

# Strategies for Reading and Studying the Bible with Children and Adolescents

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For over four thousand years ago, God has been calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things. The oldest stories were told around campfires and dinner tables. Artists wrote songs and painted pictures about the stories they learned as children. Grandparents shared the stories along with wisdom born from experience, passed down generation to generation. As God's people passed on the stories and wisdom, they added new stories – their own stories became the next chapter in an already ancient tale. Guided by the Spirit, these stories were written down for preservation and protection. Then, about two thousand years ago, God did something new and the stories of Jesus have been transforming the world ever since. Today, we can explore God's gift of wisdom and story in any language and in an ever-expanding number of translations.

Like those earliest recipients of the story, we add our own chapters. The scriptures come alive as we tell and retell the old, old story and respond with our own acts of hospitality, care, and compassion. The scriptures come alive as we read, study, reflect, and respond. Today, we inherit the responsibility to tell the story in our context and add our chapters. History, linguistics, creative arts, and story-telling all come together and that same Spirit opens our eyes, ears, and hearts to encounter God's word today. We are the keepers of that wisdom, the tellers of the story, and it is our responsibility to equip the next generation to take their place in the ancient story of God's people.

Studying the Bible is not just for scholars and Sunday School is not something we ever graduate from. To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind requires us to engage scripture at every age and in every season of life. Each time we come to the text we bring a different perspective and new experiences through which we can interpret the story. Images and metaphor have different meaning to different generations so we retell the story letting it speak in a new time in our life and a new time in history. For children and youth this is an introduction to a story that can challenge and sustain them for years to come. How we approach scripture will help determine whether people come to it as an outdated rule book from a time long past, or a living story in which God is still speaking. This is a core issue for the Church of today and the future.

Some of the practices recommended in this chapter are not new and even sound like statements of the obvious. As you read, consider how the practice is applied and for what purpose. There are lots of things we do as a Church for which we have forgotten the purpose. Sometimes practices are even moved to more convenient times, forgetting the importance of the context. Passing the peace, for example, may feel like something more comfortably done as people enter worship but loses some of its meaning away from the Eucharist. Allow the practices that are familiar, or even obvious, to be a reminder of the purpose and context of the ministry we share.

# Reading and Studying the Bible: Five Settings

## On Your Own

All children eventually discover the magic words, “by myself.” Some assert themselves at different ages and in different settings. When reading the Bible, we have to find a balance between personal study and communal reflection. We have to help people find their own way into the Bible and make them comfortable navigating the massive one volume library they are reading. While there are practices and activities that help individuals explore the Bible, these can never be isolated from the communal authority that comes from public reading and study. Our personal experiences give us insight as we hear our own feelings, fears, and faith echoed in the stories we read. Still, it is the community around us that helps us take our personal reflection even deeper.

As you guide individual children and youth into the story, remember that we never read alone. Just by reading, we are sharing in a story that has been shaped and molded by over 150 generations of God’s people. Offering time for personal reading and reflection at some point in Church programming can be an effective tool for building good scripture study habits and provide learners the support of the ever-present community. Individual does not always mean alone and community experiences can still offer unique individual opportunities. Some of these practices may seem obvious, but like all spiritual disciplines, intentionality makes all the difference.

## Growing in Faith with Peers

Engaging the scriptures together is important. Each person comes from their own context. Some know the stories better than others and some may have memory verses they can recite. Other children and youth are coming to the stories having no previous contact with the Biblical narrative. Reading and exploring the scriptures together can make study of the Bible fun and help stories come to life in the midst of community.

Story can also be a safe context for spiritual sharing. Prayer has an intimacy that can be a barrier to shared practice. Worship has a structure that provides a parallel experience but doesn’t necessarily create relationships between participants. Sharing a story or discussing a story can draw people into life giving and relationship building conversations. It is also a lot of fun to explore a story with others. Their imagination joins with ours to make the story more than either of us imagined alone. Their understanding joins with ours to make the story deeper than we understood alone. By exploring the Bible together, we also provide check and balances to each other’s tendency to interpret scripture in our own best self-interest. The opinion of peers reminds us that we read and understand as a community of faith and that even we read alone, the Bible is a communal text.

## Growing in Faith with My Family

Engaging scripture as a family includes practices at home and those experienced together as a family within the faith community. While the connection to the larger community is important, one of the greatest strengths of family exploration of scripture is moving faith beyond the walls of a Church and making God’s story part of our daily life. Pre-readers and those with developmental disabilities may be

more reliant on adults to structure the described practices, but everyone has something to offer and everyone's voice should be included as families share God's story together.

