



# 2021 Children's Sabbath

## "Where Does It Hurt?" Listening to Heal Our Children

Christian Resources for the Worship Service

Following are Christian worship resources from a variety of sources. Use or adapt any that would be appropriate for your tradition. In addition, you may want to consider the prayers and other worship resources from other faith traditions on the [Children's Sabbath website](#), as well as resources available from your denomination or faith community. And as always, we hope you will create your own Children's Sabbath resources and share with us what you develop. (Unless otherwise noted, all resources were written by Shannon Daley-Harris.)

### Call to Worship

Where does it hurt?

**We gather this morning with listening hearts  
to hear the voices of our children.**

What do you hope?

**We gather this morning with listening hearts  
to hear the hopes of children and  
to nurture the hope within each of us.**

How can we help?

**We gather this morning with listening hearts  
to hear how we can help  
in partnership with those who are hurting,  
as ones who are hoping.**

Who are you and why are you here?

**We gather this morning as God's people to worship God,  
in confidence that God hears our hurts and hopes  
before they are even on our lips,  
and calls us, as God's partners, to help  
with a passion for justice and hearts full of love.**

Come, let us worship God on this Children's Sabbath day.

### Call to Celebration (in unison)

This is the Lord's day.

This is the Lord's house.

We are the Lord's children.

Let the praise begin!

(From the A.M.E. Zion Church Christian Education Department)



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### Invocation

Come, O Creator, O Immensity of love, O Eternity of mercy. Come, and be with us and in us and beside us and over us. Be as hands upon us, and fashion us for shining. Be as warmth within us, and fire us for caring. Be as strength beside us, and shape our lives for healing. Abide in our prayers, the spoken and the unspoken; and make your Word come true in our flesh; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

(by Arnold Kenseth in the United Church of Christ's *The New Century Hymnal*)

### Call to Confession

If we say we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves. None of us is perfect; we all make mistakes. God knows that. If we confess our sin, we open ourselves to receive the gift of God's forgiveness and recognize a fresh start to do better. Wow, what a relief!

Trusting God's promise, let us confess our sin first in silence and then aloud together using the words printed in the bulletin.

### Prayer of Confession

Loving God, we confess that often we fail to hear the voices of those who are young, impoverished, and hurting. We ignore the voices of those who speak in other languages, come from other communities, have different life experiences than our own. We turn away from voices that call us to account, or to commit, or to sit with their pain. We privilege the voices of those in positions of power, with status and wealth, or who tell us what we want to hear.

O God, when Jesus put a child amid the disciples squabbling about position, he reminded us what is important. Forgive us for again missing the mark. Remind us to hush and heed the voices of children and young people. Open us to what they have to teach us, for ways they might lead us to more faithfully be your people who love and listen, heal and prevent harm, and pursue your ways of peace and justice. Amen.

### Assurance of Pardon

Listen to me! I have good news to share: God is for us. God never gives up on us. God will always love us. Let us live our lives with love and joy in that knowledge. Thanks be to God.

### Prayer for Illumination

O God, by your Spirit quiet our minds,  
center our hearts, and open our ears  
that we might hear the word you speak to us  
through the Word written and proclaimed.

Help us to listen so deeply and truly  
that we might be prepared to go out  
and loudly live your Word in the world,  
raising a ruckus for justice, speaking boldly for love,  
for the sake of your beloved children. Amen.



