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Hello Friends.

I want to share with you something special I get to do each week. Well, I get to do a lot of special things each week. In the church I serve, I wear many hats. (Don't we all?) I write curriculum and lead the weekly children's message in worship. I get to work with our children's and youth choirs. And for ten precious minutes each Sunday morning, I get to visit our preschool-age children for, as they call it, "Music with Mister Mark." And while there is plenty of music, there is also movement, story, prayer, and space for wonder. This time together isn't so much a mini music lesson as it is a time of gentle, playful, sacred ritual. It's worship.

Children thrive on routine.

There are countless variations of this idea. We understand that routines:

- help children know what to expect and feel secure.
- help support social emotional development.
- help build trust.

Think back to the beginning of every episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Mister Rogers would enter singing while changing into his sweater and sneakers. It was predictable. It was reassuring. It was something young children could count on. In fact, it was more than a daily routine. It was a ritual.

A ritual is a routine that has the added layer of meaning. Ritual has the power to connect children to community and to their deeper selves. Mister Rogers' opening ritual helped build trust and genuine connection with his viewers. We have the opportunity, through carefully curated ritual experiences, to build trust and genuine connections with our young friends. We can help them understand how dear they are and how they are part of a loving faith community.

This resource is a collection of twelve curated worship experiences, each centered on a core Bible story. Each worship experience includes a dependable routine of songs, movement, prayer, story, and other ritual elements and is designed to be about ten minutes long.

This really is the ideal length of time, especially if you see all the preschool-aged children at one time. However, if you're able to meet with each age group individually, these sessions can be shortened or expanded slightly.

Now, let's explore the individual elements of the worship experiences and how you might use this resource with your preschool-age friends.



Ritual of Welcome

It is so important to foster a sense of warm welcome and dependability each and every time you come together. As the children arrive, invite them to sit with you in a circle on the floor and sing this song together. Encourage children to use the motions suggested.

Welcome



(wave to friends on one side) (wave to friends on the other side)

D

Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope.

(arms open wide) (give self a hug) (wave to friends all around)

G A F#m Bm Em A G/D D

All of us to-geth-er, held in God's em-brace. Wel-come to a place of hope.

Once a routine has been established, you can switch out the word **hope**, depending on the theme and Bible story.

Welcome to a place of **love**.

Welcome to a place of **peace**.

Movement/Song

This is a simple song or movement activity and is different for each worship experience. If I'm going to use a simple song/refrain during the retelling of a Bible story, this is often where I will introduce it.

And this is also a time when I "read the room." If I can sense the children need to get up and move, we'll do a short wiggle song. If I can sense some heightened anxiety, I'll do something gentler, even singing our Welcome song again softer, waving only our fingers.



The Box

The children love the box. It's fun and it helps bring a sense of mystery and wonder. The box can be a small wooden box or even a shoebox. An item is placed in the box before the children arrive. This is always an easy-to-find or easy-to-make item.

Hold up the box and ask, "Would you like to see what's inside the box?"

The children enthusiastically answer, **"Yes!"**

Bible Story

Each worship experience comes with a scripted retelling of a Bible story. These are all interactive and involve simple movement, singing, drama, or even body percussion. After the story, don't spend time trying to unpack what each story "means." When it comes to young children (and perhaps all people) a sound philosophy is –

Explain less. Experience more.

If you want to quickly lose a roomful of preschool children, try getting them to sit still and passive while you explain what a Bible story means. At this stage, it's about creating opportunities for children to encounter the stories of their faith.



Taking Care of Each Other

Hey, Neighbor

Here we take one core idea from the Bible story and seek to internalize it and even foster it in each other. This is an intentional time for affirming one another. For example, in the story of God calling Moses, we learn that Moses struggles to believe in himself. But God believes in Moses, and in each of us. We have the children turn to one another and say –

**"Hey, neighbor,
God believes in you."**

Puppet Time

This is, with little exception, the children's favorite part. I have a mouse puppet – Charlie the Church Mouse. He comes out near the end of each session and the children adore him. I can't skip this. One morning I was running late and decided there wasn't enough time for Charlie that week. There were tears. (Routines matter.)