Family Bible study and reflection also helps create a home culture that is spiritual and marked by Christian practices. Jewish homes are often marked by a mezuzah by the door. Hindu families have religious statues and art at home. Muslim families will often have a place for shoes by the door before entering. All of these are functional and visible signs of the faith practiced within. In America, Christian homes may have a cross or an occasional cross-stitched verse of scripture, but we have lost a lot of our tradition of home practice. The symbols we do have at home are often decorative rather than functional. Having a family Bible, along with devotions or prayer time, helps make the home a place of faith practice. The Bible in our home becomes more than a book on the shelf. Helping families explore scripture together at home can help deepen the faith of that family across multiple generations, including those to come.

### **Growing in Faith with Intergenerational Faith Community**

The scriptures are filled with intergenerational stories. The Gospels offer Simien and Anna blessing Jesus as an infant and Paul affirming Timothy and the generational faith he inherits from his mother and grandmother. The community of faith as we see it in scripture, is not divided into youth groups or women's leagues. Jesus doesn't assign each Disciple an age group or demographic to work with. Paul works with gentiles, not to keep them separate, but to include them in the larger community of God's people. The Church should echo these themes of scripture, especially when exploring the Bible.

Each generation will approach events in the Bible based on their life experience. A youth raised post-9/11 has a different understanding of war from those who lived through World War 2 or the Vietnam Conflict. Factor in the Generation X population who did not see an armed conflict until the brief Gulf War in 1992 (putting many in High School and College) and you can imagine how different ages read texts like Joshua differently. When we study in age divided groups, the wisdom of the room is limited by experience. When we engage the scriptures with the lenses of multiple generations we can learn from each other as we all grow closer to God.

### **Growing in Faith in the World**

The connection between scripture and our world is two sided but both are grounded in tangible connection. One side is the connection between the stories and an actual context. These stories didn't happen in a galaxy far-far away. Bible stories are rooted in the homelands of our spiritual ancestors, and thus the connection of story to location gives context and a tangible handle for understanding. The other side is discovering how these stories connect to the world we live in today. This is less about geography and more about pastoral care and justice. Where, in the world today, do God's people need to hear this story or hear this message? As children and youth learn about the world where scripture unfolded, their global vision grows. As we connect these stories to the world today, God becomes visible in an ever-shrinking global community.

# Reading and Study the Bible Strategies

## Children

1. Reading 101	Younger and Older Children
2. Wondering	Younger and Older Children
3. Family Bible	Young Children and Older Children
4. Sorting the Shelves	Older Children
5. Stuffed Pews	Older Children
6. Children's Story Library	Children
7. Story Mapping	Children
8. Bible Illustrated	Growing from Children to Youth
9. Team Telling	Growing from Children to Youth
10. What did you hear today?	Growing from Children to Youth
11. Storytellers	Growing from Children to Youth
12. Google That	Growing from Children to Youth
13. Into the Story	Children and Youth
14. Very Big Super Events	Children and Youth
15. On location	Children and Youth

## Adolescents

16. Exploring the Library	Younger and Older Youth
17. Timeline	Younger and Older Youth
18. What were they Thinking?	Youth
19. Trivia Time	Youth
20. Matching Game	Youth

## Children

### 1. Reading 101

Exploring the Bible in ways that bring us closer to God is at the heart of faith formation with Children and youth. Reading the Bible is important is something that all Christians would agree is important, but the practice with children and youth can be complicated. Pre-readers can't just pick up a Bible and discover new stories. The buffet of Bibles for youth and adults seems never ending. Deciding which Bible to provide children and youth is actually a complex question.

Giving a small child a big Bible filled with small print and words they do not know does not inspire them to read and can create an opposite effect. We need to provide different Bibles and story books that go with it to different children at different ages. We also need to let them see older children, youth, and adults reading from the Bible they will one day receive. In other words, we give people the Bible for where they are and show them a Bible for where they are headed. We provide access to the stories now while assuring them that this is just the beginning and even more stories await.

A good Children's Bible is important to have in Church classrooms. You can also present copies to families or buy in bulk to help families get a good version that is appropriate to your community. Some children's curriculum has Bibles and Bible story books that complement the material. Illustrations and even some reflection questions echo the study themes. If you are purchasing curriculum, check with your publisher to see what they offer.

For pre-readers, a Bible will have less words and more pictures. They might use the pictures as clues to guess at words or just tell the story from memory. Older children may still enjoy some pictures but need versions of the story that are appropriate for their reading level. Youth can engage in more readable adult translations. Be careful to not provide too much interpretation along the way. Many "youth Bibles" include devotions that tell youth how to interpret the text rather than simply letting them read. The publisher brings their own theological perspective and that voice can be confused or comingled with the authority of scripture. If you do provide a study Bible, some coaching is appropriate to help youth navigate the contents.

