluia.

People: Alleluia.

Priest: Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest. (Luke 9:48)

People: Alleluia.

Gospel Acclamation (Catholic liturgy)

Priest: Alleluia.

People: Alleluia.

Priest: Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. (Lk. 18:17)

People: Alleluia.

General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful) (Catholic rubric)

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

For the holy Church of God, that we manifest your love for all children, not just this Children's Sabbath day but every day, and so become living witnesses to the Christ who welcomed the children to him, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For all the peoples of the world, especially the children in countries where labor replaces learning, in lands where the education of girls is valued less than that of boys, in places where malnutrition and preventable disease stunt minds and bodies and cut short learning and lives, that all children may one day learn and thrive, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

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For our nation, that we fulfill the promise of opportunity by helping all children learn and succeed, and for our leaders, that they lead by serving and demonstrate greatness by protecting the least of these, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For our brothers and sisters in need, especially the more than 15 million children living in poverty in our rich land, that they find justice and comfort in you, in their families, and in the care of congregations and communities, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For ourselves and our community, especially the teachers and school administrators, child care providers, Head Start staff, parents, mentors, and all who help our children learn, that they find satisfaction in their work and appreciation from the community as they guide the discoveries of children, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For all children—the smallest baby learning to recognize his or her father's voice, the preschooler stooping to examine a bug, the kindergartner learning to manage milk money, the middle school student wrestling with the challenges of school and peer groups, and the high school students whose gazes are drawn toward the future that for some looks bright and others looks dim—that every child know the love of you, of family and friends, of congregation and community as we help them to learn and succeed, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For all who have died, especially those who died too soon and too small, and the children who have died from illnesses we could have prevented, guns we could have controlled, poverty we could have abated, and despair we could have lifted, we pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

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

General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful) (Catholic rubric)

My brothers and sisters, in the name of Christ who told his followers to welcome the children and who blessed the children, let us pray to the Lord saying, Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

For the holy Church of God, that we open wide our arms of blessing to embrace all of your children in word and deed, with justice and mercy,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

For our world, where millions of children suffer, sicken, and starve, where millions yearn for safety, schooling, and sustenance, that we find ways to share your bounty with all, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

For all our brothers and sisters in need, especially children living in poverty who bear its heavy burden and worry about what tomorrow will hold, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

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For our community and nation, that we feel a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are, with imbalance between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the corporations and the children, and that we work to better reflect your intentions for justice and love, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

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.

General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful) (Catholic rubric)

My brothers and sisters, in the name of Christ who came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, let us pray to the Lord saying,
O Lord, you are our hope.

For the holy Church of God, that the Spirit of the Lord rests upon us as we bring good news to the poor not in word alone but also in deed, we pray to the Lord,

O Lord, you are our hope.

For our world, in which billions of people are held captive by grinding poverty, preventable malnutrition and disease, warfare and displacement, that we work to bring release from their suffering, we pray to the Lord,

O Lord, you are our hope.

For all our brothers and sisters in need, especially children in our rich nation who are oppressed by poverty, that we work so that all have enough, we pray to the Lord,

O Lord, you are our hope.

For our community and nation, which are so often blinded by greed, prejudice, suspicion, and self-concern, that we open our eyes to the needs of others, the inherent dignity and worth of every child, and recover our vision of the just and compassionate society you intend, we pray to the Lord,

O Lord, you are our hope.

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.

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Prayer over the People (Catholic)

(The following prayer may be used at the end of Mass, or after the liturgy of the word, the office, and celebration of the sacraments.)

Lord,
Send your light upon your family.
May they continue to enjoy your favor
and devote themselves to doing good.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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

Amen.

(Daily Roman Missal)

Collect of the Day: On the Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

Gracious and almighty God, source of all wisdom, love, and justice: Help us on this Children's Sabbath to hear your call to care for the children. Strengthen our hands and embolden our hearts that we may act with your love and speak with your justice, to the end that all children may learn, succeed, and live out the lives for which they were created; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

People: Amen.

