

YOUNG CHILDREN AND WORSHIP

Dolly Cardwell February 25, 2018

This is the Sabbath. This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it! In the beautiful Genesis story of Creation, on the seventh day, God gave us the gift of a day to rest and reflect on all the gifts of creation - light- water-dry land and all the green growing things - the great lights that rule the day and the night - the fish and the birds - the creatures that walk upon the earth, the animals and the people. And God saw everything that was made and God said, "It is very good."

Stories from the Bible like the creation story call me back to truth day by day and keep alive within me my relationship with God and the world, the rhythm of life and the reminder of all that is really important. My faith, my relationships, my love of life originates in the God, in whom I trust and for whom I know all things are possible. Ruthie spoke about looking for God last week when Jeremiah was so ill. We look for God especially when we are suffering. I find God in Scripture! I feel totally inadequate to even try to convey my view of the under-use of Scripture as a resource for our faith journey. Walter Brueggemann, a Protestant American OT theologian and scholar who has written scores of books and happens to be my OT theologian of choice, was interviewed by [Image Journal](#) recently. Included in his comments was the following: "... the Bible itself is not 'a package of certitudes' but an 'act of faithful imagination.'" Dr. Brueggemann understands the prophets, beginning with Moses, as poets! One of his most important books is [The Prophetic Imagination](#). He is known throughout the world for his method of combining literary and sociological modes when reading the Bible. He describes the language of the Bible as both anchoring and transcending the stories it tells.

Familiarity and engagement with the Bible in one way in which faithful imagination may be born and nurtured, is the sacred trust of the church, the Christian community. We have at hand the pearl of great price which can feed spirits, as we journey, enriching the life of its people and most worthy of being passed on to the next generation. In this day of technology, breaking news, ever-frenzied activity and special sales on Sunday, now more than ever, both the observance of Sabbath and the recovery of Scripture appear to me, to hold promise as an inoculation against so much that is

'hazardous to our health' and the health of our world! I see the time-out of Sabbath as necessity, not as luxury! The call to silence and solitude, remembrance and reflection certainly rise to the surface as we age, but for all of us, at any age who find good news in the gospel and who treasure community, the Sabbath serves as a weekly time to gather in, to acknowledge and remember our covenant with God and all of creation before we then disperse again, renewed by respite and remembrance, to live out and share the good news in all the nooks and crannies of life which await us. God is blessing us while we are gathered in this very special way.

Some of us have had little exposure to the Bible; for others, the Bible is dismissed as full of magic, false claims and as having nothing to do with anything. Our journeys vary so much and each of us is who we are, as a result of the journey we have traveled. I was raised pretty typically in the 40's and 50's. I think it was the few extraordinary teachers that I enjoyed, the college major I chose as well as being led to this alternative community at the age of 16, which has created within me the esteem that I feel for the Bible. Let me take a few minutes to share where I come from. Born in Staunton, VA and baptized at Second Presbyterian Church as a baby, our family moved close-by to Waynesboro, VA when I was about four years old. As a child, I spent Grades 3-7 at Bethany Lutheran School. There was a time each day to hear a story from the Bible and to talk about it. One of my school books was the Lutheran Catechism and each week we had a verse or passage from the Bible to commit to memory. I looked this week at the website of the school which now focuses on Early Childhood Education and found the memory verse there for February: Jeremiah 29:11 - "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Assuring words for any age!

My parents took my sister Jo and me to Sunday School and to summer Bible School, at First Presbyterian Church where we were exposed to age-appropriate Bible stories again and again as children and youth- I loved the desert sand and flannel boards for hands on experience! We studied and memorized the Westminster Shorter Catechism as we prepared to become members of the church around the age of twelve; all this helped me to catch glimpses and bits of understanding which formed my image of God, of myself and what I was to be about. As a college student I was again enriched as a result of attending the Church of the Covenant where Scripture

was at the heart of our community. Although admittedly a topsy-turvy and eye-opening time, I gained decidedly new perspective as a Religion major at R-MWC, viewing and dissecting those same stories and their sources with an academic approach, with friends, professors and my church community by my side. I must also say that our School for Christian Living, which ceased to be held around the year 2000, was so important in my journey; we read and discussed important books together. More recently study and discussion of the Lectionary readings each week and our recent study of the Book of Esther with our Jewish friends at Agudath Sholom Synagogue have been so helpful to me as I continue to learn and to grow. Scripture has indeed permeated and blessed my life. I suppose it is natural that I cherish the opportunity to help pass it along to the next generation and that our children's program, in which I have participated for many years, continues to be important to me.

In his book [The Inner Voice of Love](#), Henri Nouwen says: "Keep deepening your conviction that God's love for you is enough, that you are in safe hands, and that you are being guided every step of the way ... Only when your roots are deep can your fruits be abundant." Whatever our age, we cannot hear this enough! This Love, this safety and this guidance take root in our lives and create a deep and abiding security that continues to elude so many throughout the world today.