What stories we focus on will also evolve as children grow. The youngest children need an introduction to the narrative stories of Jesus and the core stories of the Old Testament. Simple stories with strong characters will capture their attention. Creation, Abraham and Sarah, Joseph in Egypt, the Exodus, and King David are often used with children due to the easy narrative around them. These core stories are a great foundation. As children get older, Psalms add depth of imagery and emotion. More stories are learned as they grow. Providing picture books and videos of these stories is a great way to help their imagination engage the Bible. Adolescents can dig deeper, exploring their childhood stories with new eyes and wrestling with more complicated stories. Older youth can learn as much from the mistakes of Bible characters as they do from explicit teachings.

allow time at Church for children and youth to explore the Bible on their own. Workshops for parents on how to choose a Children's Bible, or introducing them to how the Bible was developed can be helpful. Keep offering resources, tools, and encouragement while you keep providing access to the Word of God.

## **2. Wondering**

Those familiar with Godly Play or Young Children in Worship, know the power of wondering. This is a simple response to a shared story. The most important rule of wondering is that it has no agenda. Wondering questions are open-ended and invite children to share their own thoughts and ideas. The thought process of a child is not always as linear, so answers are often unexpected. That is not only acceptable, but something to celebrate. Children will make connections that adults miss, so responses should not be judged. Share story and ask open ended questions – wonder together and share thoughts. Affirm children's answers as authentic theological reflections.

Wondering questions do not have to be aimed at any particular lesson from the story. Jerome Berryman, the creator of Godly Play uses the same questions for all his stories, including, "I wonder which part of this story you liked best?" and "I wonder if there is a part of this story we can leave out and still have all the story?" Others story tellers help children imagine the story with sensory questions like, "I wonder what this place smelled like?" Some invite children to take ownership of the story by asking, "I wonder what the names of these sheep might be?" or "I wonder where you might be in this story?" Older

children might even be able to offer some wondering questions of their own for their peers to answer. Again, wondering is about reflection rather than instruction. This is a great chance to allow the scriptures to draw us into conversation with it and each other.

### **3. Family Bible**

This may sound really old fashion, and it can be. This can also be a fresh, new, experience for a family. Some families may already have an old family Bible, passed down from generation to generation. Some adults may remember a grandparent's Bible that always held a place of honor on a coffee table or special shelf. For generations past, a family Bible was as common as a photo album, conveniently set out for visitors to see and engage. The book held more than scriptures. It included important family dates, often some genealogy, and sometimes had a favorite poem or hymn tucked into the back pages. Equipping families to revive or create their own family Bible can be a powerful ministry.

Having a Bible on a table does little to teach specific stories about God or Jesus, but it does stand as a cultural marker in the family's life. It is a visible reminder of the family's spiritual identity. Still, the family Bible does not have to remain ornamental. Using that Bible for family Bible study can help connect generations of family in a sacred practice. Those who do not have an old family Bible can begin the tradition by allowing Children to help add special dates, and including notes about their rites of passage moments. For those families reclaiming an old tradition, help them find ways to engage the past while making the tradition their own going forward. For those families starting a new tradition, help them choose a family Bible that is appropriate for them. Be mindful of what version your faith community most commonly uses. This could even be a rites of passage gift from the Church to first time parents. Even if they inherit a family Bible, having one that is new to them can be a blessing.

Families that use this Bible for shared study might consider having highlighters in different colors for each family member. As children get old enough, everyone can all highlight favorite passages or write notes in the margin using their own color. Being old enough to read the family Bible for a family study time might even become a rite of passage in the family's life. Remember, like many good faith practices, the Church will not have a staff person or volunteer there to organize and lead each family's personal practices. This type of family cultural marker is created by introductory programming, coaching, and regular encouragement to include the practice in their family life.

### **4. Sorting the Shelves**

Pre-readers and older children can both start learning how to navigate the Bible by learning where to find the various "books" and what is in them.

Make small blocks of wood with books of the Bible written on the sides, and designate a book shelf for them, forming a small library of fake books. This can be done easily by cutting 4-6 inch pieces off of a piece of lumber. Painting Old Testament and New Testament different colors can be helpful as Children learn where the books go. You can expand this to include "covers" painted on with images of events or characters to remind children what happens in those books. Arranging the books can be a regular activity that Children can do individual or together. Younger children will need help but eventually this can be a personal project that children work on when they come into the class room or activity space.

When you begin, consider using only the first five books of the Old Testament and the four Gospels. You can expand, adding one section or type of scripture as you go. Maybe add Psalms, or Prophets as the children get good at ordering the ones they already have. Eventually they will be able to put all the books of the Bible in order which will help them find scriptures in the Bible as they get older, and it teaches them how the Bible includes various books into one collection. Be sure to include a list for adult leaders to use if helping children but encourage adults not to show the list. The best practice would be for the adults to learn the order too. That way they can assist without a cheat-sheet.

