



SECTION 5

Bahá'í Resources for the Children's Sabbath

This section provides suggestions for learning activities for children, youth and adults, devotional and fellowship activities for the Nineteen Day Feast for the Month of 'Ilm (Knowledge), selections from the Bahá'í Writings on the theme of this year's National Observance of Children's Sabbaths® celebration, and

resources for continuing the community's involvement in the themes of the Children's Sabbath beyond the event itself. Please utilize these as appropriate for your community. A brief Glossary is provided at the end of this section to acquaint the reader with terms that may be unfamiliar.

Suggestions for Observances and Related Activities

- **Feast of 'Ilm (Knowledge):** Because this Nineteen Day Feast falls within the timeframe of the national Children's Sabbaths observance, consider using the program described, and/or including the readings and prayers about faith in action reprinted in this section, for the devotional, consultative and fellowship portions of Feast. Include a diversity of readers, including children and youth. Consider inviting others to serve refreshments to the children and youth, and/or to those who work to fill the needs of children and youth, such as teachers, parents, grandparents, social workers and health care providers. During the administrative portion of Feast, encourage consultation about specific needs and hopes of children and youth in your community.
- **Devotional meetings:** Encourage community and individual devotional meetings during the Children's Sabbaths weekend to focus on the theme of "Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow, perhaps including some of the readings and prayers reprinted in this section. Consider inviting children and youth to be involved in planning and presenting a devotional meeting on the subject of creating a better world.
- **Children's and youth classes:** Encourage children's and youth classes in the community to utilize the materials in this manual for their participation in observing the Children's Sabbath.
- **Ongoing community learning through local study groups or weekend workshops:** Consider beginning study circles in your community that help develop strong, vibrant communities and families, in which children and youth can thrive. Many Bahá'í curricula support the themes of providing for the needs of children, creating a more just and prosperous world and developing nurturing communities. For a variety of educational resources, see www.ruhiresources.org and www.core-curriculum.org.
- **Encourage families in your community to subscribe to, and read together, *Brilliant Star*** (a magazine for children ages 6–12 that emphasizes character development), *Tabula Rasa* (a Bahá'í arts magazine) or *Bahá'í Parenting* (an electronic newsletter that supports spiritual parenting). For more information, visit www.brilliantstarmagazine.org, www.tabularasaarts.com, or www.bahaiparent.com.
- **Deepen your personal understanding about the principles of justice and peace by perusing the Bahá'í Writings** through books from the Bahá'í Distribution Service at www.BahaiBookstore.com/index.cfm or talks and web resources available at www.Bahai.us/Bahai-multimedia. Of special interest: the series *In Service to the Common Good*, prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in 2004, 2005 and 2006, with stories about effective service projects around the world. Download from www.Bahai.us/in-service-to-the-common-good or purchase from the Bahá'í Distribution Service (BDS).

Passages and Prayers from the Bahá'í Writings

Related to “Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow”

O CHILDREN OF DUST! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth. To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Persian No. 49

O YE RICH ONES ON EARTH! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Persian No. 54

They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor, for great is the honor destined by God for those poor who are steadfast in patience. By My life! There is no honor, except what God may please to bestow, that can compare to this honor. Great is the blessedness awaiting the poor that endure patiently and conceal their sufferings, and well is it with the rich who bestow their riches on the needy and prefer them before themselves.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 202

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 285

God has created all, and all return to God. Therefore, love humanity with all your heart and soul. If you meet a poor man, assist him; if you see the sick, heal him; reassure the affrighted one, render the cowardly noble and courageous, educate the ignorant, associate with the stranger.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 290

The fourth principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the readjustment and equalization of the economic standards of mankind. This deals with the question of human livelihood. It is evident that under present systems and conditions of government the poor are subject to the greatest need and distress while others more fortunate live in luxury and plenty far beyond their actual necessities. This inequality of portion and privilege is one of the deep and vital problems of human society. That there is need of an equalization and apportionment by which all may possess the comforts and privileges of life is evident. The remedy must be legislative readjustment of conditions. The rich too must be merciful to the poor, contributing from willing hearts to their needs without being forced or compelled to do so. The composure of the world will be assured by the establishment of this principle in the religious life of mankind.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107

What could be better before God than thinking of the poor? For the poor are beloved by our heavenly Father. When Christ came upon the earth, those who believed in Him and followed Him were the poor and lowly, showing that the poor were near to God. When a rich man believes and follows the Manifestation of God, it is a proof that his wealth is not an obstacle and does not prevent him from attaining the pathway of salvation. After he has been tested and tried, it will be seen whether his possessions are a hindrance in his religious life. But the poor are especially beloved of God. Their lives are full of difficulties, their trials continual, their hopes are in God alone. Therefore, you must assist the poor as much as possible, even by sacrifice of yourself. No deed of man is greater before God than helping the poor. Spiritual conditions are not dependent upon the possession of worldly treasures or the absence of

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them. When one is physically destitute, spiritual thoughts are more likely. Poverty is a stimulus toward God. Each one of you must have great consideration for the poor and render them assistance. Organize in an effort to help them and prevent increase of poverty. The greatest means for prevention is that whereby the laws of the community will be so framed and enacted that it will not be possible for a few to be millionaires and many destitute. One of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the adjustment of means of livelihood in human society. Under this adjustment there can be no extremes in human conditions as regards wealth and sustenance. For the community needs financier, farmer, merchant and laborer just as an army must be composed of commander, officers and privates. All cannot be commanders; all cannot be officers or privates. Each in his station in the social fabric must be competent—each in his function according to ability but with justness of opportunity for all.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 216

Soon will your swiftly-passing days be over, and the fame and riches, the comforts, the joys provided by this rubbish-heap, the world, will be gone without a trace. Summon ye, then, the people to God, and invite humanity to follow the example of the Company on high. Be ye loving fathers to the orphan, and a refuge to the helpless, and a treasury for the poor, and a cure for the ailing. Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged. Think ye at all times of rendering some service to every member of the human race.... Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 1-3

As to the difference between that material civilization now prevailing, and the divine civilization which will be one of the benefits to derive from the House of Justice, it is this: material civilization, through the power of punitive and retaliatory laws, restraineth the people from criminal acts; and notwithstanding this, while laws to retaliate against and punish a man are continually proliferating, as ye can see, no laws exist to reward him. In all the cities of Europe and America, vast buildings have been erected to serve as jails for the criminals.