Each Sunday morning, either Stephanie East or I have the great privilege of sharing worship upstairs in the Mary Morrison Children's Worship Room, with our child or children, the heart of which is a precious story from Scripture-today- Jesus and the Children. For over ten years now, our community has been using the *Young Children Worship* curriculum which is unique. This Montessori based way of being with children, has as its foundation the recognition that each child already has a relationship with God. Designed for children from about the ages of 3 ½ up to 7, we have recently added *Following Jesus* stories for older children 8 or 9 or 10; we welcome them as long as they love to come. Children are provided all the time they need to listen to the stories of God and then to wonder about them, in discussion, through retelling the story themselves and through artistic media. Quiet voices, a comfortable space, trained leaders as Greeters and Storytellers, appropriate visual items to aid the telling, an encouragement to "Be still and know that God is God"- all deepen the experience of growth in faith of the

children and the adults involved with CW&W. Certainly there are times when things don't go as planned, whereupon, we all do our best. When new children begin to come regularly, we plan an Orientation for the children and their parents. A varied structure and the materials we use, communicate to children the imaginative stories of Jewish scripture as well as the New Testament stories chronicling the life and the mission of Jesus, all recorded by faithful scribes as they grew in their own faith journeys. Stories are told with as few words and as few motions as possible. The more familiar we become with these stories, the more understanding and insight we gain into God's Covenantal presence with a people as they lived their life together, with the man Jesus, in the way of the Kingdom of God, in the life of the early Christian communities and in the call to justice for all people. Several weeks ago Christina Cosby, whom you may remember was our summer minister several summers ago, emailed me to say she would like to contribute a new story to our resources. At the time she was attending a Presbyterian Christian education gathering in Kentucky. The story that Christina chose, *The Parable of the Treasure*, has arrived and will soon be told to Mumu and other children who may come. We appreciate Christina's gift and each child who comes to be with us. Most are brought by their parents but occasionally a parent has said to me: "My child brought me to church this morning."

On a given Sunday morning, it is ideal to have two adults - a Story Teller and a Greeter. Each one is trained and prepared for a special role with special responsibilities. Stephanie and I have been trained and take turns serving as Story Tellers. We have no active trained Greeters in our community. Occasionally we will have a very young child, a very active child or more than three children who need attention from someone other than the Story Teller. Two people are definitely needed from time to time, and we can never predict when that time will be! The role of the Story Teller is to prepare and tell the story, in addition to leading the children through the Order of Worship. The role of the Greeter is to lead the children safely upstairs, to slow them down at the door and make sure they are ready to enter worship, to greet latecomers, to help children choose their 'work' or their activity after the story, to prepare the Feast, to know the schedule and to help at any point that help is needed. We need both Story Tellers and Greeters; Steph is hoping that a new Story Teller will emerge soon to take her place. We have scheduled a Greeter Training in April, on Saturday April 14; we have one person enrolled already. It will be a three-hour training

held in the Lodge. If you are interested or know someone who is, please ask me for a *Volunteer Application* which is available. When there is a need in our community we sound the call. I am confident that God's purpose is unfolding among us, that our children will be cared for, and that all will be well.

When most children reach the ages of eight or soon thereafter, it is important to begin welcoming them as a regular part of our worshipping community on Sunday mornings; they with their parents can feel their way into our worship service. It behooves all of us who plan and lead worship, to find creative ways to include children! We hope, that for them just as for ourselves, their experience of faith will continue to be deepened, whether they worship upstairs or down.

Welcoming children into our community, it seems to me, is not only an essential element of community for adults as well as children, but it also enriches and assures the experience of young families when they choose to worship with us. We are in a time of re-formation as a community. From time to time, young families come to check us out. As one who knows Christian community to be in her DNA, I look upon 'something inviting for children' as a key component of an authentic Christian community. I am well aware that I am almost eighty years old! My turn is about up. Hopefully others will be dreaming dreams soon of what they think is best for our children in the years to come. I also know that the children who participate in our community will more than likely be fine; they will experience love because of who their parents are, who we are and the way we welcome them. Meanwhile, Steph, Ruth (who is standing by for Greeter training) and I will continue to share with our children, hospitality and the reason for the hope that is in us. Our membership graciously entrusts the program for our young to we few who are called to that mission. It is a sacred trust. Your thoughts and prayers and input are welcome. We all benefit from having children in our lives. Our community benefits from having children in its corporate life. We consider ourselves an alternative Christian community - an intentional community. I'd like to return to Walter Brueggemann as I close. His take is that the beautiful, transcendent, and transformative language of the poetic prophets has been flattened into creeds and doctrinal traditions which are deathly. "So" he says, "we have to communicate to people, if you want a God that is healthier than that, you're going to have to take time to

sit with the images and metaphors of Scripture and relish them and let them become a part of your prayer life and your vocabulary and your conceptual frame." The Bible invites imagination. Although few of us are currently memorizing Bible verses, in closing I'd like to quote Dr. Brueggemann once more: "I happen to think memorizing Bible verses is a good thing because then you have the text available that can yield this stuff. Because what a metaphor or image does is to invite you to keep walking around it and looking at it another way and noticing something else. It's a gift that keeps on giving." It is indeed!