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### Reading: Psalm 31:1-8 (Common English Bible translation)

*(The Children's Sabbath lesson plans include an activity in which the high school students develop a creative expression of Psalm 31—a paraphrase in their experience, spoken word piece, liturgical dance, or other possibilities. Check with the leader of the class to coordinate its inclusion in addition to or instead of the reading.)*

- <sup>1</sup> I take refuge in you, Lord.  
Please never let me be put to shame.  
Rescue me by your righteousness!
- <sup>2</sup> Listen closely to me!  
Deliver me quickly;  
be a rock that protects me;  
be a strong fortress that saves me!
- <sup>3</sup> You are definitely my rock and my fortress.  
Guide me and lead me for the sake of your good name!
- <sup>4</sup> Get me out of this net that's been set for me  
because you are my protective fortress.
- <sup>5</sup> I entrust my spirit into your hands;  
you, Lord, God of faithfulness—  
you have saved me.
- <sup>6</sup> I hate those who embrace what is completely worthless.  
I myself trust the Lord.
- <sup>7</sup> I rejoice and celebrate in your faithful love  
because you saw my suffering—  
you were intimately acquainted with my deep distress.
- <sup>8</sup> You didn't hand me over to the enemy,  
but set my feet in wide-open spaces.

### Prayer for the Courage to Do Justice

O Lord, open [our] eyes that [we] may see the needs of others;  
open [our] ears that [we] may hear their cries;  
open [our] hearts so that they need not be without succor;  
let [us] not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong  
nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.  
Show [us] where love and hope and faith are needed,  
and use [us] to bring them to those places.  
And so open [our] eyes and [our] ears that [we] may,  
this coming day, be able to do some work of peace for thee. Amen.

(By Alan Paton)

### 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



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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 Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Common Worship*)

### **Prayer for Leaders**

O God, as you anointed leaders and called prophets of old,  
lead us to recognize our true representatives and authentic leaders:  
men and women who love your people and can walk with them,  
who feel their pain and share their joys,  
who dream their dreams and strive to accompany them to their common goal.  
In your fire, with your Spirit,  
embolden and commission us to transform our political system,  
to serve your people,  
and to bring real glory to your name. Amen.

(Philippines, 20th Cent., in *United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 544)

### **St. Luke, Evangelist** (October 18)

Almighty God, you inspired your servant Luke the physician to reveal in his Gospel the love and healing power of your Son. Give your Church the same love and power to heal [your children], to the glory of your name; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

(*Lutheran Book of Worship*)

## Children's Day Litany from the Department of Christian Education and Formation of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Leader: Oh God we come this day to celebrate the children among us.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: We thank you God for creating children in your image.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: Help us God to honor our children and to raise them up according to your divine goodness.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: As we are called to nurture our children in the Christian faith, we pray for your divine guidance.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: Help us God to be intentional and loving towards all the children of our community.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: As we hear the call of Jesus to make disciples, help us to reach out to the children in our Congregation, our faith community, our neighborhoods, and the world.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: Help us to be good parents, guardians, role models, mentors, and servants for our children.

**People: Thank you God for blessing us with children.**

Leader: As we celebrate Children's Day help us to hear the call of Jesus to 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'

**ALL: As we gather today for worship, we pray for children everywhere. As you hold them close to you dear God, protecting them and watching over them, help us to be committed disciples of Jesus Christ loving our children, holding them close, having compassion, and forming and nurturing them in the faith so that they might bear good fruit and become servant leaders modeling the ministry of Jesus Christ. AMEN!**

(By Willa M. Ross, D.Min.)

### The Care of Children

Holy God, loving parent of the child Jesus, we pray for children around the world. Alert us to the struggles that many children endure. With your generous and tender care, grant to all children compassionate adults who will shield them, feed them, and help them to grow strong and skilled, joyful and free. Empower family members and all caregivers with adequate resources and a daily renewal of wisdom and patience, and assure them of their holy vocation as guardians of your dear ones, for the sake of our protector, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

*(All Creation Sings: Evangelical Lutheran Worship Supplements, p. 53)*

### Renewers of Society

Holy and righteous God, you created us in your image. Grant us grace to contend fearlessly against evil and to make no peace with oppression. Help us to use our freedom to bring justice among our people and nations, to the glory of your name; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*(Lutheran Book of Worship)*



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O God, you form all humanity to bear your divine image, and you intend for everyone to live together in harmonious dignity. We pray for all people, whether ourselves or others, who suffer the cruelties of racial or ethnic prejudice. Grant your Spirit of power to all who are oppressed. Give healing to victims of violence, protection to the vulnerable and abused, better housing and worthy employment to the mistreated, courage to the fearful, a remedy for rage, strength to parents and caregivers, and hope to children and youth. Purge the privileged of their sense of superiority, and lead church and society to foster communities of equity and diversity; through Jesus Christ, our loving Savior. Amen.