Charlie does the exact same thing each week, and the children can't get enough. He comes out, says hello, and wants to play a game.

The game is – Charlie tries to sing a song or retell a story the children just learned. But he gets the details mixed up. The children must listen closely and be Charlie's teachers, helping him out with the right thing to say or sing.

Charlie starts at the beginning each time, eventually making fewer and fewer mistakes until he gets through the whole story or song successfully ... to much applause from the children! Then, if it's a song, Charlie likes to sing it one more time with everyone.

Now, there's a lot going on here under the surface.

- If I introduced a song to the children earlier in the session, and I can tell the children have some of the words but not all, I'll have Charlie sing that song. This gives me a chance, through Charlie, to teach the song to the children in a way that is fun and allows them to actively listen, giggle, and affirm Charlie. The end result is that everyone knows the song.
- If the Bible story has a lot of details, I have Charlie attempt to retell that story. Then when he

makes mistakes, I can observe how many children catch those mistakes and offer the correct details for the story. Incidentally, I always try to make the mistakes super obvious.

Charlie and I have been together for years. He's enthusiastic, playful - a lovable mess. I would strongly encourage you to consider incorporating a puppet character into your time with children. It doesn't have to be as silly as Charlie. I do have a second puppet, a bunny named Zoe, who lives in a watering can. Zoe is very shy and only comes out when we use our gentle voices. Zoe waves and blows kisses, but never speaks directly to the children. She's too shy. Zoe whispers to me and then I "translate" to the children what she says. Zoe has helped me teach lessons on gentleness and kindness. She's helped me cool down the volume in a room. And on more than one occasion she's helped me soothe a child who was feeling shy, anxious, or uncertain.

Find a puppet that feels right to you and give it a voice you can do without hurting your own voice. And you do not have to be a ventriloquist. As soon as Charlie comes out, the last thing the children are doing is looking to see if my mouth is moving.

Your puppet character could be:

- a bird puppet who comes out any time there's a song involving call-and-response or echo. The bird could sing the call and the children the response.
- a sheep puppet who can talk about the importance of a loving shepherd, or who could give a good "first-sheep" account of the angels visiting the shepherds outside Bethlehem.
- a curious cat who comes out to ask one question each week. "What's a shepherd?" "Is Hosanna a real word?"

Prayer

When we pray, we talk to God and we listen to what God has to say to us. I don't ask the children to bow their heads, close their eyes, or fold their hands. I simply ask them to echo me as we talk to God together.

Ritual of Goodbye



This begins by putting away each item we used during our time together. As we do so, we say goodbye to each thing.

Goodbye, (puppet name).

Goodbye, Bible.

Goodbye, burning bush.

Goodbye, box.

This simple ritual helps children know that a transition is coming. Transitions can be hard, especially for young children. But when children get to be part of those transitions in meaningful ways, and when the transitions remain dependable and consistent, the children are much more at ease.

Song: No One Is Alone

This closing song is a simple echo song that sends children on their way with the crucial message that they are always loved and they are never alone.

4. We Are Sent Forth: Ritual of Goodbye

Putting Things Away
Song: No One Is Alone
Blessing

Again, there's no need to explain this to children. It's enough for them to experience it. Just know that years and years of best practices – in terms of both child development and worship design – have gone into how this all fits together.

We've explored the concepts of ritual and routine. Let's look at one more "R word" – rut. The flow above is meant to provide a framework for meaningful ritual. It's not a rigid structure to be strictly adhered to, word-for-word, note-for-note. Within the framework, look for moments to add variety. Some of these will be suggested in the resource itself. At other times it will simply be a matter of you being present with the children, using your teacher superpowers, and making adjustments as you see fit.

- Are the children really responding well to a song? Add more verses.
- Is a particular song not quite landing? Teach the chorus one week and save the verses for subsequent weeks.
- Is it a five-Sunday month, and by week three all the children know what's in the box? Find another item related to the story that can be in the box – a mid-month surprise.
- Do the children need to move more? Do a wiggle dance.
- Is the group a little more wiggly than usual? Stop and take a deep, centering breath.
- Are the children fascinated by an item from the box? Pass it around so each child can hold it.