Divine civilization, however, so traineth every member of society that no one, with the exception of a negligible few, will undertake to commit a crime. There is thus a great difference between the prevention of crime through measures that are violent and retaliatory, and so training the people, and enlightening them, and spiritualizing them, that without any fear of punishment or vengeance to come, they will shun all criminal acts. They will, indeed, look upon the very commission of a crime as a great disgrace and in itself the harshest of punishments. They will become enamored of human perfections, and will consecrate their lives to whatever will bring light to the world and will further those qualities which are acceptable at the Holy Threshold of God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 132

Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, the manner of treating them, the quality of the attention shown them, the spirit of adult behavior toward them – these are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude. Love demands discipline, the courage to accustom children to hardship, not to indulge their whims or leave them entirely to their own devices. An atmosphere needs to be maintained in which children feel that they belong to the community and share in its purpose.

Ridván Messages of the Universal House of Justice, Ridván 157, 2000, p. 8

FEAST of 'ILM (Knowledge) Children's Sabbath Program

(The Nineteen Day Feast is the principal gathering in each local Bahá'í community, every Bahá'í month, for the three-fold purpose of worship, consultation, and fellowship.)

This activity may also be used at other community gatherings.)

Preparation

- Prepare an environment that warmly welcomes friends of all ages. Consider adding color, through flowers or artwork; create inviting, comfortable areas and surfaces on which all ages can sit, including on the floor, with pillows and throws. As the friends enter, have cheerful music playing, such as melodies from different cultures or children's songs.
- In advance, make several photocopies of the previous pages, "Passages and Prayers from the Bahá'í Writings Related to Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow."
- See "Fellowship Portion" on the following page for suggestions of refreshments tied to the theme, as well as stories and games to prepare.

Devotional Portion

- Lovingly introduce the theme of the evening/day's devotions: Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow. Invite readers to intone selections from the photocopied "Passages and Prayers."
- Consider using music to help set the tone, such as: "It Takes a Village," *It Takes a Village*, Joe Crone; "Care for the Stranger," "O God! Educate these Children," *Immerse Yourself, Prayers and Writings for the Young at Heart*, Joe Crone; "Behold a Candle," *Lift Up Your Voices and Sing, vol.1*

Consultative Portion

- Open the consultative portion of Feast (or other gathering) by reading aloud the last selection of "Passages and Prayers from the Bahá'í Writings," from the Universal House of Justice.
- Introduce the theme and purpose of the Children's Sabbath and suggest that consultation be centered on the needs of our children and youths and how we may respond, creating change for children today in our daily

acts of justice and compassion for the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed. How can our Bahá'í communities create an atmosphere in which children, "our most precious treasure," feel that they belong and share in its purpose, and thus ensure the character of our future society?

- Refer to "Suggestions for the Observances and Related Activities" for ideas and possible action steps or tools your community may wish to pursue after identifying issues.
- Divide into three multi-age consultation groups to address some of the issues facing children and youths and how we might respond:
 - Give each group several copies of The Bahá'í International Community's Statement on Poverty — *Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One*, with discussion questions.
 - Give each group several copies of **one** section from the "Children's Concerns Primer" (Section 2, Children's Sabbath Manual, Volume 18):
 - A Child Poverty Primer
 - A Children's Health Coverage Primer
 - A Pipeline to Prison Primer
- Ask each group to read these documents aloud together, consider the discussion questions, and appoint someone to record their findings and suggestions. Allow groups about 30 minutes to read and consult before returning to the large group for sharing ideas.
- Ask each group's spokesperson to summarize the issue they studied and the results of their consultation.
- Together, plan action steps that can be completed in three to six months. Decide how progress will be evaluated, and who will communicate needs and encouragement to others. Celebrate your collective dedication to our children and youths!

Fellowship Portion

■ Refreshments:

- Consider making a “friendship soup” or “friendship salad,” with many diverse vegetables or fruits representing how we each bring a special sweetness and flavor to the community. If possible, ask each person or family to bring one ingredient – these can be added to the simmering soup pot, or to the salad bowl, or salad bar, as each arrives.
- Play a cooperative game such as “Hidden Treasures” from *Brilliant Star* Nov/Dec 2008.
- Invite a Bahá'í Youth Workshop dance group to perform the “Poverty Dance” or another performance arts piece about overcoming social injustice.

■ Activities:

- Read or tell the folktale, *Stone Soup*, prior to serving the “friendship soup” or “friendship salad.” You may ask your children's librarian for a copy of this Swedish folktale.

Lesson Plans are available online at www.childrensdefense.org.

Glossary of some Bahá'í terms:

'Abdu'l-Bahá: (1844–1921) Son of Bahá'u'lláh, designated His successor and authorized interpreter of His writings. Named Abbas after His grandfather, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was known to the general public as Abbas Effendi. Bahá'u'lláh gave Him such titles as “the Most Great Branch,” “the Mystery of God,” and “the Master.” After Bahá'u'lláh's passing, He chose the name 'Abdu'l-Bahá, meaning “Servant of Bahá'u'lláh.” 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the United States, on an extensive speaking tour, in 1912.

Báb, the: The title, meaning “Gate,” assumed by Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad, who was the Prophet-Founder of the Bábi Faith and the Forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh. Born 20 October 1819, the Báb proclaimed Himself to be the Promised One of Islam and announced that His mission was to alert the people to the imminent advent of “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” namely, Bahá'u'lláh. Because of these claims, the Báb was executed by order of Náziri'd-Dín Shah on 9 July 1850.

