How to Tell a Story

Storytelling is the most natural and universal way to convey a message. Across cultures, people tell stories to convey beliefs and shared values, for entertainment, and to connect with one another. Children are no different. Telling a story not only engages children's hearts and minds, but it allows them to imagine themselves in the story, experience characters' emotions, and understand who God is. Learning through stories also helps children internalize and remember the truth or lesson it conveys in a powerful, more lasting way.

Telling Bible stories also helps children feel less alone. When they hear stories about Bible characters experiencing problems and how God loved and helped them, it teaches children that God will love and help them with their problems, too. As they mature and age, children will begin to understand that they, too, are part of God's grand story of creating, saving, and restoring the world.

When sharing a story from the Bible, try including some of these universal elements:

1. Make the Bible Characters Relatable

Refer to the humanity of the characters in the Bible story and relate it to the everyday situations children find themselves in. Emphasise the emotions Bible characters experienced; children are very empathetic and will connect to the story when engaged emotionally. Children everywhere can relate to the sadness of Naomi and Ruth having to leave their homes or the fear of the apostles on a boat in a storm, how lonely the leper must have been when he could not be with his family or friends and how elated he was when made well.

2. Maintain a Sense of Anticipation

Maintain a sense of anticipation as you tell the story. A good storyteller builds momentum in a story by encouraging curiosity about what happens next. To do so, you might pause a bit before revealing the next event or get quieter and quieter as you dramatically share part of the story. For example, to build momentum with the story of Jesus walking on the water, you might tell it this way:

"The apostles on the boat were so frightened because they saw something approaching in the mist above the waves. What was it? (pause and squint your eyes like you are looking.) They could not see clearly (pause and lean forward)… What is it? (pause and place your hand over your eyes to see better)… It seemed to move over the waves… (pause…pause)… the apostles thought it might be a ghost… (pause…pause)… Oh My! (and in a dramatic, loud whisper)… It is JESUS walking on the water!

3. Make it A Sensory Experience

Each of us, including the people in Bible times and the children you are teaching today, experience the world through the senses of hearing, smell, touch, taste and sight. As you tell Bible stories, think about how to incorporate these senses into your lessons. What would it have sounded like when David played his harp for Saul? Have the children heard soothing music before? Perhaps you could play similar music while telling the story. When the prodigal son was longing for the pig food, what would that have smelled like? Have they smelled something stinky lately? Try bringing in something smelly and passing it to each child as you tell the story.

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4. Move With the Story

If there is movement in a Bible story, allow the children, or at least one child, to mimic this movement in demonstration. Here are a few examples:

- The Israelites marched around Jericho, so you could let the children march in a circle.
- The people of Jerusalem danced with David, so let the children dance.
- The ark was carried into the city, so try asking a few children to mimic carrying something important across a room.
- Mary and Joseph searched and searched for Jesus and finally found him in the temple with the teachers of the law, so let one child hide while the others try to find him/her.

5. Use Visual Aids

People of all ages benefit from seeing an object, picture, or visual representation of something from the story being told. Visual aids help us process the story and make connections between what we are learning and what we already know. To learn about the different kinds of visual aids and why we suggest using them, click on the Storytelling Methods page.

top

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