Be open to moments of wonder and play, and you can avoid the ritual becoming a rut.

Do What Works for You (Timing & Schedule)

Our time together occurs on Sunday mornings in the children's area while parents are in Sunday school or worship. We're an old, downtown church and this makes the most sense for us. Some faith communities may have enough children that you can see 2s, 3s, and 4-and-ups separately. A reasonable timeframe for each group could be:

- 2 years old – 6-8 minutes
- 3 years old – 8-10 minutes
- 4 years old and up – 10-12 minutes

Depending on size you might prefer to combine children into one group, in which case ten minutes is ideal.

You will notice that this resource contains twelve worship experiences, and yet, there are way more than twelve Sundays each year. (Ah, math!) In our setting we stay with a Bible story and theme for an entire month, rather than introduce new thematic content each week. There are many reasons for this:

- It is incredibly rare that we see the same children from one week to the next. And in many cases, due to parenting arrangements, we may only see some children every other week at most. If we rotated every week, think of all the core stories children would miss. Staying with

a story for a whole month ensures that most of our dear ones will get the same stories and worship experiences upon which to build their faith.

- Young children love repetition. Everything is new to a young mind – new words, new ideas, new stimuli. There is comfort in being able to predict what will happen next, to know how a story will unfold. But it's about more than comfort. When you tell the same story, sing the same song, or perform the same action with children – they learn more, they understand better, they grow more confident. As adults we have to resist the urge to just move on to the “next thing.” In fact, what a blessing it is to be truly present with young children who are experiencing these “old stories” of our faith for the first time. Through their eyes maybe we, too, can discover something fresh, wonderful, and even exciting!
- And there's a practical aspect to this. Twelve is a good number (the Bible would agree). Over the course of a year, I can find twelve different items for the box, I can learn twelve new songs, I can read and practice twelve Bible story scripts. If, however, I had to do all those fifty-two times each year, I'm not sure how sustainable that would be. It would certainly make it more challenging for me to encourage any volunteer teachers to try and take on leadership. Besides, with 52 completely different experiences each year, I think I might have my head buried in the resource, rather than lifted up, being fully present with the children. At this age, curriculum is all about what happens, not what the teacher reads from a resource. Twelve works for us.

Note: This resource is the first of a five-year cycle that will include a total of sixty Bible stories and worship experiences. So, if you really have your heart set on a different Bible story each week, that option will be available to you once all volumes are released.

Another option could be to offer each worship experience once a month. It could be offered on a Sunday morning or weekday evening as a brief Parent-and-Me worship experience for families.

Do What Works for You (Setting)

We have a special place in the children's area set aside for our time together. There are some benefits to this:

- Having a special place helps the children know that our time together is set apart for a special purpose. It's holy.
- Teachers appreciate the opportunity to get out of their regular rooms and walk with the children to a fresh environment.
- Children, for the most part, also appreciate getting to go somewhere different, somewhere special.

While we do have space set aside now, that wasn't always the case. For the first two years, I would visit individual classrooms, bringing everything I needed with me in an old vintage suitcase.

In fact, I still use that suitcase to hold everything I need:

- the box
- a container with all the items for the box I'll need the whole year. (That way I don't have to go track things down every week.)

1. God Calls Moses from the Burning Bush



Ritual of Welcome



Welcome

(wave to friends on one side) (wave to friends on the other side)

D

Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope.

(arms open wide) (give self a hug) (wave to friends all around)

G A F#m Bm Em A G/D D

All of us to-geth-er, held in God's em-brace. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope. Wel-come to a place of hope.



Body Drumming

This simple activity reinforces the idea of hearing and responding, explored later in the Bible story.

Let's play a game. I'll play a rhythm on my lap. Listen carefully and echo me.

- Tap a simple four-beat pattern in your lap and have the children echo.
- Try a few more simple four-beat patterns for the children to echo.
- For variety, rather than changing the pattern, change where it's played (lap, chest, shoulders, tummy) or change the volume (loud, medium, soft, very soft).
- Encourage the children to listen and watch carefully as they respond.

Great job friends. Way to listen and respond.