Bahá'í Writings: The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá constitute Bahá'í Sacred Scripture.

Bahá'u'lláh: Title assumed by Mírzá Husayn-Ali, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Born on 12 November 1817, He declared His mission as the Promised One of all Ages in April 1863 and passed away in

Akka, Palestine, on 29 May 1892 after 40 years of imprisonment, banishment, and house arrest. Bahá'u'lláh's writings are considered by Bahá'ís to be direct revelation from God.

Local Spiritual Assembly: The local administrative body in the Bahá'í Faith, ordained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The nine members are directly elected by secret ballot each year at Ridvan from among the adult believers in a community.

Nineteen Day Feast: The principal gathering in each local Bahá'í community, every Bahá'í month, for the threefold purpose of worship, consultation, and fellowship. The Bahá'í calendar is composed of nineteen months of nineteen days each. The names of the months are attributes of God, such as Glory, Mercy, Knowledge, etc. The months are referred to by both their Arabic names and the English translation.

Social and Economic Development (SED)

Project: An initiative designed to upraise the quality of human life. For Bahá'ís, this involves efforts to develop the capacity of the community to address its own needs and ensure the well-being of all its members through the application of spiritual principles including education, consultation, and reflection.





SECTION 6

Christian 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. The Children's Sabbath should not be turned over to the children with adults serving only 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.
- **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, Revised Common, and Roman Catholic lectionaries, as well as sermon notes on another text for those not bound by the lectionary, and two sample children's sermons.

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>.)
- **The week before the Children's Sabbath, distribute copies of the Seven-Day Guide for Reflection and Prayer** on pages 61–66 in this resource 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 beginning** on pages 55–56. 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 or Head Start staff, administrators, parents, and children**, and others to attend your Children's Sabbath.
- **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.** **Living Waters Sanctuary in Virginia Beach, Virginia**, put the tender and captivating photo of an infant on its bulletin cover along with the question, "When will we hear Dr. King's call to end poverty in America?" **All Saints Parish in Brookline, Massachusetts**, used the materials for Episcopal liturgies from the Children's Sabbaths resource manual. On their bulletin cover, they noted, "On this Children's Sabbath we reflect on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to build and be the Beloved Community where all people— young and old—can live out their God-given potential," which helped orient worshippers to the day's special focus.
- **On the Children's Sabbath, distribute the children's activity bulletins** in 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 creating change for children to bring hope and a better tomorrow, especially as it relates to alleviating child poverty, ensuring children have health care, and putting children on paths of promise.
- **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 and child advocacy.
- **Focus the sermon or homily on children and our responsibility to act on their behalf.** 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 beginning on page 88. There are also sermon notes on other especially suitable texts for those who don't preach from the lectionary cycle. Other sections of this resource 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. A guest speaker who is the director of community outreach for Franklin County Children's Services addressed the Children's Sabbath at **Crossroads United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio**. **First United Methodist Church of Dayton, Ohio**, invited the executive director of the United Methodist Children's Home to serve as the morning speaker. In **Livingston, Montana, Holbrook United Methodist Church's** Children's Sabbath featured two guest speakers who were directors of two after-school programs.

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

- **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 on pages 98–99. 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 on page 87.
- **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.
- **Honor people who are creating change for children and bringing hope and a better tomorrow through their work with and for children.** 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 toothbrushes and children’s toothpaste, nutritious food, or diapers. Announce the special offering in advance. **Good Shepherd + St. Mark’s, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church, in Madras, Oregon**, 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 organization serving or working on behalf of children. The **First United Methodist Church of Bella Vista, Arkansas, and Christ Church United Methodist Women in New York, New York**, and others made donations to the Children’s Defense Fund.

- **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.
- **Include a dramatic presentation** to especially engage children and young people, as well as adults.

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, Massachusetts**, 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, Massachusetts.... 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.”

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

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, Pennsylvania**, 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.
- **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 us 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.**

First Presbyterian Church of Glen Cove, New York, a congregation of about 80, celebrated its seventh Children's Sabbath with worship that was led almost entirely by youths. The sermon focused on justice issues for children and the congregation hosted the Choir of St. Dunstan's College, England, comprised of 36 youths, for a free concert open to the community.

- **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.
- **Read prayers and scriptural passages** and lead responsive readings.
- **Write a prayer** to be used in the service.
- **Deliver the sermon** or other presentation.
- **Prepare a dramatic skit for the service.** The middle school children of **Cross Lanes United Methodist Church in Cross Lanes, West Virginia**, 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.**

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 who 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.

Worship Resources

Following are 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 in this resource manual to see if any would be appropriate for your service.

Call to Worship

“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We come here seeking change; we come here, each of us a child of God, to recognize our dependence on God.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not just me but the one who sent me.”

We come here to welcome the children everywhere in God's name.

“Beloved, we are God's children now.”

We come here as children of God, secure in God's love, urged to work for God's justice, bound in one family to care for one another.

Come, let us worship the God on whom we rely, the God who bids us to welcome the children, the God who claims us all as God's children. **Amen.**

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

Call to Worship (based on Jeremiah 31:15-17)

Child 1: Every day in our nation, more than 2,500 babies are born into poverty.

Child 2: Every day in our nation, more than 2,400 children are abused or neglected.

Child 3: Every day in our nation, 2,224 babies are born without health insurance.

Child 4: Every day in our nation, more than 75 babies die before their first birthday.

Child 5: Every day in our nation, 4,520 children are arrested.

Leader: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

People: We come together with hearts that weep for our nation's children.

Leader: “Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears: For there is reward for your work, says the Lord.”

People: We come together to be moved from weeping to hear the promise of the work we can do.

Leader: “[The children] shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: Your children shall come back to their own country.”

People: We come together to glimpse your vision of homecoming that would bring our nation's children from an experience of need to one of safety, plenty, and love.

