

## Preparing to Preach to the Kids

By Carolyn C. Brown

Preparing to preach effectively to children does not mean finding "something for the kids" to add to the sermon you prepare for the adults. Instead, it means doing your entire sermon preparation aware that some of your listeners will be children. It begins as you study the text for the day or mull over the chosen topic, exploring its significance for children as well as for adults. It challenges you to give the sermon an outline and format that children can follow and to consider how your points speak to children. Imagine the children of the congregation looking over your shoulder as you work asking, "What will you say to us?"

This is not as daunting as it sounds. It begins by asking three basic questions as you study the texts or explore the topic on which you will preach.

Question 1: What words does a child need to know in order to understand this text or topic?

Words are the basic building blocks of a sermon. Not knowing or misunderstanding a key word is a major barrier to following a sermon. Unfortunately, many of the biblical words and faith words that are uttered in preaching do create barriers for children.

The church universal chuckles over the original way children hear some of the words of our faith. There is the child who prayed the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name ..." while another prayed "Our Father who art in heaven, how'd ya know my name?" Funny? Yes, but these children could benefit from a little word study on that unfamiliar word, 'hallowed.'

Then there are the words whose current everyday usage is different from its biblical or faith usage. "Offense" is a good example. Most sports-conscious children define "offense" as the team with the ball. At church "offense" is another word for sin. So when we preach about forgiving offenses or forgiveness for our offenses, we need to explain just what constitutes an offense and why it needs forgiving. To identify the words that need attention, read the biblical text once looking specifically at the vocabulary. Read several translations looking for the words children will understand. If you are starting from a topic rather than a text, make a list of key words you expect to use readily in the course of the sermon. Which words might pose problems for children? What could you do to eliminate those problems?

One preacher public collects "big words for Christians." Frequently during a sermon she will devote a few minutes to defining a word to be added to her collection. At times she recalls a word that is already in the collection and adds a new dimension to its meaning. Both adults and children enjoy this process and learn from it. Adults occasionally suggest words that need to be added to the collection.

Another useful device for exploring the meaning of words in preaching is to identify "used to thinks." For example, one nine year-old reports that he "used to think" that God and Santa Claus were brothers, and that Santa lived at the North Pole and took requests for toys you needed at Christmas while God lived at the South Pole and took requests about what you needed during the rest of the year. Identifying the problems with this way of thinking and replacing it with new ideas about God does two things. First, it

provides an opportunity to replace a rather childish understanding of how God responds to our requests. Second, it suggests that we keep growing in our understanding of God. Publicly identifying common "used to thinks" about a variety of faith concepts leads listeners to expect that over time some of their current understandings will also become "used to thinks."

Question 2: Are there obsolete practices, beliefs, or cultural realities children need to explore before they can understand this topic/text? The Bible was set in a culture very different from the one in which children currently live. The biblical culture was mainly agrarian and local. The cul-ture children live in today is mainly urban, technological, and increasingly global. Kids are interested in, even fas-cinated by, the differences in these two cultures. But they need help understanding the familiar aspects of the biblical culture.

Children need help understanding specific practices and items. For example, before children can ponder the good shepherd's careful watch over the sheep in the sheepfold, it helps to know what a sheepfold is. (To a child unfamiliar with sheep, a sheepfold can sound like a machine in which sheep are folded-like a paper folder.) Before the stories of the Samaritan woman at the well or the Good Samaritan make full sense, children need to know about the tensions between Jews and Samaritans.

They also need help with more general assumptions that have now changed. For example, much of Paul's talk about atonement presupposes an understanding of the ritual of sacrificing animals at religious temples. People in Paul's day routinely practiced such sacrifices to honor their gods. But animal sacrifices intended to honor God or to ask for God's forgiveness probably make no sense to children living in the twentieth century. Children, and often adults as well, need help in understanding how such discarded past practices hold truths that are still important for us now.

Question 3: What does this text or topic say to children?

If your starting point is a text, read it once from the point of view of a child. What interests you about the characters? What do you think they looked like? Do you like and trust them or do they seem dangerous to you? If you could meet them, what questions would you ask them and what advice would you want to give them? Would you want them as friends or leaders? Why?

What about the plot grabs your attention? At what point in the plot do you want to know what happened next? Does anything happen that is very different from your experience? If so, what do you need to know before you can believe that it happened and understand how it happened?