Teach this simple refrain:



One day Moses was out taking care of his sheep. He made sure they had grass to eat and water to drink. The sheep were happy. *(Have the children give a happy "baa.")*

Then, Moses looked and saw a bush. *(Hold up the bush and flame.)* The bush was on fire, but the fire was not burning up the bush! Moses decided to take a closer look. *(Have the children make slow walking foot sounds.)*

God saw Moses coming towards the bush and called, "Moses, Moses." Do you hear that? God is calling Moses. Let's sing our song of encouragement.

Moses, Moses, God believes in you.

When Moses got closer, God told him to stop and take off his sandals. The place where Moses was standing was a special place – holy ground. Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. I think Moses needs some more encouragement.

Moses, Moses, God believes in you.

God told Moses that God needed him to do something important – to give a message to a leader in Egypt called Pharaoh. Pharaoh was making God's people work very hard for no pay. God wanted Moses to go to Pharaoh and to tell him to let God's people go. Moses didn't think a powerful leader like Pharaoh would listen to him. Let's encourage Moses again.

Moses, Moses, God believes in you.

God assured Moses, "I will be with you." But Moses was still worried. Sometimes when he spoke, the words didn't come out the way he wanted them to. How was he supposed to give such an important message to someone like Pharaoh? But God said, "Go. I will help you speak. And I will teach you what to say." Moses went and did what God called him to do. Let's sing our song one more time.

Moses, Moses, God believes in you.



Taking Care of Each Other

Moses believed in God. And God believed in Moses. But sometimes, Moses forgot to believe in himself. It was so kind of you to encourage Moses. We all need encouragement from time to time. And when we know God is there rooting for us, we can have the courage to try new things, even hard things.

Hey, Neighbor

Everybody turn to a neighbor and say:

**Hey, neighbor,
God believes in you.**

Turn to another neighbor and say:

**Hey, neighbor,
God believes in you.**

Friends, I believe in you too. And now I believe it's time for a visit from our friend.

Puppet Time

You can have your puppet try to retell the story, getting various details mixed up. The children can be the puppet's teachers who offer the right answer.



Example

One day Moses was out watching over his flock of penguins. (sheep)
Then he saw a bush that was covered in chocolate syrup. (the bush was on fire)

Continue until the puppet makes it all the way through the story to huge applause from the children.

Prayer

Now let's make time to pray. When we pray, we talk to God, and we listen to what God might have to say to us. Repeat after me.

Have the children repeat each line of the following prayer.

**Dear God,
Thank you for calling Moses.
Thank you for believing in him.
Thank you for believing in us.
We will answer your call.
Amen.**

Ritual of Goodbye



It's time to start saying our goodbyes. Let's say goodbye to some of the things that have helped us understand God's love today.

Putting Things Away

Put away each item as you invite the children to say goodbye to it.

Goodbye, (puppet name).

Goodbye, Bible.

Goodbye, burning bush.

Goodbye, box.



No One Is Alone

Call: C Response: Dm G7 Dm G7

I am loved, I am loved, I am not a-lone. I am not a-lone.

G7 C Dm G7 Dm G7

You are loved, You are loved, you are not a-lone. you are not a-lone.

C Dm G7 Dm G7

Made by God, Made by God, one big fam-i-ly. one big fam-i-ly.

G7 C C G7 C

All are loved, all are loved, no one is a-lone. no one is a-lone.

Blessing

Friends, always remember –
You are not alone.
God loves you.
Jesus loves you.
Your church family loves you.
See you next time.



Keeping the Ritual from Becoming a Rut

- For the **Body Drumming Activity** – use a shaker instead of a lap drum and have the children “echo” you by shaking their bodies side to side, echoing the rhythms you play.
- Add a sheep as an item to discover in the box.

Welcome

Mark Burrows

Warmly (♩ = 104)

Em A G/D D D (wave to friends on one side)

Wel-come to a place of *hope.

5 (wave to friends on the other side) (arms open wide)

Wel-come to a place of hope. All of us to-geth-er,

8 (give self a hug) (wave to friends all around)

held in God's em-brace. Wel-come to a place of hope.

Additional verses:

Joy Grace
Peace Trust
Love Faith

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