Unison: Be with us in our worship and our work, O God. Prepare us by the power of your spirit that we may commit our hearts and hands and minds to realizing your vision of homecoming for the children of our nation. Amen.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

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.

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

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.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

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 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.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

Assurance of Pardon

Beloved, we are God's children now. Hear and believe the good news: **In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Amen.**

Readings on the theme, "Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow"

Creating Change

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

(*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*)

Today

Su Nombre es Hoy (His Name is Today)

"We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the

fountain of life. Many of the 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 him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow,' his name is Today."

(By Gabriela Mistral)

*Hope and a Better Tomorrow*¹

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true and beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

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.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

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)

Prayers for Change and Hope

Lord, please let our small mustard seeds of daily service grow into great shrubs of change and trees in whose branches the birds can nest and in whose shade our children can rest and feel safe. Amen.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

¹ By Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 1952. Reprinted with permission by the Estate of Reinhold Niebuhr.

O God, take our tiny acorns of service and turn them into towering oak trees of hope. Amen.

(By Marian Wright Edelman)

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)

To Trust in God, the Giver of Justice²

An Affirmation of Faith based on Psalm 146

One: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

All: **I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to God all my life long!**

One: Do not put your trust in princes or in mortals in whom there is not help; when their breath departs they return to the earth and their plans perish.

All: **We will trust in God who is our Creator and who is the source of our help!**

One: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord who made heaven and earth, who keeps faith forever.

All: **We will trust in God who is the source of our faith and who calls us to live into hope!**

One: It is God who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry and who sets the prisoners free.

All: **We will trust in God the giver of justice who calls us to do justice!**

One: It is the Lord who opens the eyes of the blind, who lifts up those who are bowed down and heavy burdened.

All: **We will trust the Lord who heals and who calls us to be healers!**

One: It is the Lord who watches over the stranger in the land, who upholds the orphan, the widow, and the outcast.

All: **We will trust the Lord of compassion who calls us to empower the powerless and show loving-kindness to the outcasts!**

One: The Lord will reign forever; the justice of God shall be for all people and unto all generations.

All: **Praise the Lord, the giver of justice, the source of our faith, the sustainer of our hope, the Spirit of loving-kindness. Thanks be to God! Amen!**

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.

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.

² "To Trust in God the Giver of Justice" reproduced from *Prayers for the New Social Awakening*, edited by Christian Iosso and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, ©2008 Geneva Press. Used by permission of Geneva Press.

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

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.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

Charge and Blessing, version 1

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.

Charge and Blessing, version 2

Go forth to create change in the world for children made in the image of our Creator;
Go forth to bring hope to children in the name of the Christ who brought them to him for blessing;
Go forth to work for a better tomorrow, empowered by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus called our "Advocate."

Now may the blessing of the Creator, the Christ, and the Advocate be with you and every child of God this day and ever more. Amen.

(By Shannon Daley-Harris)

Charge

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12:9-18, 21)

Blessing

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Romans 15:13)

The World Methodist Social Affirmation

We believe in God, creator of the world and of all people; and in Jesus Christ, incarnate among us, who died and rose again; and in the Holy Spirit, present with us to guide, strengthen, and comfort.

We believe;

God, help our unbelief.

We rejoice in every sign of God's kingdom:
in the upholding of human dignity and community;
in every expression of love, justice, and reconciliation;
in each act of self-giving on behalf of others;
in the abundance of God's gifts entrusted to us that all may have enough;
in all responsible use of the earth's resources.

Glory be to God on high;

And on earth, peace.

We confess our sin, individual and collective, by silence or action;

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

through the violation of human dignity
based on race, class, age, sex, nation, or faith;
through the exploitation of people
because of greed and indifference;
through the misuse of power
in personal, communal, national, and international life;
through the search for security
by those military and economic forces
that threaten human existence
through the abuse of technology
which endangers the earth and all life upon it.

Lord, have mercy;

Christ, have mercy;

Lord, have mercy.

We commit ourselves individually and as a community
to the way of Christ;
to take up the cross;
to seek abundant life for all humanity;
to struggle for peace with justice and freedom;
to risk ourselves in faith, hope, and love,
praying that God's kingdom may come.

Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

For Children

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.
(From the *Book of Common Worship*)

God's Power Shown³

Leader: Out of love comes celebration

All: And God's kingdom is among us:

Men: Where peace is the means of making us one,

Women: Where truth does not stumble and justice is done.

Leader: Out of change comes possibility

All: And God's new creation is begun:

Men: Promise of splendor and signal of worth,
Women: Source of all goodness, renewing the earth.

Leader: Out of freedom comes responsibility

All: And God calls us to discipleship:

Men: In our compassion, making love known,

Women: In our conviction, God's power shown.

Leader: You did not choose me; I chose you.

All: This, then, is what I command you: Love one another.

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 celebrate the sacred gift of children and our solemn responsibility to nurture and protect them—not just those born into our family or here in our parish, but all children, God's beloved. In the words of His Holiness Benedict XVI, "The Creator assumed the dimensions of a child in Jesus, of a human being like us, to make himself visible and tangible. At the same time, by making himself small, God caused the light of his greatness to shine. For precisely by lowering himself to the point of defenseless vulnerability of love, he shows what his true greatness is indeed, what it means to be God."⁴ We cannot be God, but we can show our greatness through our love for children. 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."

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.

³ Kathy Galloway ©2001, taken from the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, The Iona Community, Glasgow, www.ionabooks.com.

⁴ Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, January 11, 2009, Mass in the Sistine Chapel and Administration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

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.

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

Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

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.

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, lack of health care, and the grim prospect of prison rather than paths of promise, that we create change for children today so they may know hope and a better tomorrow, 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.

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 the 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)

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ who came to bring good news to the poor, healed the sick, proclaimed release to the captives and welcomed the children, you have revealed your intention for our life in community to be marked by justice, compassion, and inclusion. Prosper now the work of our hands that we may faithfully serve you by creating the change you desire for the least of our brothers and sisters; through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

People: Amen.