Collect of the Day: On the Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

Almighty and everlasting God, you have blessed us with children and called us to be a blessing. In Christ who came to bring good news to the poor and welcomed the children, you have revealed your intention for justice and compassion. Prosper now the work of our hands that we may faithfully serve you by lifting up the next generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

People: Amen.

The Prayers of the People (Episcopal rubric)

With all our heart and with all our mind, let us pray to the Lord, saying "Lord, bless the children."

For the Universal Church, that we manifest your love for all children not just this Children's Sabbath day but every day, and so become living witnesses to the Christ who welcomed the children to him, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For our nation, that we fulfill the promise of opportunity by helping all children learn and succeed, and for those in authority, that they lead by serving and demonstrate greatness by protecting the least of these, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For children everywhere, in countries where labor replaces learning, in lands where the education of girls is valued less than that of boys, in places where malnutrition and preventable disease stunt minds and bodies and cut short learning and lives, that all children may one day learn and thrive, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

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For our local community, especially the teachers and school administrators, child care providers, Head Start staff, parents, mentors, and all who help our children learn, that they find satisfaction in their work and appreciation from the community as they guide the discoveries of children, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For all children—the smallest baby learning to recognize his or her father's voice, the preschooler stooping to examine a bug, the kindergartner learning to manage milk money, the junior high students wrestling with the challenges of school and peer groups, and the senior high students whose gazes are drawn toward the future that for some looks bright and others looks dim—that every child know the love of you, of family and friends, of congregation and community as we help them to learn and succeed, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For those who suffer, especially the more than 15 million children living in poverty in our rich land, that they find justice and comfort in you, in their families, and in the care of congregations and communities, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

For all who have died in the hope of the resurrection, and for all the departed, especially the children who have died from illnesses we could have prevented, guns we could have controlled, poverty we could have abated, and despair we could have lifted, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, bless the children.

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

Leader and People:

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

The Prayers of the People (Episcopal rubric):

With all our heart and with all our mind, let us pray to the Lord, saying, "Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing."

For the body of Christ, that we treat every child as made in your image; that we welcome every child as you welcomed the children, and that we bring good news to the poor that you announced, let us pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

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For our nation and our leaders, grant wisdom and courage to change what is unjust and recognize that until all the children are well, none of us is well, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

In a world where children hunger and starve, where they sicken and die, where they face bullets and bombs, where they know the exile of prison and refugee camp, help us protect and defend them, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

For ourselves and our community, that we let our eyes weep over injustice, our hearts burn with determination, our voices speak out to demand change, and our hands move to make a difference, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

On this Children's Sabbath day, for our nation's more than 16.4 million children in poverty, that we use all that we have and all that we are to raise up the next generation, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

For all who have died, especially those who died too soon and too young, those whose lives were cut short by poverty, we pray to the Lord,

Lord, bless us that we may be a blessing.

Leader and People:

God of all mercy,

We confess that we have failed to live our lives as ones made in your image,

We have not loved each other as sisters and brothers,

We have not welcomed all children and so welcomed you,

We have left stumbling blocks in the way of too many children.

Forgive us our sins,

As a woman searching for a cherished coin,

As a father welcoming a beloved child home,

And uphold us by your Spirit

That we may do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you,

Through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Proper Preface for Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

Because you sent your Son, who came as a baby, who studied in Temple and grew, who called the children to him and blessed them, who gave himself that we may know the fullness of your love for us, your children.

Proper Preface for Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

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

Proper Preface for Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

Because your will is for justice, peace, and love that embrace all and exclude none, and you show special concern for those oppressed by poverty.

Eucharistic Prayer for the Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

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, living and loving God,
for calling our world into being—
for making earth and water, plants and animals, and then
for making each and every one of us in your image—
every woman and man, every girl and boy,
of every race and place, rich and poor.

We give you thanks
for loving each of us
as a mother loves her children,
for promising to be our God no matter what—
welcoming us as a father
even when we have done wrong.