*(All Creation Sings: Evangelical Lutheran Worship Supplement, p. 50)*

O God, in your divine mystery you embrace difference in unity, and you call your people to live in peace with all. We pray for an end to racial and ethnic prejudice. Free us from the dread of difference. Free the church from constricting traditions. Free our society from centuries of violence against the other. Break down the walls that separate your people by color, culture, or religion. Call us to repentance for our sins of racism and prejudice, known and unknown. Transform discrimination into a passion for justice. Guide us to nurture a society that embodies reconciliation and cooperation among all, for the sake of the one who embodies your love, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

*(All Creation Sings: Evangelical Lutheran Worship Supplement, p. 51)*

### **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.  
Lord, have mercy.

**People: Lord, have mercy.**

Priest: Lord Jesus, you are the hope of all generations.  
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.**

### **Penitential Rite** (Catholic liturgy)

Priest: Lord Jesus, you healed the sick:  
Lord, have mercy.

**People: Lord, have mercy.**

Priest: Lord Jesus, you forgave sinners:  
Christ, have mercy.

**People: Christ, have mercy.**

Priest: Lord Jesus, you give yourself to heal us and bring us strength.  
Lord, have mercy.

**People: Lord, have mercy.**



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May almighty God have mercy on us,  
Forgive us our sins,  
And bring us to everlasting life.

**People: Amen.**

### **Gospel Acclamation** (Catholic liturgy)

Two child-friendly possibilities for the Gospel Acclamation, as demonstrated by St. Thomas Beckett in Eagen, MN, are: "Alleluia, praise to God, praise to God, praise to God. Alleluia praise to God, alleluia," sung to the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and "Halle, Halle, Hallelujah."

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

Let us turn our hearts to God who loves us as a parent, offering arms of comfort and sending us out with encouragement, responding "Lord, listen to your children praying."

For the holy Church of God, that we open our hearts and arms to live out your inclusive love that tends wounds, heals divisions, and nurtures wholeness in mind, body, and spirit, in families, communities, and nations, we pray,

**Lord, listen to your children praying.**

For our world, in which pandemic and poverty, war and want, famine and climate change threaten children's ability to survive and thrive, that we join in collective care and action, we pray,

**Lord, listen to your children praying.**

For all our brothers and sisters in need, especially children suffering from loss and loneliness, disruption and despair, poverty and pandemic, incarceration and injustice, that we may listen to their pain and partner with them in pursuit of healing, we pray,

**Lord, listen to your children praying.**

For our community and nation, which have borne the trauma of pandemic and racial reckoning, suffered the loss of jobs and homes, celebrations and security, education and connection, that we have the courage and commitment to work together to emerge stronger and better, we pray,

**Lord, listen to your children praying.**

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.

### **Prayers of the People** (Episcopal Rubric)

O God, you are ever more ready to listen than we are to pray. You know our hearts more truly than we do ourselves. We join now in prayer, trusting in your listening, loving presence as we name our hurts and hope for healing, saying, "Loving God, hear our prayer."