Option 2 (Episcopal rubric):

With all our heart and with all our mind, let us pray to the Lord, saying, "Lord, you are our hope."

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, you are our hope.

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, you are our hope.

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 create change and bring hope and a better tomorrow, we pray to the Lord,
Lord, you are our hope.

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, you are our hope.

On this Children's Sabbath day, for our nation's more than 13 million children in poverty, the nine million children without health coverage, and the countless children in a pipeline to prison instead of on a path of promise, that we help usher in a better tomorrow, we pray to the Lord,
Lord, you are our hope.

For all who have died, especially those who died too soon and too young, those whose lives were cut short by poverty, lack of health care, and a deadly and dead-end culture, we pray to the Lord,
Lord, you are our hope.

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, hope of the world and herald of a better tomorrow, to bring good news to the poor and to bless the 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 embraces all and exclude none, and you show special concern for those oppressed by want, war, and hate.

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.

Affirmation of Faith⁵

God has not taken the covenant 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.

⁵ From *A Declaration of Faith* (alt.), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

Music Suggestions

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
For the Beauty of the Earth
Gather Us In
God of the Sparrow
God Whose Love Is Reigning o'er Us
God Is Here
How Can We Name a Love
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise
Lift Every Voice and Sing
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
God Whose Giving Knows No Ending
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
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
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 put our faith into action by loving and protecting children.

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.

Of course, countless other biblical passages also illuminate our call to nurture and protect every child. For those who do not follow a lectionary, there is a reflection on Jeremiah 31:15–17 starting on page 93. Reflections in the Daily Devotional Guide beginning on page 61 may also spark sermons on other texts.

Two sample Children's Sermons follow these sermon resources. Use or adapt one for use with children of the congregation in a special conversation or "time with children," or create your own.

Sermon Notes

Sermon Notes on the Lectionary Texts

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

Job 38: 1–7 (34–41)

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

Psalm 91:9–16

Hebrews 5:1–10

Mark 10:35–45

These lectionary texts designated for the Sunday on which Children's Sabbath falls and its focus on creating change for children in poverty, without health coverage, and in the pipeline to prison presents 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 understanding of what the “right” answer to the question of suffering is, in part because God affirms that Job has spoken rightly (42:7) and events turn out as the friends predicted. Notes Carol Newsome:

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

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

Job gives voice to all of us who wonder about suffering in our world, all who wonder why, in the well-worn words, bad things happen to good people. When children suffer, especially, we are driven to ask with Job, why, why, why? How can one who is innocent, defenseless, vulnerable be burdened with such suffering? How can nine million

children be without health coverage and unable to see a doctor when they are sick or injured? How can 13.3 million live in poverty in the richest nation on earth? How can a Black boy born in 2001, who is just eight years old now, already face a one in three chance of imprisonment in his lifetime, or his Latino age-mate face one in six odds of imprisonment? How can this be? Where is God in all of this suffering?

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

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

Isaiah 53:4–12

Location

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

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

In our passage, which traditionally serves as the Old Testament reading for Good Friday, we encounter a portion of the fourth Servant Song that captures the major themes of the whole. One commentary notes, “1) The basic message is stated at the outset and reiterated in the conclusion (53:12a): God will vindicate and exalt

⁶The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV: 1&2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms, p. 637.

his Suffering Servant. That point, not only in the original context but in all others, is a reversal of expectations, including those of the disciples in Mark 10:43–45. God's power and authority are manifested in weakness; God acts through one whose suffering made him repulsive to all who saw him. 2) We are asked to identify with the life of the innocent sufferer, recounted here from youth (53:2) through a trial and death (53:7–8). 3) The servant's life of suffering and humiliation is both vicarious and efficacious. It is on behalf of others, and it effectively removes their sin (53:6, 8, 12). 4) Not only will the servant be vindicated before the whole world, but also his suffering is on behalf of the transgressions of all ("the many," 53:12).⁷

Turning Things Upside Down: Reversal of Expectations

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

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

Identifying with the Innocent Sufferer

Many children and youths might well identify with the experience of the suffering servant. Too many of our children are trying to take root and grow in the dry ground of poverty, dangerous, substandard housing, unsafe neighborhoods and schools, abuse and neglect, and lack of health care and mental health care. Struggling just to survive rather than thrive, too many of our children have no outward "form or majesty;" our casual glance sees

not a child of God but a scrawny kid, a sickly or wheezing teenager, a baby dulled forever by lead poisoning, a child tormented by depression or other untreated mental illness. Too many of our children and youths are despised and rejected, feel society's contempt and rejection that allows it to accept poverty as their lot, to observe preventable illness and deprivation without taking action, to assume prison as an acceptable outcome for so many. Far, far too many of our children have suffered and are acquainted with illness and infirmity. If you look at the plight of 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 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

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

every day, the pipeline to prison acquaints too many children with the evil of poverty, of low academic expectations and high dropout rates, of abuse and neglect, of racism, of violence that surrounds them in their neighborhoods, in the culture, in the most prevalent role models.

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

Hebrews 5:1–10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark 10:35–45

Location

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

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

Theme of Suffering

James and John are looking for glory and good times, and Jesus asks them if they are prepared to drink the cup that

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

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

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

Theme of Servant Leadership

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

The disciples were as susceptible as most of us are to being influenced by conventional notions of status, standing, honor, and power. That's why angling for the best seats

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

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

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

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

Mother Teresa, who embodied servant leadership and greatness through service, once said, "Prayer in action is

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

The service we are called to is not only to reach out with a touch of love, but also to change the structures and systems that are hurting and failing children. When children are the poorest group of Americans, when 13.3 million children are poor, there is a need for change to our nation's structures and systems. When one out of every nine children, nine 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.