On this Children's Sabbath day,
we thank you especially for children,
for the ways they are eager to learn and for the things that they teach us,
for the challenges that don't stop them and for the successes they celebrate,
for the way in which each one is
wonderfully made, a gift from 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,
You sent your beloved child Jesus
to enter our world as a baby,
to grow as a child in mind and body,
to teach others that God loves us as a parent,
to hug the children close and bless them,

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to tell all people that it is only by being like a child that we may enter God's reign,
to heal children and adults who were sick in their bodies, minds, and hearts,
to be a friend to people who were poor, looked down upon, left out by others.

Jesus went even to the cross
that we may know your love,
triumphant even over death,
that frees 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 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

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to welcome the children,
to show your love,
to work for your justice.
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.

Eucharistic Prayer for the Children's Sabbath (Episcopal rubric)

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 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. 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 Blessing⁵

The Wisdom of God
the Love of God

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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.

(from *Enriching Our Worship*)

The Dismissal

Option 1:

Celebrant Remembering especially all our children, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
People Thanks be to God.

Option 2:

(adapted from 15th century Gaelic blessing)

God be in your heads and in your understanding of children's needs.

God be in your eyes and in your beholding the wonder of children.

God be in your mouths and in your speaking to and on behalf of children.

God be in your hearts and in your love for all children.

God be in your hands and in your serving children.

God be at your end and at your departing.

People Thanks be to God.

Affirmation of Faith

God has not taken God's people out of the world, but has sent them into the world to worship God there and serve all humankind. We worship God in the world by standing before our Lord on behalf of all people. Our cries for help and our songs of praise are never for ourselves alone. Worship is no retreat from the world; it is part of our mission. We serve humankind by discerning what God is doing in the world and joining in that work. We risk disagreement and error when we try to say what God is doing here and now. But we find guidance in God's deeds in the past and promises for the future, as they are witnessed to in Scripture. We affirm that the Lord is at work, especially in events and movements that free people by the gospel and advance justice, compassion, and peace.

(From *A Declaration of Faith*)

Benediction

Let us go forth
To love, serve, and seek justice
For all of God's children.

Now may the God who
Watches over us
Came for us and
Works through us
Be with you, beloved children of God. Amen.

⁵ From *Enriching Our Worship* © 1997 by Church Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Music Suggestions

This collection of songs was created by Darrell and Joy Faires offer simple, yet meaningful “child-size” music to enrich the programs and worship services of the Children's Sabbaths. The songs were composed for the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths and the Light a Candle for Children Prayer Vigil. “Children's Sabbaths Songs” is packaged in a loose-leaf binder. It includes printed music with permission to copy for the Observance, a CD of the songs, suggestions for planning, preparation and other creative resources. The 31-page resource is \$18.00 plus shipping from Shalom Publications, 7225 Berkridge Dr., Hazelwood, MO 63042, (314) 521-6051 or shalomusic@earthlink.net.

The following hymn suggestions that lift up children, families, and God's call to justice and love can be found in many hymnals including the *New Century Hymnal*, the *United Methodist Hymnal*, the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, *Chalice*, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the *African American Heritage Hymnal*, and *Worship: Hymnal and Service Book for Roman Catholics*.

Hymns of Praise

All Things Bright and Beautiful
Bring Many Names
Earth and All Stars
For the Beauty of the Earth
Gather Us In
God of the Sparrow
God Whose Love Is Reigning o'er Us
God Is Here
Here, O Lord, Your Servants Gather
How Can We Name a Love
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise
Let the Whole Creation Cry
Lord of Our Growing Years
My Heart Is Overflowing
O God in Heaven
Tell Out, My Soul, the Greatness of the Lord
There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

Hymns After Passing the Peace

A hymn such as “I've Got Peace Like a River” or “Jesus Loves Me” would be a good choice here, since the children may already know it or could learn it in preparation for the Children's Sabbath.