Bible Stories That Offend Children (But Not Adults)

Some texts offend both children and adults because they challenge what we think and want. These stories offend children because children hear them from a child's point of view rather than an adult's point of view.

The Story      The Problem

Cain and Abel Why did God refuse Cain's sacrifice but

accept Abel's? Unless there was a good reason, I'd be mad too.

The Flood      Why should God kill all the animals because the people were bad? That was not fair to the animals!

Abraham almost      How could God ask a father to do that? If sacrifices Isaac    God asked my parents to kill me, would they?

Ishmael and Hagar sent away    That was not fair to Ishmael and Hagar. They shouldn't have to suffer just because God chose Isaac.

All stories in which oldest      That's not fair! inherits all (especially if the listener is not the eldest child).

God kills the firstborn in Egypt    Why did God kill the firstborn to get at (especially if the listener is the    Pharaoh? The children had done nothing eldest child)    wrong!

Samuel in the Temple    Poor Samuel! Imagine living all alone in the Temple and seeing your parents only once a year and getting only one set of new clothes each year!

"But I say, ... if you are angry      Hey wait! Everyone is telling me It is OK with a brother or sister ..."      to be angry. I just have to learn to deal with angry feelings without hurting anyone.

This must be wrong!

"Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy." But, I depend on my parents entirely, Please God, don't make them choose not between me and you!

Children prefer stories to essays. Many biblical essays are part of larger stories, however. For example, Paul's long theological letters are responses to problems in particular churches. When children know the problems the texts address, they can listen to Paul's ideas and evaluate their usefulness in solving the problem in the original church and in solving similar problems today. This is easier if the problem is one they recognize as currently existing. For example, the bickering Christians of the church in Corinth will grab the attention of children more quickly than the Christians in Ephesus worrying about eating meat offered to idols.

What does the scripture say to you? Try summarizing the message of the story or essay for an eight-year-old. Does it make sense? Is it meaningful to an eight-year-old in your church or city? Is it good news for that eight-year-old? How do you feel when you hear from a child's perspective?

Some texts feel very different to adults and children, (see chart on following page) Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac at God's request is one example. Adults, hearing the story from Abraham's point of view, are impressed by Abraham's faith and reassured by God's not requiring the sacrifice of Isaac. Children, hearing the story from Isaac's point of view, are frightened. How could God ask a parent to do such a thing? What if there had been a mistake and Abraham had not been stopped in time? How did Isaac feel when his father tied him up on that altar? If God asked my parents to kill me, would they? Children need to be told clearly that Isaac was never in danger, that God loved Isaac and was protecting him. They also need to know that many religions at that time required parents to kill their firstborn child as a gift to their god. The God of Abraham did not and would not require this sacrifice -- not then, not now, not ever.

Some texts seen from a child's point of view offer insights that enrich everyone's understanding of the text. When adults read about the healing of Naaman, they tend to focus on the seven baths in the muddy Jordan River as God's chosen means of healing. When children read the story they are delighted by God's choice of a little slave girl as the bearer of the critical piece of information that enables the cure. They are pleased that her mistress and master take her information seriously and act on it. The story promises them that God takes children seriously and that children can make important contributions now.

If your starting point is a high holy day think about that day from a child's perspective. During Advent and Christmas children are facing all the traditions of the season without the instruction they used to get in the public schools. For better or worse, they are more dependent on the church and their families to tell them the stories and introduce them to the carols. Preachers must assume much less knowledge on the part of their young listeners. The Christmas stories, however, present few special problems for children.

Easter, on the other hand, demands that different approaches be used for people of different ages. Adults respond enthusiastically to the Easter claim and promise of victory over death because adults understand the finality of death and fear death. Children, however, have a hard time grasping the reality, especially the finality, of death. Even after attending Grandpa's funeral and seeing his casket lowered into the ground, a child will often want to know when Grandpa will be visiting. This natural inability to grasp the finality of death is supported by fairy tale princesses who awaken after "sleeping" for years; by cartoon characters who, flattened by steamrollers, peel themselves off the road; and by superheroes who, though apparently dead, revive to fight again. Given all this, it's not surprising that children can't get too excited by victory over death.

Recognizing this situation, much of the current Easter curriculum and worship resources for children focus on new life, paying special attention to eggs, bulbs, butterflies, and other symbols of new life. Children, however, are only vaguely interested in these symbols. "New life" strikes few of them as particularly significant or exciting since all of life is new for them.