Sermon Notes for Jeremiah 31:15–17, For Those Not Following a Lectionary

For those who don't follow a lectionary, the following sermon notes suggest how one might link this year's theme to Jeremiah 31:15–17. One appropriate New Testament text to accompany the reading from Jeremiah is Matthew 2:13–18.

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

*Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for **there is a reward for your work, says the Lord; they shall come back from the land of the enemy; There is hope for your future, says the Lord; your children shall come back to their own country.*** (Jeremiah 31:15–17)

Location

This passage is part of the poetic and prose oracles that make up the so-called “Book of Consolation” beginning in Jeremiah 30:1 and concluding in 31:40. The focus on the Book of Consolation is the future restoration of Israel and Judah. While the date and authorship of all of the material here is uncertain, many believe that our passage (31:15–17) is authentic to Jeremiah and was most likely written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Before the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah writes with dire warning. When it is too late to avert the disaster, the tone finally turns to one of hope. Writes R.E. Clements in *Jeremiah*, “The message of hope set out most strikingly in chapters 30–33 now forms the pivotal center for the entire book. Until the time Jeremiah received this word of hope while Jerusalem was under siege for the second time his message had predominantly been one of warning and threat. Then when disaster had become inevitable, Jeremiah held out the word of assurance and hope from God concerning a new beginning for Israel.”⁹

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

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

The consolation that Jeremiah offers is communicated, in part, through his prophecy of salvation. The “Prophecy of Salvation,” according to the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, “contains the following parts: the appeal for attention and/or the introductory messenger formula (e.g., ‘Thus says the Lord’), the description of the present situation, the prediction of salvation, a final characterization of either God or of the message, and the concluding messenger formula (‘says the Lord’).”¹⁰

The Rachel in this passage is the matriarch of Israel, preferred wife of Jacob, mother of Joseph and Benjamin, whose story we read in Genesis 35:16–20. Patrick D. Miller, in “Jeremiah” in *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VI*, comments, “The passage presents a series of rich and poignant images of familial relationships. They begin with the inconsolable weeping of Mother Rachel for her children. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. The extremity of Israel’s condition is sharply depicted in this picture of the ancestral mother, disconsolate because of the destruction of her children. The setting of Rachel’s weeping in Ramah is probably to be connected to that town as the place from which the Judeans were taken into exile (40:1) The reason for such bitter and uncontrollable maternal weeping is clear: ‘They are not.’ (v. 15) Here that punishment is seen through the eyes of the mother whose children are being punished.”¹¹ The *Harper Collins Study Bible* suggests simply, “The dead Rachel is heard weeping over her children, who were either killed or deported.”

It should be noted that we will hear again of Rachel, in Matthew 2:16–18, when this passage is recalled after Herod’s order to slaughter the children in and around Bethlehem in his fury at the wise men enabling Mary and Joseph to flee to safety with the baby Jesus.

How are we to understand the hopeful future in which the children are restored that Jeremiah prophesies? *The Women’s Bible Commentary* reflects on preceding verses in Chapter 31 that describe “the return”: “The transformed society imagined in these poems provides a social vision that includes everyone not only in worship but also at the banquet of material life....The society will satisfy the basic human needs of all, and it will be characterized by justice, harmony, and peace.” Turning to the verses in 31:15–22,

the commentary continues, “In another poem announcing the return, the comforting of Rachel, mother of Israel, symbolizes that new society (31:15–22).”¹²

Theological Themes

God hears

God hears the weeping of Rachel for her children, lost and in exile, and promises that there will be a reward for her work and that her children will come back to their own country. Here, God hears the cries of a grief-stricken parent, but urges a movement from weeping to work in trust that the children will come home. The passage in Jeremiah is just one of many passages that underscore God’s attentive hearing. Throughout scripture, we are assured that God hears us in our need, when we are in painful, unjust circumstances that demand change right now.

In Genesis, God hears the cry of the child Ishmael when he’s forced into the wilderness with his despairing mother, abandoned, and given up for dead.

In Exodus we read that God says “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their task masters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of the land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:7–8a) There, God hears the cry of an entire people oppressed and mistreated, exploited economically and trapped in desperate circumstances.

Jesus hears the loud cries of the blinded, in Mark identified as Bartimaeus, who refuses to be hushed despite the disapproval of others who don’t share his circumstances. He is undaunted as he seeks healing for himself with hope and determination.... Jesus hears and, unlike the bystanders criticizing Bartimaeus for his loud cries, responds with compassion. (Mk. 10:46-52; Mt. 20:29-34; Lk 18:35-43) God hears the cries of an individual seeking help for oneself.

Yes, God hears. The cries that God hears come from different places: parents, children, entire communities, and individuals with their own needs.

¹⁰ *Harper Collins Study Bible*, p. 1169.

¹¹ “Jeremiah” by Patrick Miller in *New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

¹² *Women’s Bible Commentary Expanded Edition*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, p. 185.

God calls us to work that will create change for children.

While God hears our grief and pain at circumstances of injustice that demand change, God's response is to call on God's people to create the change that is needed. It is not enough to cry out and be heard. Rachel is told that the change will come as a reward for her work.

God responds to hearing the child Ishmael's cry and saves him by working through the mother: God offers concern, calls for courage, and prompts her to take the life-saving action: "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand." When the mother has no longer given up in despair but is taking action, her eyes are open to life-saving resources she hadn't known before were available. God hears the cries of our children even as God urges us to be bold and lift the child up and look again for resources for rescue we hadn't seen before.

God's deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh takes place through Moses and the others sent to challenge the political leadership of his day. God hears the cries of oppressed communities and uses us—despite our sense of inadequacy—to challenge systems, structures, and leaders who seem entrenched. God sends us to challenge even those structures that at one time met our individual needs at the expense of others—just as Moses, one-time child of the palace, challenged that system of privilege for the few at the expense of the many.

Bartimaeus finds relief because he persisted in demanding help for himself even when others would hush him.