Hymns of Thanksgiving and Communion

For the Fruits of This Creation
Living Word of God Eternal
Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether

Hymns of Petition

God, Omnipotent, Eternal
Kum Ba Yah
Lord of All Hopefulness
O God, We Bear the Imprint of Your Face
Our Father by Whose Name
This World, My God, Is Held Within Your Hand

Hymns of Commitment and Closing Hymns

All Who Love and Serve Your City
Called as Partners in Christ's Service
Child of Blessing, Child of Promise (*traditionally a baptismal hymn, it may be sung on the Children's Sabbath by the congregation to affirm the promises of God and of the congregation that we make in baptism.*)

Christian Women, Christian Men
Guide My Feet
Help Us Accept Each Other
Here I Am, Lord
I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me
Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love
Let Justice Flow Like Streams
Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ
Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us
Live into Hope
Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace
Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service
Lord, You Give the Great Commission
Now Praise the Hidden God of Love
O For a World
Our Cities Cry to You, O God
Song of Hope (Canto de Esperanza)
The Church of Christ in Every Age
There's a Spirit in the Air
Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples
We Are Your People
What Does the Lord Require
When a Poor One
When We Are Living

Sermon Resources

The sermon or homily is one of the most powerful opportunities to proclaim God's love and concern for all of God's children and God's call to us to pursue justice and protect children. To help you prepare the sermon or homily for the Children's Sabbath, we have provided several resources:

- Sermon notes based on the Revised Common, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran lectionaries designated for October 21, 2012.
- Two sample sermons to provide varied examples of preaching on Deuteronomy 16:20 that lift up the Children's Sabbath theme of pursuing justice for children and the poor. First is a video clip of a sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. James Alexander Forbes Jr., Harry Emerson Fosdick Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary, at the Children's Sabbath service opening the Children's Defense Fund's National Conference in July 2012. You may watch it at bit.ly/PrURwn. The second is a sermon by the Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris, CDF's Religious Affairs Advisor, titled "Is This As Fast As It Goes," found on Page 3 of the Welcome section.
- A sample children's sermon to talk about pursuing justice during a special time with children.

Sermon Notes

The lectionary texts designated for this Children's Sabbath Sunday offer deep connections and powerful messages related to the Children's Sabbath themes for those churches that follow these designated cycles of readings. The Revised Common Lectionary, the Roman Catholic Lectionary, and the Episcopal Lectionary share a common Gospel lesson, Mark 10:35–45, and the passages from Isaiah and Hebrews overlap in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal lectionaries. Even pastors who do not follow a lectionary will find food for thought and study in these sermon resources.

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 present both opportunity and challenge for the preacher. 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

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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.”¹

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 nine million children be without health coverage and unable to see a doctor when they are sick or injured? How can 16.4 million live in poverty in the richest nation on earth? How can a Black boy born in 2001, who is 11 years old now, already face a one in three chance of imprisonment in his lifetime, or his Latino counterpart face a 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)

¹The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV: 1 & 2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms, p. 637.

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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).²”

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 nine 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

² *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.

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in six 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.”

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.

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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.

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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 10 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,

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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."³

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 16.4 million children are poor, there is a need for change to our nation's structures and systems. When one out of every 10 children, almost eight million all together, does 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.

³ *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path* compiled by Lucinda Vardey, p. 114.

Sample Sermon on Deuteronomy 16:18-20

Is This As Fast as It Goes?

By the Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

It was a foggy day at Washington's Dulles airport. I boarded the plane bound for Florida to give a speech. On my sixth flight of the month, I settled myself into my seat and immediately buried myself in some work.

As I did so, a father and his young son, maybe three years old, entered the row in front of me. On what was clearly his first ever airplane ride, the little boy eagerly clambered into his window seat, pushed up the plastic shade and peered out the window with great excitement and anticipation.

Well, the deep fog that day had delayed many flights. Our plane was way at the back of a long line of planes waiting for their turn on the runway. So you know what that means: the plane at the front of the line would take off and the rest of us in this long line of planes would roll slowly forward a few feet and then stop and wait some more. Then the next plane would take off and we would inch forward, stop, wait, and so on. Buried in work, I scarcely paid attention as for half an hour or more we continued inching forward like this.