## **5. Stuffed Pews**

Storytelling often evolves into a ritual and often finds an informal liturgy of its own. Bedtime, or midday stories for small children often have a routine that includes a favorite place, or a special chair. Children and care givers often get into a routine that is unknowingly part of the story. Children love roleplaying the jobs of adults and this can be done in storytelling. Like a child might pretend to be a doctor or teacher, they can pretend to be the storyteller. This can be practiced at Church between friends or in a nursery but is a great practice for home where children can tell their stuffed animals, dolls, or action figures a story.

Some children will be more interested than others. Some may just need a simple wondering question such as, “I wonder what Bible story this bear might like to hear?” or after hearing a story themselves, ask, “I wonder which of your furry friends would like to have you read them this story?” Children’s Bible story books with lots of pictures are a wonderful tool for this practice.

A local congregation can support this practice by providing access, ordering, or even a small library of children’s Bible stories. This is a practice that even volunteer nursery and child care workers can encourage. If you are sharing this practice with adults with hopes of them trying it at home, remind them to be patient and not assume children will do it on the first invitation. The actual story telling doesn’t have to be perfect. It doesn’t have to be complete. Some children might hold the book upside down or even forget to turn pages. Still, if they know the story they can tell it. Even if their words are not understood by adults, “fuzzy the bear” will not complain – the child can still be the story teller.

Primary goals of this experience are empowering children to engage stories on multiple levels, and to help them eventually take their place as confident story tellers who will pass on what they have received without the insecurity we see in many adults today. Children’s imaginations allow them to try on adult roles long before they are pressed into them. Luckily, in the kingdom of God, there is already a place waiting for all of us. The Word is heard from the stories told by children just the same as those told by adults. This is the other benefit of this practice – Children taking their place in the story without a sense of hierarchy.

## **6. Children’s Story Library**

Part of equipping storytellers is to have a library available to them. Children’s books are a great resource for lots of things in the life of the Church. While it is important to have a large number that share Bible stories, it’s OK to have some secular ones too. Just be sure to keep your “sections” clear. This library can be a couple of shelves in a classroom, or in the Narthex. Try to make it as accessible as possible for

volunteers and children. If you request donations, make sure to only keep those books that reflect the beliefs of your faith community and the ones that are in good shape. Just because someone gives it, doesn't mean you have to use it. Keep an eye on the condition of books, making sure there are not tears or snags that could be hurtful to young children or make older children feel bad because a book fell apart while they were reading it.

Books can be used in the nursery, Sunday School or other age specific programming, or other child-care settings. Books can be checked out to families sitting in worship together. Some recommendations can be placed out on display for families to borrow. You might even consider having a storyteller sharing a story from your library before worship begins, or while the line for a Church dinner is forming. This can be a great way to capture the attention of Children in transition times, share a Bible story, and connect members of multiple generations. Just remember to keep your collection accessible, clean, up to date. Then, be sure to use books from the collection. If not, it will be forgotten. If you add a new book every month or two, you will be surprised how much attention all the books receive and how many stories are shared.

## **7. Story Mapping**

A map of Israel and the surrounding area is a great way to help children understand stories and prepare them to see how our ancient story still impacts the world today. One day, children will have to wrestle with justice issues like the Israel – Palestine conflict. Understanding the proximity of Egypt and where ancient Babylon stood is great preparation for a future conversation. At the same time, this helps children understand the distance between locations in the Bible, and thus better understand the story.

You can use a permanent map, or have a roll-up version that can be moved around different settings. The most effective is a permanent bulletin board with a map over it so you can place tacks for different stories. Let children stick a pin in the spot you show them, marking the location of the story. You can use stickers (or small pieces of paper with yarn) with the name of a story or location to label each tack. Over time, the number of tacks will grow. Children can look back at old marks to see where other events took place.

If you have space, you can print out pictures from common locations and connect them to the appropriate spot on the map with a piece of yarn. Children can look at the tack, then follow the string to see what that location looks like in real life. There are ways to do this digitally as well.

SundaySoftware.com even sells some great games and learning programs for the computer that will take children on a tour of prominent Bible locations. Remember that the goal is to help Children better understand the story and their relationship with God.

## **Children to Adolescents**

### **8. Bible Illustrated**

The written word evokes images. Famous art and the culture around us shape the way we imagine scripture but all of us have our own mental masterpieces. Some people are more comfortable than others when it comes to artistic expression but all of us are capable of some basic visualization of the

scriptures. Children are most often eager and confident artists, ready to share their work with others. Asking children to respond to scripture readings with creative arts responses is a great way for them to share their thoughts and feelings. This can be done by pre-readers and older youth alike. You don't have to be a Bible scholar or even a strong reader to illustrate a passage.