So God not only hears but, importantly, God's response to hearing our cries is to *call us to work that will create the change that is needed*; we are called as parents, as people in privileged circumstances, as future leaders who don't even recognize our potential to create change, as mothers, as individuals in difficult circumstances.

God's love is the source of our hope; we can trust in God's promises.

We are summoned out of grief to this work with a promise to sustain us in that difficult calling. The promise isn't vague or other worldly but concrete and in many instances embodied in the very real well-being of our children. The promise to Rachel is that the children will come back to their own country; that is the "hope for your future."

The hopeful future that is promised is one in which justice is restored, compassion is practiced, and the community has rededicated itself to living in right relationship with God and with each other.

The child Ishmael is promised that God will make of him a great nation, and "God was with the boy, and he grew up..." (Gen. 21:20a) The Israelites are promised God's covenantal love, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." (Ex. 6:7a), that will be expressed in freedom, deliverance, redemption, and a promised land of abundance. Bartimaeus' future begins right away; "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." (Mark 10:52b) For Bartimaeus, following Jesus became his hopeful, promised new life.

We don't arrive at this hopeful future alone or by dint of our own efforts alone; we reach a better tomorrow because we are accompanied by God who is with us and our children, who takes us as God's people, who allows us to follow Christ on the way.

Preaching the Lesson

The passage from Jeremiah offers a useful progression: the problems that make us weep for our children; the work we are to do to create a just world in which all children are safe and can thrive; and the hope for our future—that our children will be restored to their families, communities, and a nation that protect and seek justice for them, and that we all will be the better for it. A Children's Sabbath sermon on Jeremiah 31:15–17 might explore the questions: "Whose weeping does God hear today?"; "what is the work God expects of us to create change for children?"; and "what is God's promise to us and to our children for a better tomorrow?"

Whose weeping does God hear today?

God hears the grief of our nation's 13.3 million children living in poverty, cut off from the abundance that most of the nation enjoys, exiled in schools many of us would never dream of sending our children to, left in substandard child care when their hard-working parents can't find good quality care available that they can afford.

God hears the grief of our nation's nine million children without health coverage, and the parents who suffer to witness their needless suffering.

God hears the grief of children lost to the pipeline to prison and the families who mourn their exile there.

Note:

The profiles of children in Section 2 of this resource manual may help you put a real face of a child in your sermon. Perhaps there are other stories of particular children that you would share as you describe the children for whom God and we weep.

In Jeremiah, God hears the weeping of Rachel for her children lost and in exile, and promises that there will be a reward for her work and that her children will come back to their own country.

Comments Patrick D. Miller in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI*, "Rachel's weeping is over the lost children regardless of who is ultimately responsible. But it may be that the ambiguity around the question of responsibility for the terror—tyrannical king or wrathful deity—is what has held the image of Rachel's weeping so powerfully in the tradition, enabling it to be recalled in the face of the terror and destruction of the Holocaust and in the depiction of the plight of the homeless. [Walter Brueggemann writes:

Mother Rachel in Ramah, moreover, is not grudging with her tears. She will weep for all her children. The warehoused ones in New York City are present, then, with the baby at Bethlehem, and with the exiles in Babylon, and with the lost boy in Genesis. On the horizon of mother Rachel, all are the same, all her abused, destroyed children who must be grieved in perpetuity. And [Jonathan] Kozol, in an act of courageous imagination, shows us [in his book on homelessness titled *Rachel and Her Children*] that our policy on homelessness is indeed a 'final solution,' a betrayal of a beloved city, a city completely dissolved in tears."

(NIB, Vol. VI, p. 815)

Today, above the grinding noise of cement mixers and pounding hammers building new prison cells for Black and Latino sons, God hears the weeping of our mothers and others, but promises us that with our work to dismantle the pipeline there can be a reward and our children can make it back home.

So too today, God hears the cries of entire communities oppressed by poverty, lack of jobs or health care, racism, and anti-immigrant prejudice, even as God sends us to confront the powers and principalities and find a way through the wilderness so that all the people might know a promised land of plenty and justice.

In Matthew, Jesus hears the loud cries of blind Bartimaeus who refuses to be hushed as he seeks healing and a hopeful future for himself—noisy, persistent, won't be hushed, active faith, and Jesus hears and responds. When we ourselves are sitting on the sidelines out of resources; when we feel like we are in the dark and just can't see the way

ahead, if we would but call on God with fervent, won't be hushed faith, asking for God to grant us vision, by our faith and God's grace our eyes will be opened, and we will see fresh vistas and the way ahead to the glory of God.

Yes, God hears. The cries that God hears come from different places: children, entire communities, mothers, and individuals with their own needs; and yet, God's response is consistent: calling *us* to respond to the suffering and injustice that God has heard.

What is the work that God expects of us to create change for our children that will usher in God's promise of hope and a better tomorrow?

While there is much that has and should bring us to tears about the plight of children in our nation today, there is hope for a better tomorrow if we heed God's call to move from weeping to work.

True, 13.3 million children in our rich nation are living in poverty, but we know what to do to bring a better tomorrow. Children can't move out of poverty on their own, but there are effective ways that we as a nation can lift children and their families out of poverty or at least protect them from poverty's worst effects. We know what works. Programs that reduce poverty by providing cash or near-cash assistance—such as the Food Stamp Program, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, and the Earned Income Tax Credit—can ease child poverty for millions of children. Government benefits (federal and state) lifted almost one of every three otherwise-poor children above the poverty line in 2003. Still, no child deserves to live in poverty, so there is more work to be done so that every family has the job training, living wage, health care, child care, and other supports they need to keep children out of poverty and ready to thrive.

Nine million children may lack health coverage today, but we have the real opportunity to ensure that every child in our nation has health coverage this year if we join our voices to demand justice and compassion. There's no mystery: Children need regular health care for their developing minds and bodies. They need timely treatment for illness and injury. By doing the right and decent thing, we not only will build stronger, healthier children—the most important reason for acting—but also ensure a healthy, productive workforce. We know that children with health coverage are healthier and do better in school. Imagine the better tomorrow when every child has the benefit of health coverage and a shot at good health.