Suddenly I heard the voice of the little boy turn to his dad and ask with dismay and deep disappointment: *is this as fast as it goes?*

I wonder if our nation's 16.4 million children who live in poverty, who are waiting for us to end child poverty in our rich nation, would turn to each of us and ask "Is this as fast as it goes?" Is this as fast as we can go to end poverty while their childhoods slip by?

I wonder if the hungry children whose parents are waiting to hear if the SNAP program—food stamps—will be cut or preserved, whose meals depend on the decision of a budget so-called Super Committee, would they turn to our legislators and ask, "Is this as fast as it goes?" Is this as fast as we can go to protect children from cuts?

I wonder if the three-year-old waiting for a place in Head Start to be funded, or the toddler waiting for a quality child care spot, or a child at the bottom of the list for affordable housing...would they ask us all "Is this as fast as it goes?"

I wonder if the nation's uninsured children, who rely on Medicaid which is now in jeopardy, on health reform threatened with repeal, would they turn to pundits and pastors, congregations and candidates and Congress, and ask "Is this as fast as it goes?" Is this as fast as we can go to protect every child with health coverage?

Is this as fast as we can go?

Pursuing Justice

Our passage from Deuteronomy this morning warns against distorting justice and the things that can fog our leaders' clarity about the right thing to do, slowing our progress toward justice. Babies, now as then, aren't very good at making bribes; children don't make campaign contributions, or vote, or lobby, or do much of anything to tip the scales in their favor or just keep the scales even. Children and their cause are outweighed by contributors, campaigners, corporations, and constituents. It's an old, old story. Isaiah, using the same Hebrew word for "pursue" as the Deuteronomist, says of the nation's leaders, "Everyone loves a bribe and runs after—*pursues*—gifts. They do not defend the orphan and the widow's cause does not come before them." (Isaiah 1:23b) Both writers warn of a nation headed fast in the wrong direction and of children and poor parents being left behind.

In our passage today, we are not only warned of the dangers of distorting or subverting justice. We are told to *pursue* justice. To *pursue* it—there can be nothing accidental or incidental, apathetic or apolitical, about *pursuing* justice. Rabbi Abraham Heschel knew something about pursuing justice. He said once, after marching with Dr. King in Selma, "It felt as if my feet were praying." Of this passage in Deuteronomy, Rabbi Heschel wrote "The term 'pursue' carries strong connotations of effort, eagerness. This implies more than merely respecting or following justice"; we must actively pursue it.¹

The Deuteronomist couldn't have envisioned, precisely, our burgeoning email inboxes, phones that ring off the hook, computers waiting for us to finish memos or sermons or grant reports...but maybe he knew, nonetheless, that there would always be competition between our to-do lists and the call to do justice, and that if we are not to be forever distracted and derailed from doing justice by the rest of our over-full lives and competing demands, then we would have to pursue, actively pursue, justice with focus, urgency, energy, imagination, and determination.

So how fast are we going to get to work? How fast are we going to tell our nation's leadership to get moving? How are we going to remind them that their first responsibility is to defend the orphan—that is, our nation's poorest and most vulnerable children, and to respond to the widow's cause—that is, the parents who are most impoverished, most lacking in community and economic supports? How much urgency and focus will we help our congregations bring to the pursuit of justice at this crucial time?

Victor

Maybe you remember the story in the news last October of Victor Perez, an immigrant here legally, a construction worker by trade but unemployed for three years who picked grapes to try to make ends meet for his family. On this fall day he was standing outside his house in Fresno, California, talking with his cousin about a recent Amber Alert for an 8-year-old girl who had been abducted. As they were standing there talking, he spotted a vehicle that looked like the one in the Amber Alert.

So Victor leapt into his own car and took off in pursuit, even though he was nervous that the abductor might have a weapon. Each time Victor pulled up to try to cut off the abductor's vehicle, the man driving protested "I don't have no time," and sped up to try to get away.