Drawing characters, events from a story, or even decorating a photocopy of a Bible passage can open up the scriptures in ways we can't imagine. Younger children love to paint, which requires some extra planning and cleanup, but just a few crayons can empower them to engage the scripture story in a creative way. For children who stay in worship, drawing what they hear from the scripture reading can be a great way to keep them engaged. Older children might turn the scripture reading into a six-panel story, comic book style. As children get older they can create more intricate drawings or even create GIFs of their favorite passages pairing pictures and text together on-line. Art responses can be kept private or shared by way of Church bulletin board, home refrigerator, or hash-tagged on-line.

As children develop their own personal devotion time, drawing or doodling about a scripture can be a great form of meditation or prayer experience. Some may want to keep their drawings as part of a journal. Those that do enjoy sharing their work open the door for their personal Bible exploration to be shared with family, peers, or Church family. Personal or private, drawings based on Bible stories are a great way to help children and youth place themselves into the story or draw out things in the story that moved them. When we think of great works of religious art, we are looking at the ways Christian readers of the past responded to the scriptures. Now, we invite our children and youth to do the same. Instead of just looking for crafts for your next program time, think about how you can invite children and youth to creatively respond to or retell a story.

## **9. Team Telling**

A good story can be told multiple times in different ways without getting old. Lucky for us, the Bible is filled with amazing stories. Some are very familiar. Some have details that get lost in the retelling with small children, or in cultural interpretation. When a group works together to tell a story, new and creative expressions come out. Leave room for the Spirit as you invite children and youth to explore stories together, engaging their corporate imagination.

With all ages this begins by asking what they know about a character or story. For example, "What do you know about Noah?" Allow them time to say what they know. Follow up with questions about the statements they make. If they are incorrect, don't worry about correcting. Just let them share what they remember. Some might combine different stories or confuse characters. Just let them share. If there is disagreement, encourage them to have grace for those they disagree with and help them discuss the differences. Be sure and get as many voices as possible into the conversation. Once the sharing dies down, read the story from an age appropriate Bible or story book. Ask the group to reflect on how well they did telling the story. Discuss what the group got right and what they got wrong. Make sure they don't attack or judge those that got things wrong. Just remind the group how many stories are in the Bible and affirm that we study scripture so we can know it better.

In some contexts, this may be all you need to do. Others groups might be able or you may have time to dig deeper. Younger children can reenact the story with a narrator while older children and youth can

divide into small groups to come up with their own interpretation of the story. If you want to create more sharing time among participants you can have them retell the story in their own words to a partner, then ask the partners to share what they liked about their partner's version. By exploring the story together, telling and retelling, children and youth take ownership of the story and it becomes part of their life. They are also practicing telling the story to others. While they may not take time to share the story of Ruth or Nicodamids at the school lunch table, you never know where it may come up.

## **10. What Did You Hear Today?**

Even if family's never read the Bible at home, it is assumed they will encounter scripture and the stories of God's people at Church. The trip home, or a meal after worship can be a ripe time for family conversation about scripture. Some congregations might even provide questions or take-home activities based on the day's readings from the lectionary or other lesson. There are a growing number of resources available for this practice and creating your own is relatively easy.

Although helpful, this is not necessary. This practice can simply start with parents asking children and youth "what did you hear at Church today? Ask them to tell you stories, share symbols they saw, songs they sang, etc. Focus on the scriptures but listen for how other remembrances might connect back to the story themes from worship, Sunday school, or other gatherings. As children get older this practice can become a family tradition and older children will often beat parents to the question.

Remember, grown-ups can answer the questions too. The more this becomes a full family experience, the better. Besides helping parents reflect on their own experience, it will create an assumption that faith formation and scripture study is a lifelong endeavor rather than something children eventually graduate from. If families have a tradition of visiting grandparents on Sunday, this can become part of that experience as well.

To introduce this practice, consider posting questions for reflection on social media at the end of worship, or sending home a slip of paper with a couple of simple, open ended questions. Creating a hash tag for your congregation, or this specific practice can allow families to share their thoughts with each other. This also acts as a reminder for busy or forgetful families.

## **11. Storytellers**

The role of storyteller is a special one in any community and in a child's life. Using guest story tellers in Sunday School, special children's ministry events, or the nursery is a great way to connect generations and engage both storytellers and listeners in the Biblical story. Be mindful of child safety policies, making sure adults have all the training and support they need. Then find as many ways as you can for adults and youth to tell children stories. Find as many ways as you can for children to tell stories to youth and adults. Some adults will be comfortable acting out a story while others won't do any more than read a book. The offering of each is worthwhile. This can also be an easy entry point for new volunteers or a way to reengage older adults who think they have nothing to offer.