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For the body of Christ, that we more truly become your hands of help, voice for justice, and hearts of love in the world we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

For our nation and our leaders, that they show courage and compassion to unite in your priority of love and justice, standing with and for those who are young, impoverished, imprisoned, excluded, and vulnerable, we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

For our world that is still struggling with pandemics of disease and poverty, war and warming climate, felt first and worst by the young and the old, that our love and action are as borderless as God's own heart, we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

For ourselves and our community, that we listen to the voices of the young who are hurting, that we stand with families who are struggling, that we work together for healing and the prevention of harm so that all may thrive, we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

On this Children's Sabbath day, holding in our hearts children who are thriving and those who are struggling to survive, young people who are blossoming and those who need more nurture and care, families who have grown together and those who are hurting in broken places, that we hear and heed and seek healing with and for each other, that we listen to, learn from, and love one another, we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

For all who have died, especially those who died too soon and too young, from the pandemic of COVID, from unheard and unhealed trauma, from depression and despair, from causes we could have prevented and those we were helpless to heal, we pray,

### **Loving God, hear our prayer.**

We pray these things in the name of Jesus who came among us, loving, listening, healing, and redeeming that we might live into the fullness of life that God intends. Amen.

*Alternatively, you could invite the congregation to join in a sung refrain from "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying" by Ken Medema. The words of the refrain are: "Lord, listen to your children praying. Lord, send your spirit in this place. Lord, listen to your children praying. Send us love, send us power, send us grace."*

### **Collect of the Day: On the Children's Sabbath** (Episcopal Rubric)

Loving God, in Christ who came to listen to the children and heal those who were hurting, you revealed your intention for life together in which we listen and love, help and heal. Strengthen us now to be healing agents of your love, justice-seeking partners that all your beloved children may thrive; through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

**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 you sent Jesus to listen to the children and those who hurt and to bring healing through love and justice and grace.

**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 brings 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 unite our hearts and voices 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



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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, to bring your peace. 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.

### Prayer by Marian Wright Edelman

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.



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Help us to recover a spirit of sacrifice for our children's sake.  
Help us to recover our faith in Thee for our children's sake. Amen.

*(In Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children)*

### **Benediction**

Be strong and let your heart take courage.  
Go forth with the listening love of God to hear our children;  
Go forth with the tender love of Christ to heal our children;  
Go forth with the empowering love of the Spirit to seek justice with our children;  
On this Children's Sabbath day and ever more. Amen.

### **Benediction**

May the God who dances in creation,  
who embraces us with human love,  
who shakes our lives like thunder,  
bless us and drive us out with power  
to fill the world with her justice. Amen.

*(By Janet Morley, in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Chalice Hymnal)*

### **Suggested Songs for the 2021 Children's Sabbath:**

"Build a Longer Table" (Text: David Bjorlin, Music: French Carol)  
Children's Song from Preschool Children's Sabbath Lesson Plan: "I Hear You, You Hear Me"  
"Called As Partners in Christ's Service" (Text: Jane Parker Huber, Tune: BEECHER)  
"God, We Gather As Your People" (For All the Children) (Text and Music: David Lohman)  
"God Weeps with Us Who Weep and Mourn" (Text: Thomas Troeger, Music: Sally Ann Morris)  
"Guide My Feet" (African American Spiritual)  
"Help Us Accept Each Other" (Text: Fred Kaan, Music: Doreen Potter)  
"I Love the Lord, Who Heard My Cry" (African American Spiritual)  
"Kum Ba Yah" (African American Spiritual)  
"Let Us Build a House" (All Are Welcome) (Text and Music: Marty Haugen)  
"May the God of Hope Go With Us/Dios de la Esperanza" (Text: Alvin Schumaat, Music: Argentine folk melody)  
"Out of the Depths, O God, We Call" (Text: Ruth Duck, Tune: Fennville) Pues Si Vivimos (When We Are Living) (Text: Elise S. Eslinger and Roberto Escamilla, Music: Spanish melody)  
"Standing in the Need of Prayer" (African American Spiritual)  
"We Lift Our Voices" (We Are an Offering) (Text: Dwight Liles)  
"What Does the Lord Require of You" (Text and Music: Jim Strathdee)

## 2021 Children's Sermon

### “Listen to Me!”

*Use or adapt this Children's Sermon for use with children of the congregation in a special conversation, or “time with children,” or create your own.*

Good morning! I'm so happy to see you today. Today is a special day called “Children's Sabbath.” Children's Sabbath is a time to remind grown-ups and everyone that children are very special and it is important to love, listen to, and take good care of all children. Children's Sabbath is also a day that children think about how they can be loving and helpful to other children. We celebrate Children's Sabbath in church because we know that God loves every child and God listens to and wants to help every child.