Victor later said, "The second time I reached him, the way he acted—yes, I was, for a split second I was nervous until I saw the little girl and all fear was out the window after that, I didn't have no fear. I wasn't thinking of me no more. I was just thinking we need to get that little girl to safety." He added, "I wasn't going to give up.... I couldn't give up." So Victor kept pursuing him.

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The driver was pushing the little girl down, trying to hide her. Victor said, "He kept getting away. He kept going round my truck. The last time I completely said, 'Either he crashes into me or he stops.' Finally, on his fourth attempt, Victor forced the vehicle to stop and the abductor shoved the child out. She was saved.

Afterward, the aptly named Victor humbly said, "I just felt like I was doing my part. ... I just felt like everybody should step up in their own communities and when something like this happens, come together and try to do your part to help out. And, you know," Victor concluded, "I just thank that God I was put in the right situation to do what I did. Thank the man above for that." ²

Amber Alert Time for Our Nation's Children

When a child is in absolute jeopardy, mortal danger, we put out an Amber Alert—we tell the whole community that we are in pursuit of the child and the one who is endangering her, it is a time of utmost urgency and everyone has to get involved, everyone is expected to be aware, to look out for the child, to do what they can to help rescue the child in danger.

This, my friends, is Amber Alert time for our nation's children. Everyone in our communities of faith needs to be on the lookout for the child, needs to help in the pursuit, to bring the child to safety, to see that justice is done. We need to protect children from cuts, invest in their development, and see that the rich and powerful contribute their fair share.

In an Amber Alert, the child's face, name, story, is plastered on telephone poles, on TV, and in the newspaper. In this Amber Alert time for our nation's children, we won't get to see the faces of 16.4 million children in poverty, or the millions without needed health care, or those without a spot in Head Start or child care, or the countless faces of children who go to bed hungry. We won't come to know their names or faces as intimately as we do when an Amber Alert goes out for a single child. But God knows each of their names, their faces, their stories. And God calls us to go in pursuit of justice on their behalf. How fast are we willing to go? Justice, only justice, shall you pursue. May it be so. Amen

¹ Etz Hayim; Torah and Commentary, The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2004, p. 1088-1089

² From reports "Samaritan Hero: God 'Put Me Here' to Rescue Girl" Oct 6, 2010 , AOL News, and "Victor Perez Hailed as Hero for Rescue of Abducted 8-Year-Old Calif. Girl" by Naimah Jabali-Nash, CBS News, October 8, 2010.

Sample Children's Sermon

Following is an example of how a special Time with Children during the Children's Sabbath service might introduce the concept of pursuing justice. Feel free to use, adapt, or create your own.

The Importance of Justice (Deut. 16:20)

(In advance, you can make posters with "Justice and only justice should you work hard for." The first one would have JUSTICE written in capitals both times; the second poster would have justice underlined. The third poster would have justice and you can highlight it with a highlighter pen as you talk with the children. Have a Bible with a bookmark at Deuteronomy 16:20.)

When a word in a book is really important, there are ways to make readers pay attention. You can write it in CAPITALS. You can underline it. Some people use highlighters to make important words stand out. Or you can repeat the word, use the same word twice to show how important it is.

In our Bible verse today, God uses the same word two times to show how important it is. Listen and tell me if you can hear the same word two times: "Justice, and only justice should you work hard for."

What word did I say two times? (*Justice.*)

Justice is so important to God, the word is used two times in one sentence. So what is justice and why does it matter so much to God? Why should it matter to us? Justice means making things fair especially for people who are having the hardest time because they are very young or very poor or others don't respect or care about them. Justice is so important to God, that in this Bible verse God's people are told to work hard for justice two times: it says, "Justice, and only justice, should you work hard for."

Today is Children's Sabbath and we are praying and talking and working together as a church for justice, to make things fair for children and families who are poor and to show we care. And we are going to keep working for justice all year long and even after that.

Let's have a prayer.

Dear God,

Thank you for caring about us and for caring about all children.

Help us to work together for justice, to make things fair for children and families that are having a hard time.

Amen.