Storytelling can also be done digitally, even further spanning the generations of your faith community. Getting shut-ins to share a story on video allows you to bring their voice into events and creates

relationships between young people and people they may not know or remember. This can be a project where youth visit and record the stories, then play them for younger children. You can also reverse the process and video children and youth telling stories for senior adults. In both of these options, remember to give the storyteller some freedom to tell it their way. You can always read the scripture after to clarify where the Bible's version begins and ends.

If your congregation gets really excited about storytelling, consider having a workshop and bring in a guest speaker or trainer to help expand the storytelling gifts of the congregation. This can be offered to members or even the broader community. In a format like this, keep your focus on telling stories from the Bible so you don't forget the purpose.

## 12. Google That

This is more of a practice to include in various places than one independent event. When reading a Bible story, lots of questions may come up. For example, when reading the nativity story, questions may come up about the Roman tax. If anyone has a question, a fun practice can be to say "Google that" and let anyone who can help look it up. For young children, it will be an adult leader looking it up. As children get smart-phones and other devices, they can join in the research. If there are computers in activity space, this is another avenue for research. Eventually, youth may take over the primary research task as they are often more comfortable with technology than adult leaders. This is a form of scripture study, empowered by technology, that allows learners to dive deeper without the leader having to do extra research in advance.

To help start this practice, consider having a few questions in mind before a text is read. If the group doesn't have any, offer one of yours for them to look up. This will allow you to model the concept and let them start researching. As children and youth take on roles of researcher online, remind them to be careful about accuracy and where they get information from. Consider comparing multiple sites and answers before leaving a question. Make sure the sources are reputable. It is better to have no clear answer than a wrong answer.

## Children & Adolescents

### 13. Into the Story

Inviting children and youth to enter the story can be powerful and a lot of fun. Putting ourselves into the Bible story is not a new idea. By evoking the Prophets, Paul, the Gospel writers, and even Jesus invited listeners to imagine themselves as part of the ancient story. Some adults will remember *SuperBook* cartoons from their childhood where two kids and a robot traveled back in time to visit Bible stories. Hanna-Barbera co-founder, Joseph Barbera, even did a series called "Greatest Adventure Stories from the Bible." This idea of visiting a story can be done in a variety of ways in Church settings, in various contexts that range from Sunday School, to Vacation Bible School, to worship.

For younger children, creating a location is very helpful. You can use adults in costumes and paper or canvas backdrops to transform Church rooms into a market place or sea shore camp-fire. Headbands with cut out ears can allow children to become sheep, or a short stick with a string can put them in the

fishing boats as Jesus calls the first Disciples. Simple scripts for adult readers can add to the drama, you can let children help act out the story as it is read, or you can simply read the scripture story and let the children imagine themselves in that place.

Youth are probably not likely to wear ears and crawl around in a flock, but they can still put themselves in the story. Through guided meditation, or inviting them to draw the setting of a story, you invite them to put themselves in the place where it all takes place. Youth can act out the story as you narrate it, or come up with their own reenactments. Older youth can imagine who else might have been there but wasn't included in the telling. Help them think through the context with questions about clothing, available technology, sanitation, and cultural expectations.

Entering a story can be as complicated or simple as your setting and programming allow. Remember to keep the gifts and energy level of volunteer leaders and parents in mind as you plan. Maybe you can use a more intricate story experience with Children for Lent or Advent. Maybe you can have youth help create backdrops as they learn stories, then use those with younger children. Maybe some of these reenactments and backdrops make their way into worship for a scripture reading and story-telling time. When you invite people to enter the story, you move them from listeners to witnesses and the story will never be the same.

## **14. Very Big Super Events**

One of the most famous acronyms in all of Christianity is VBS (Vacation Bible School) and depending on who you talk to it can sound like the greatest thing ever or a sign of the ends times. Congregations have embraced it, cursed it, adapted it, and abandoned it countless times. Some have changed the name to "camp" or "church school." Others have hired it out and others have sworn to never do it again. If you have had success with a big summer event that brings generations together to learn and grow, then keep on doing what you are doing. If you have struggled with special summer events or given up on having them, you might try reevaluating your purpose and methods.

Every spring, publishers send thousands of promotional flyers out to congregations, selling summer curriculum. This, together with years of expectations and traditions that are slow to change can leave a Church feeling like it must muster all their might to pull off the event the congregation is expecting. This is where planning has already failed. Planning must start with the needs and gifts of the congregation. A rural community and an urban community may have drastically different needs and resources. The first step to a great annual event that engages and inspires all generations of the Church is to figure out what the Church is gifted to achieve.