*Hold a children's Bible in your hand, and say,*

“In one part of the Bible, God's people wrote poems and prayers and songs to God, telling God how they were feeling and how they wanted God to help them.

Sometimes they were happy and thankful. Raise your hand if you have ever felt happy.

Sometimes they were angry. Have you ever felt angry? *(allow time for children to raise hands.)*

Sometimes they were scared. Have you ever felt scared? *(allow time for children to raise hands.)*

Sometimes they were sad. Have you ever felt sad? *(allow time for children to raise hands.)*

Sometimes their feelings were all mixed together. Have you ever felt that way?  
*(allow time for children to respond)*

It's ok to have all of those feelings.

We can tell God that we have those feelings.

And we can tell our parents and other grownups who love us about all of our feelings.

We can even tell our friends about our feelings.

One of God's people in the Bible said a prayer that went like this: “Listen to me, God! Help me quickly, God! Help me feel safe with you, God!”

Can you say that prayer with me? We'll do it one part at a time.

Listen to me, God! *(children repeat, “Listen to me, God!”)*

Help me quickly, God! *(children repeat, “Help me quickly, God!”)*

Help me feel safe with you, God! *(children repeat, “Help me feel safe with you, God!”)*



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God's people are God's helpers. So let's stand up and tell the grownups in the church how they can be God's helpers by listening to us, helping us, and making sure we feel safe.

So stand up and let's look at all the church people. You and I will say one line together, and then the church grownups will repeat the next line with me.

Kids, say with me: "Listen to us, church!" (*repeat with the children, "Listen to us, church!"*)

Grownups, say with me: "We'll listen to you, children!" (*repeat with congregation, "We'll listen to you, children!"*)

Kids, say with me: "Help us when we need it, church!" (*repeat with the children*)

Grownups, say with me: "We'll help you when you need it, children!" (*repeat with the congregation*)

Kids, say with me: "Help us feel safe with you, church!" (*repeat with the children*)

Grownups, say with me: "We'll help you feel safe with us." (*repeat with the congregation*)

Thanks be to God. Amen!

## 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 later in this section.

Reflections in the Children's Sabbath Daily Devotional Guide may also spark sermons on other texts.

## 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 listening to “where it hurts” for our children, listening that we may work together to bring healing and wholeness, present both opportunity and challenge for the preacher.

The opportunity is to acknowledge that suffering exists; all who care about children know too well that children are hurting. 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 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:



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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.<sup>1</sup>

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, and 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 4.4 million children be without health coverage and unable to see a doctor when they are sick or injured? How can 10 million live in poverty in the richest nation on earth? 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)

<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume IV: 1 and 2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms, 637.*



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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 [God’s] 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).”<sup>2</sup>

### 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 born 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 more than four 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 nearly one in seven children who is poor, 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

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<sup>2</sup> *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B* by Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993) p. 444.



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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 those who are young, weak, and lack traditional forms of power. It is we who are adults, it is we who are strong, it is we who are powerful that are called to servant leadership and to make the suffering of others our own. The plain truth is that we either respond to that call, or we reject it. The integrity of our faith lies in the balance—our very ability to say we are “Christian” without taking the name of the Lord in vain.

### Psalm 91:9–16

This psalm’s assurance of God’s protection against enemies, disease or sickness, and all evil (v. 3, 10) stands in tension with the reality that illness does strike us, even children, even the “innocent,” even the faithful. With the reality that every day, through no fault of their own, small children are endangered by the enemy of poverty that chases them from an empty breakfast table, through substandard housing, through unsafe neighborhoods, to a failing school, and is waiting when the school day is over to continue to hunt and haunt them. With the reality that every day, the pipeline to prison acquaints too many children with the evil of poverty, of low academic expectations and high dropout rates, of abuse and neglect, of racism, of violence that surrounds them in their neighborhoods, in the culture, in the most prevalent role models.