The more helpful Easter messages are found in the biblical stories. To younger children, the empty tomb story is the ultimate victory of the good guys (God/Jesus) over the bad guys (Judas, the priests, Pilate, the soldiers). On Good Friday the bad guys thought they had won. They killed Jesus and sealed His body into a guarded tomb. On Easter morning God/Jesus blasted right out of that tomb and proved once and for all that God is more powerful than even the worst evil the worst bad guys can inflict. The natural response to such a victory is to yell "Hooray for God and Jesus!" and to celebrate belonging to God who is the most awesome power there is in the universe!

To older elementary school-aged children, who are focused on friendships and have clear expectations of "best friends," the most significant resurrection story is the story of Peter's breakfast conversation with Jesus. Peter had been Jesus' best friend. He had promised to stick with Jesus no matter what. But he had been caught three times on the same night pretending that he did not even know Jesus. Such betrayal by a "best friend" deserved condemnation then as it would now. As a betrayed "best friend," Jesus would have been justified in ignoring or punishing Peter for his denials. But Jesus did not. For Peter, the Resurrection happened when Jesus forgave him, welcomed him back as a friend, and put him to work building God's kingdom. For older children, Easter holds the promise that Jesus will forgive them and welcome them back even if they betray their friendship with him. Such Easter forgiveness is worth celebrating!

And then there is Pentecost. Pentecost is one holy day that has not been taken over by commercial interests. Many congregations actually overlook this day. But more and more congregations are finding it significant. It is in many ways the birthday of the church. It is also a celebration of the Holy Spirit, of God's presence with us. Children are fascinated by both aspects of Pentecost. They love birthdays with all the traditions and talk of "the day you were born" and "how you have grown." Many churches incorporate children's birthday rituals into a birthday party for the church that begins in worship and continues with a cake and punch party afterward.

Preaching on that day often takes one of two directions. It can focus on the church -- both the church universal and the individual congregation -- and can be an opportunity to remind listeners of the true identity of the church while helping the congregation evaluate its effectiveness in living up to that identity. Sermons that offer specific examples and activities that include children will help youngsters "listen" to talk about the church on its birthday.

Or the sermon can focus on God's presence. One question children often ask is "How can you tell when God is around?" "God is with us all the time," is the typical answer, but this response does not completely satisfy young questioners. When children read stories from the Bible about God speaking through burning bushes, angels, or the wind and flames of Pentecost. They often conclude that either God has quit talking to people in such obvious ways or that God has decided not to talk to them personally in those ways. In either case, they are disappointed and a little miffed with God. Pentecost is an opportunity to describe in great detail some of the everyday ways people sense God's presence with them.

Point out that some people sense God with them when they are outdoors, others while listening to or playing music, some during quiet times of prayer, still others while they are doing God's work, some when they are worshiping, others when they are alone, and so forth. This helps children identify experiences in which they have sensed God with them. Using lots of stories to which listeners of all ages might respond with "something like that happened to me" can be most helpful for understanding Pentecost.

Whether you are starting with a text, a topic, or a holy day, think about children early in the process of preparing the sermon.

#### An Alternative Approach: Start with the Children

On the Sunday that a group of sixth and seventh graders was to be confirmed, one preacher began his sermon, "I usually preach mainly to the adults and hope that the kids find some worthwhile ideas in what I say. Today I am going to preach to the kids, mainly to the kids who are being confirmed, and hope that the adults find some worthwhile ideas in what I say." He then preached a serious sermon about knowing who we are. The message affirmed that we are God's children, created in God's image and called to be a part of God's kingdom. He urged us all not to listen to those who tell us that we are worthless or who want us to settle for being less than God created us to be. Instead of his usually erudite references to current books and events, he told stories using athletics and talked about being judged by teachers, coaches, and friends.

Listeners of all ages insist it was one of his very best sermons. The children felt loved and respected and left with a message that was particularly relevant to their lives that week. They, as individuals, and their concerns had been taken seriously. The adult members of the congregation, who also struggle with maintaining a sense of self, felt they had heard a valuable message well worth taking home. They were able to readily add their own experiences with judgmental supervisors and coworkers to the preacher's accounts of judgmental teachers.