A large congregation may need a more structured day camp program to include lots of volunteers and staff. A small congregation may need a series of family nights on weekends. One congregation may need their annual event on Spring Break while another is well suited to summer. One congregation may be able to do something alone while another may be a great host for an ecumenical event. Look at who you are as a congregation. Forget about expectations and how it has been done before. Simply look at the best way to pull generations of the church together for a special event celebrating the and exploring the story of God's people. Even if you only meet a few Sundays evenings over the summer to roast hotdogs and have a storyteller share a scripture, you have brought the people of God together to hear the stories of God. This simple outcome is worth the effort and everything else we hope to achieve is bonus.

## 15. On Location

A story can feel completely different when we change the venue of the story. Most structured ministry in the Church will take place inside a building, and often in a class room. Just changing where we read a story can add to the reading and help the listeners understand the feel of the story. While we can't take children and youth to the sea of Galilee to read a story of Jesus, we can do some short field trips for scripture readings. Go outside to read stories that take place outside. Go to sanctuary to read stories about worship or that take place in the Temple. Go to a body of water to share stories that happen along the shore or on boats. Help children and youth connect the story with the real world and imagine how creation acts as a character in the story.

If you don't have water close by, consider going to a fountain or the baptistry. Even a painting of Jesus' baptism could be a good backdrop for a story. If you don't have a hillside nearby, going to an upper room of a building to read about the last supper, or Moses on the mountain, can create a memorable moment that will help connect the story. If you don't have a garden or green space, create a story space with some fake ferns or potted plants. The goal isn't to recreate a place from the story but to create a special story telling experience for the listener.

With older children and youth, think about what stories might go well with special trips or events. If they are serving a meal at a shelter, take a moment to read the feeding of the 5,000 or one of the other stories about Jesus sharing a meal. If you are going hiking, share a story about the people in the wilderness, or maybe the transfiguration. Stories and locations can be a great way to remind participants why a trip is taking place and of God's presence along the way.

## Adolescents

### 16. Exploring the Library

Helping youth understand the Bible as a library of different types of literature is a great gift as they try to understand what they are reading. They are used to navigating the different genres available in their school or public libraries. They understand the difference between reference, periodicals, historical fiction, biography, and history. While the Bible doesn't fall into these tidy categories, the concept is similar. By creating a library of biblical texts for youth to explore, you can help them think about what they are reading and thus supporting their own personal interpretation of scripture.

Recycle some old Bibles by breaking them into sections and taping a new cover on them. Break Bibles and rebind them into separate books on shelves labeled: "Sagas (Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Esther)," "Law (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)," "Prophecy," "Poetry and Songs," "Advice," "Historical Biography (Gospels)," and "Letters (Epistles)," and "Apocalyptic (Daniel and Revelation)." Let youth choose texts from different sections to read on their own. Allow time for them to explore the Library.

With older youth, you can have another section, or another shelf outside this activity space. Include noncanonical books, important historical writings that have impacted faith such as *Paradise Lost* and *Letters from Birmingham Jail*. You can include sacred texts of other faiths, or liturgical books such as

hymnals or prayer books. This can help older youth wrestle with what makes some writings holy while others are treated different. They will wrestle with this question if we address it or now, so you might as well help guide the conversation.

## **17. Timeline**

Youth often know lots of Bible characters but sometimes struggle to see the connections between them. They may learn about Abraham in Sunday School, and remember Moses from VBS, and have picked up the story of David from a story book where the future king fights Goliath. Putting these stories into context and seeing how one informs the other is more difficult. While youth may know about the Passover, they may not have made the connection to Jesus' last supper. These are not just interesting bits of trivia. They form the context of the story and often have a big impact on how we understand the events. Helping youth understand the narrative arc from creation through the resurrection is helpful for understanding and interpretation.

One way to teach this timeline is with character cards. Simply write the names of 5-10 Old Testament characters on notecards and challenge your youth to put them in chronological order. Some youth will be more comfortable with this than others but encourage them to work as a group. Remind them of basic story plots if you have to, but try encouraging them to tell the stories to each other to see if they can work how the connections that will help them find the order. Do this at the beginning or end of each gathering and slowly add more characters from different stories. Try to include a number of women, making sure to lift up their contributions even if history has skimmed over many. Eventually start adding New Testament names to the collection.

Older children and youth are introduced to world civilizations at school and there is a direct connection to many of these class lessons and the unfolding of the Biblical story. You can make a second set of cards with world empires including: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans. Challenge the youth to connect what they learn at school to the Bible story by putting the empires in chronological order and then see if they can match up and of the Character cards with the ruling empire. For example, Jeremiah was at the beginning of the Babylonian empire and Ezra and Nehemiah come into the story as the Persians have permitted the people to return home. Jesus, of course, is born and lives under Roman rule.