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

### Hebrews 5:1–10

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

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

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.



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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 asks "where does it hurt," and commits to listening to heal our children. The Children's Sabbath has long focused attention on 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



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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.

In 2021, we know that there are additional depths of pain that our children are experiencing—loneliness, despair, depression, and additional emotional and mental health challenges made worse by the pandemic; fear, grief, and loss from the illness and death of family and community members and lost lives across the nation and around the world; trauma, grief, and anger at the killing of unarmed children, men, and women at the hands of police and others who are meant to preserve and protect life, and myriad emotions at the long overdue national racial reckoning.

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? All that our children and youth have borne in the past year of pandemic and racial reckoning? 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.



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In our day, as in Jesus', those who are young, poor, and 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 nearly one in seven children in poverty and one in nine children without health care coverage 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 more than 10 million children are poor, there is a need for change to our nation's structures and systems. When nearly 4.4 million children do 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.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path* compiled by Lucinda Vardey, 114.

## Sermon Notes for Those Not Following a Lectionary

For those who don't follow a lectionary, the following sermon notes suggest how one might link a text from Jeremiah to this year's theme:

Sermon Notes on Jeremiah 31:15–17

*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."<sup>4</sup>

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')."<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> *The Harper Collins Study Bible* suggests simply, "The dead Rachel is heard weeping over her children, who were either killed or deported."

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, R.E. Clements (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Harper Collins Study Bible, 1169

<sup>6</sup> "Jeremiah" by Patrick Miller in *New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).



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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).”<sup>7</sup>

### 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—hearing not only parents, but youths and children. 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.

#### **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.

<sup>7</sup> *Women’s Bible Commentary Expanded Edition*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, 185.



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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 it 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: God hears us and sees 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? When God or we ask our children "where does it hurt," what do we hear?
- What is the work God expects of us to create change for children? How might our listening become a starting place of healing? What comes next?
- What is God's promise to us and to our children for a more hopeful future? What is our vision for our nation in which all children thrive?

***Whose weeping does God hear today? When we ask our children “where does it hurt?” what do we hear?***

God hears the grief of our nation’s more than 10 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 4.4 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.

When we ask our children “where does it hurt?”—especially at this time in our nation’s history—what do we and God hear?

God and we hear the grief of children and young people suffering from loneliness, disappointment, despair, and depression after a year and more of disrupted education, celebrations, social and emotional development.

God and we hear the grief of children who have fallen ill themselves or had family members and others sickened by COVID and in some cases die.

God and we hear the grief of children traumatized by the killing of unarmed children, women, and men of color by those pledged to protect and defend them; by the continuing evils of white supremacy built into the very structures and systems of our nation, by the long delayed racial reckoning in our country.

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.



## CHRISTIAN WORSHIP RESOURCES

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.

So too today, God and we hear the manifold deep hurts of our children, and by listening take the first—not the only, but the first—step toward becoming a community of healing and wholeness.

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 our future if we heed God's call to move from weeping to work.

True, more than 10 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 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program the Child Tax Credit, and the Earned Income Tax Credit—can ease child poverty for millions of children. In 2019, more than four million children were lifted out of poverty with the help of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) alone. 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.

More than four 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 WORSHIP RESOURCES

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.

Our children are hurting. They are hurting from the pain of pandemic. They are traumatized by the violence of white supremacy and racialized terror. They are mourning lost family members, missed celebrations, disrupted education, and managing undiagnosed and untreated health and mental health challenges. The wounds are deep. The solutions aren't simple. The "treatment" that will lead to healing and the preventive steps that will avoid harm in the first place will take commitment, community, collective listening, collaborative action and organizing. But we can do it. We must do it. God expects no less.