Children face many critical times through which the church has an opportunity, even a responsibility, to help them navigate. Most of these times focus on faith themes that we continue to wrestle with throughout our lives.

For instance, the first day of school is an intense time for children. There is the challenge of new classes, new teachers, new friends, maybe even new schools and new ways of getting to those schools. For many, there are new clothes and new books. The excitement spills over into the entire culture making the first of September more the beginning of the new year than January 1. September is a time of getting back to work after summer vacations. Community organizations begin new activities in September.

Many lectionaries recognize this with texts about renewed commitment and discipleship. All of this suggests "Back to School Sermons" that explore both the excitement and fear of new things and call children to be God's people in their new activities.

(Warning: Remember the children who do not do well in school because of academic problems or because they are not accepted by their classmates. For them the return to school is a reminder of last year's failures and therefore they are filled with dread for the upcoming year. Adults tend to talk to these kids as if this year will be different, that all the children will start the year "even," and that any child can succeed with a little hard work. After a few years, children who have fallen behind academically or who are repeatedly ostracized at school know better and, unable to share in the hype, begin the year feeling lonely and even more hopeless. These children need to hear that their predicament is recognized. The children who study with learning disabilities and other challenges also need the support of their church. Those who feel like outsiders need a warm welcome at church. They also need to hear all children encouraged to reach out to them at school.)

Report card time is a recurring judgment day for almost all children. Those who do not do their best fear the demands for better grades. Those who are not academically gifted but did their best, and those whose lives are consumed by problems that make schoolwork difficult fear that even their best will be found "not good enough." Both the "A" student and the marginal student fear being judged as "not good enough." So report card time is an ideal time to explore God's insistence on saving us rather than judging us. It is also a time to explore the different gifts God gives each of us and to explore the tension between trying hard to be a good disciple and knowing that God loves us no matter how well we do.

The end of the school year is filled with as much intensity as its beginning. Most children are ready for a change of pace. They want to be done with homework and being indoors. Some are looking forward to summer trips, camps, and sports. Others are worrying about new challenges. Going away to camp, changes in day care arrangements for children of working parents, and more time spent dealing with other children in the neighborhood can cause as much apprehension as anticipation. Sermons that talk about how God's presence is with us everywhere -- on sports fields and beaches, as well as in classrooms, will help children deal with these changes.

Halloween, though it seems a secular holiday to most adults, can be a high holy day for children. Basically it is an opportunity to face our worst fears with the realization that God is with us and protects

us. During Halloween, elementary school-aged children try to survive scary stories and walks through haunted houses, and enjoy dressing up as monsters (finding them not so scary after all!). It is important to them to prove themselves brave. One preaching opportunity is to point out that God is more powerful than any monster or evil power and that God is with us even in the scariest situations. The key text for this point is Romans 8:38-39. Children (and adults) can be armed with that text and sent out to stand up to any scary thing that they encounter.

Super Bowl Sunday, the World Series, the NCAA basketball playoffs, and a host of local and regional sports and school-related championships for a time each year dominate the attention of many children. "We're Number 1!" they chant with excitement untempered by the knowledge that next year someone else will be Number 1 and in a few years only the most dedicated fans will recall who won the championship in which year. Their enthusiasm is often fed by media hype, and by their developmental need to make peace between the warring urges within to compete and to cooperate. Sermons about who is Number 1 in Jesus' book, and sermons that compare the value of proving your own greatness versus caring for others help children develop solid Christian attitudes toward competition in our very competitive society.

Infant baptism, first communion, and confirmation are intensely interesting to children because they are public celebrations marking the growth of children. Children can remember or anticipate their turn at each one. On the Sunday that one of these rituals occurs, children are primed to hear the stories behind and the meaning of that ritual. By preaching a sermon about that ritual, pastors take advantage of a great educational opportunity for the whole congregation.

When sermon preparation begins with situations that children encounter and uses the language and stories that children recognize, we generally address issues with which adults still struggle. And while children do not have the experiences and mental ability to adapt what is said about adult realities to their childhood situations, adults do have the experience and ability to apply what is said about children's realities to their adult situations. So occasionally preaching from a child's perspective is one way to effectively reach both children and adults.<sup>8</sup>

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**From *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too!* by Carolyn Brown, 1997 by Abingdon Press. Excerpted by permission. ISBN 0-687-06157-1. Available from Cokesbury, 1-800-672-1789 at \$13.95.**