Christian Resources for the Children's Sabbath

The statistics tell us that a Black boy born in 2001—just eight years old today—faces a one in three risk of imprisonment in his lifetime. That is true from the data we have in hand today. But we can change the odds. We can work to provide a better tomorrow for those boys and for us all. What is currently painting such a grim picture for those young boys? Poverty, lack of health and mental health care, abuse and neglect, failing schools, dangerous neighborhoods. But we know how to address and solve those problems; we know what works. Geoff Canada's Harlem Children's Zone is taking children out of the pipeline to prison and putting children on paths of promise. CDF Freedom Schools® sites have welcomed children who might have traveled through the pipeline to prison, touching the lives of more than 70,000 children since the program began in 1992 with caring college-age student leaders, reading and other enrichment, parent involvement, and community-building skills and experiences. Head Start programs have demonstrated that investing in early childhood development saves us financial and human costs, as Head Start graduates do better in school and are more likely to stay out of trouble. Innovative schools like the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academy in 19 states and the District of Columbia and the Seed Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., have shown how innovation, high expectations, excellent teaching, and comprehensive support can fill graduation stages instead of prison cells with Black, Latino, poor and at-risk students.

We are called to this hard but hopeful work because we have been assured that God hears us, God calls us to this work, and God has promised to be with us as we work for



a better tomorrow—God is with our children as they grow, God is with our nation as we struggle to move from oppression to a land of promise and plenty for all, God is with us as we open our eyes and determine to follow Christ on the way.

Sample Children's Sermon #1

“God's Stories, Our Stories”

If possible, find an illustrated Children's Bible that has pictures of the stories mentioned below and bookmark the appropriate pages, or search the Internet for appropriate biblical images and print out the pages.

Show the illustrations as you mention the stories.

Today is Children's Sabbath, a special weekend to celebrate how wonderful children are, but also a time to remember children who have big problems, like not enough money for food or homes or doctor visits, and a time to learn and pray and talk about how God wants us to make all children's lives better.

In the Bible, there are lots of stories about children and families who are having a tough time and about the people who try hard to help families and keep children safe.

When Jesus himself was a baby, his parents had to work hard to find a safe place where King Herod wouldn't hurt him. King Herod was worried that when baby Jesus grew up, he would change things and King Herod wouldn't be in charge any more. The wise men decided not to tell King Herod where baby Jesus was, even though King Herod would be mad—that was brave of them to do the right thing even when it was hard to do! When baby Jesus' parents learned that King Herod was looking for baby Jesus, they took him to a far-away place where they knew their baby would be safe. They were brave and loving and very determined to keep their baby safe. And you know what? When Jesus grew up, he did change things! His friends learned that following God is more important than following the King.

Long before baby Jesus was born, Moses was a baby and he, like all of the Jewish boys at the time, was in danger from the Pharaoh—who was like the king. The Pharaoh was being very unfair to the Jewish people and he didn't want the children to grow up and change things to make it fair. Moses' mother and sister were very smart and brave

and they came up with a plan to keep baby Moses safe from the Pharaoh: They hid him in a basket that they gently placed in the river where he could float safely until he was rescued. A woman nearby saw baby Moses floating in the water and wanted to help keep him safe and to take care of him. The mother, the sister, and the neighbor each did their part to be sure that the baby wasn't hurt and to take good care of him so he could grow up safely. And you know what? When Moses grew up, he did change things so the Pharaoh had to stop being unfair and let the Jewish people be free the way God wanted.

Even today, there are lots of families who are raising children in neighborhoods that aren't safe and have lots of problems, and who worry and work hard to keep their children safe from harm and out of trouble. If we do everything we can to keep all children safe, by working together like the people in the Bible stories worked together to keep baby Jesus and baby Moses safe, children can grow up safely and keep changing the world, so that we follow God and work to make things fair for everyone.

Let's pray. Dear God, thank you for showing us through Bible stories how you want it to be—that children are kept safe from the things that could hurt them so they can grow up the way you want them to. Thank you for showing us we can make the world better by working together as leaders and parents and sisters and brothers and neighbors. Help us to live the way you want and to be your partners in making the world better for children and for all of us. Amen.

Sample Children's Sermon #2

“Something Beautiful”

Introduce the story by saying something like:

“This weekend is Children's Sabbath, a special time of celebrating how wonderful children are and how much God loves every single child.

The Children's Sabbaths weekend is also a time to learn about the problems and hard times many children and families are having. It is also a time to look at how, with God's help, we can all work hard to change things for children so that every child has hope, and tomorrow is better for all of us.

When you listen to the story, I want you to listen for something. [To a third of the children:] I want you to see if you hear what the story says about how wonderful children are. [To another third of the children:] I want you to listen to see if you hear what the story says about the problems and hard times children are having. [To the remaining third of the children:] And I want you to listen to see if you hear something in the story about how if we work we can bring hope to children and make tomorrow better for all of us.”

Read the story Something Beautiful by Sharon Dennis Wyeth, Illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet (New York: Dragonfly Books). Some congregations equipped to do this may want to project the images of each page so that all of the congregation members can see the pages as the story is read.

After you read the story, wonder aloud: “That's really something to think about: that each one of us has a ‘something beautiful.’ I wonder what my ‘something beautiful’ is. I wonder what your ‘something beautiful’ is. Hmm. I think this week, I'm going to think about what my ‘something beautiful’ is. And I'm going to remember that each one of us is God's ‘something beautiful.’

“Let's pray:

Dear God, thank you for making each of us in your image, something beautiful. Help us to see your beauty in each child and in each person. Help us to work hard to change the problems we see so that we can make our world look more like the way you want it to be. Amen.”

Lesson Plans are available online at www.childrensdefense.org.