If you want a more permanent version of this activity, consider painting a basic timeline with core stories on the wall of a classroom, and then fill in the gaps with character cards. Empire cards can be placed along the wall painting to show where they fit into the story. This can be a powerful visual teaching tool as youth come to understand the story of God's people and how it interacts with recorded history. However you invite youth to explore the historical timeline, remember that the focus is on the context rather than the historicity of the story. The goal is not to convince youth that the story really happened, but that the context and culture of a story help us better know the story.

## **18. What were they Thinking?**

Youth are often defined by the mistakes they make more than they faith they display. While youth are often more ethical than they adults who criticize them, the perception is still common and young people

often embody the image projected onto them. In religious education, youth can often feel judged and critiqued. We know scripture is filled with stories of good people making bad choices, but youth often hear a different message. By engaging stories where main characters make bad choices, youth and families can have honest conversation about the complicated issues they face. Scripture can be a conversation partner rather than a source of critique or judgment.

As a faith leader, help direct families to these stories and consider some organized family study experiences to introduce a simple study of scripture centered around the question, “What were they thinking?” While this can be shared in a condescending tone, it can also be explored on multiple levels. Start with the condescending, or even patronizing tone. Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery is a great example. Everyone can agree this was a bad thing to do. The story can be discussed on this basic level of mutual distain. Then, the question should be asked more seriously, “What were they really thinking?” This is an invitation to put ourselves in the shoes of the mistake-makers. This is an opportunity to reflect on their motivations, hurts, short-comings, or brokenness. Finally, the third movement of this study invites us to ask when similar issues have led us, or people we know, to make bad choices.

Encourage youth to ask this question in peer activities, personal reading, and especially in family time. Encourage families to make time for scripture reading together, especially complicated stories that include good people making mistakes. There are well known characters with short-comings such as Jacob, David, and Jonah. Others such as Jephthah, Gideon, and Sampson are less told stories but are wonderful for exploring the complexity of human emotions and failures. Issues like Gideon’s constant testing and Sampson’s need for the person he loves to love him back are themes that youth can relate to but don’t often find their way into the pulpit. You can help families explore these stories by posting a weekly or monthly recommended story. If you are consistent with this practice and youth feel safe asking the question, you might be surprised at the places they will ask, “What were they thinking?” If families are consistent with the practice, they will be amazed at their conversations.

## **19. Trivia Time**

Competition can be a fun way to engage a community. Gather youth and adults on an occasional basis for Bible Trivia or another challenge activity that will allow them to share what they know and interact with each other. This can include the timeline experience described in the peer ministry section. Teams can be based on age or mixed. Make sure to build in some follow up time to talk about the results, what stories were best known, and what favorite characters were included. This can lead youth and adults to recall and retell stories in an informal way. Some may want to look up stories to see what the Bible actually says, so keep some extras around.

Sharing an activity like this around tables with food is especially fun. Many of our Bible stories involve eating or were told as special events or family occasions that involved food. Telling stories of God’s people at meal time is a very old practice. Maybe there is something about sharing a meal that draws us closer together or maybe feeding people helps with attendance, regardless what millennium you live in.

The combination of play, story, and community can help youth share what they know and be affirmed. It can also inspire youth and adults to deeper study. Keeping track of the score between adults and youth for a year might encourage Sunday School attendance for both, especially if you draw the

questions from that venue. You might also consider drawing questions from worship. Either way offers a great opportunity for cross-promotion. Announcements in worship might include a reminder that the day's lectionary reading includes a couple answers to questions at the next trivia event. Be creative in adapting this practice to things already going on in your community as you empower generations to challenge each other to explore the Bible.

## **20. Matching Game**

Youth can participate in the Story Mapping activity, but they are also capable of diving even deeper. It is helpful for them to think about where the story took place and its context, but older youth are also ready to take the next step and apply the story to the world in which they live today. Start by identifying where the story happened and asking, "what has changed in that part of the world since this story occurred?" After reflecting on that question, ask the youth, "Where in the world do people face similar issues today?"

Another way to apply this practice is looking at the theme or message of a Bible passage. Youth are exploring wisdom, epistles and other scripture that are not necessarily narrative and thus don't have a specific location. These tests do, however, have a lesson or focus. Ask the youth, "What is God telling us in this passage?" After reflecting on that question, ask the youth, "Where in the world do people need to hear this message from God today?"

You can use a map to mark locations, or look up places so everyone is familiar with the location you are discussing. Remember to always bring the focus back to the scripture you are studying, letting the text and the reflections of the youth connect.