

Feasting on the Word[®]

✿ CHILDREN'S SERMONS ✿
FOR YEAR B

Carol A. Wehrheim

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Drew Stevens

Cover design by Lisa Buckley Design and Allison Taylor

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wehrheim, Carol A., author.

Title: Feasting on the word : children's sermons for Year B / Carol A. Wehrheim.

Description: Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. | Includes index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017006343 (print) | LCCN 2017029757 (ebook) | ISBN 9781611648188 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664261085 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Children's sermons. | Common lectionary (1992). Year B. | Church year sermons--Juvenile literature. | Preaching to children.

Classification: LCC BV4315 (ebook) | LCC BV4315 .W355 2017 (print) | DDC 252/.53--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017006343>

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

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Introduction

The Importance of Stories

“Children, come join me for the story,” the storyteller beckoned, with arms open. Girls and boys hurried forward to get a spot next to a friend. Some children hesitated, holding a parent’s hand, as they walked slowly to the front of the sanctuary. When everyone was settled, the storyteller began, “Long, long ago, even before Jesus was born . . .” You could feel the congregation, adults and children, relax and settle in to hear the story. A good story, told well, has something for everyone, from age four to ninety-four and beyond. Certainly the Bible is filled with good stories. And worship is an occasion for all generations to hear the story together. Hearing the story together is no small thing, for we Christians are a storied people, and hearing it at the same time and in the same space brings all generations together.

Many reasons are given for including a children’s sermon or time with the children in the order of worship. At one end of the spectrum, it functions as a way to transition the children from the worship service to their church school classes. In that case, the little talk or story may have nothing to do with anything else that takes place in worship or in

what children do in their church school classes. Too often, it is a story or talk that is prepared hurriedly and ends with a moral, one that is often beyond the understanding of the children.

But let's back up for a moment. Why is storytelling of any kind important? Stories—family stories, community stories, national stories, faith stories—are how we pass values from one generation to the next. These stories tell us who we are and what is important to our families, our tribes, our nations, our faith communities. These stories bind us together. In this same way, Bible stories bind us together as the people of God. They tell us who we are and whose we are. They help us see God at work in our world. They incorporate us into the body of Christ. And stories begin to work this wonder when we are very, very young. What better time, then, to tell Bible stories on a regular basis than when the faith community is gathered in its most unique and faithful act, the worship of God.

When the Bible story that is told matches the sermon text, the story provides an entry point into the sermon for adults and children as they ponder the story and how it is proclaimed in the sermon. Repetition of the story as it is told and as it is read from the Bible reinforces the text, its structure and plot, and need not be a concern for worship planners.

When that text is also the passage studied in church school, whether for children or all ages—which is possible when using a lectionary-based curriculum such as *Feasting on the Word*—the possibilities for faith formation are multiplied. But these optimal conditions are not necessary to nurture faith through telling Bible stories in worship.

The ultimate goal is to tell the Bible story so the listeners' imaginations and hearts catch fire, as happened to the

disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus told the stories of the prophets. Bible stories help us recognize Jesus and meet the God who sent him to us.

Another reason for telling Bible stories in worship is to free these stories from the page. When Moses spoke to “all Israel” as the people were about to enter the promised land without him, he told them that everyone was responsible for teaching the children, and this was no small thing “but their very life.” Every adult in the church has some responsibility for telling the story to the next generation. Indeed, the congregation promises that to each infant baptized. When the story is told in worship, adults have a model to follow. They find that it’s just fine to laugh at a humorous detail or to wonder what happened next. They also learn that they don’t have to include every word or get everything right. After all, this is how Bible stories were passed from generation to generation, by word of mouth from one person to the next. Not every adult will tell the story to the congregation but might tell it to one or two children or grandchildren.

Everyone is a storyteller. Think about it. When you find a bargain at the mall and phone a friend to tell about it, you are telling a story. When a child asks, “What was school like when you were in second grade, Grandmom?” and you tell about your second grade classroom, you are telling a story. Stories help us know each other, our dreams, our fears, and our joys. We may not all be comfortable telling stories before a group, whether children or adults, but we are all storytellers, and some of us are called to be storytellers of the church’s story to the congregation, the whole congregation.

One more thought about telling Bible stories in the service of worship. If you have heard StoryCorps on a public broadcasting station, you know that personal stories can delight,

enlighten, heal, and bridge gaps in relationships. David Isay, the originator of StoryCorps, describes the stories collected as conversations in sacred space.¹ No, they are not recorded in a religious building, but the stories are the meeting of two souls with a facilitator, whose task is to listen, listen intently, to bear witness to the story and storyteller. Perhaps the adults in the congregation are the silent witnesses to the story when it is told in worship. If that is the case, adults are included in the audience for the story. It's not for children only.

For all of these reasons about the importance of story and the place Bible stories have in nurturing the faith in all ages, perhaps we ought to think of the time when children come forward as a time to tell the Bible story in worship rather than a children's sermon or time with the children. The story is for everyone present; it's just that the children get a front row seat. It's a story, not a sermon. Thinking of this worship element as a children's sermon has fostered too many pious talks that end with a moral. Or children are subjected to an object lesson before they are able to comprehend metaphor, and they become fixated on the object. Occasionally something said leading up to the story distracts children from even hearing the story. Many years ago, a person giving the children's sermon began by telling the children that he had hit a deer on the way to church. A mother reported later that her boys could talk about nothing else the rest of the day. Did they hear the message of the children's sermon? Probably not. Tell the story. Tell it with all the enthusiasm and delight that you can muster so that God's Word is given to each person in the sanctuary.

1. David Isay, "Transcript for David Isay—Listening as an Act of Love," *On Being*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/dave-isay-the-everyday-art-of-listening/transcript/6274>.

Preparing the Story

This book provides a story for telling in worship based on one of the Year B lectionary texts for each Sunday, from the first Sunday in Advent to Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday (the end of the church year), as well as a story for Christmas. Also included are four stories for special times in the congregation's life. These stories are about five minutes long.

To prepare to tell a story provided here, read both the story and text that is the basis for the story. Adapt the story so the style and the words or phrases are comfortable for you. Don't try to memorize it word for word. You are *telling* the story, not reciting it.

Practice telling the story over and over. Tell it to a mirror, to your pet, to anyone who will listen. As you tell it again and again, you will find phrases and word combinations that are natural for you, but keep the language simple and appropriate for children. Then it is appropriate for those adults who are listening intently too. Using language and concepts the children will understand doesn't make it boring for youth and adults. A story told with enthusiasm will draw in the entire congregation.

As you practice telling the story, notice how your arms or head move naturally to the emotions or content of the story. Perhaps you stand tall and strong to emphasize the power of Jesus when he calms the storm. Or you might shield your eyes and look into the distance as you tell about the lost sheep. If you find motions difficult, pantomime the story, using actions and no words. You may discover some natural movements in the process.

With a longer story, you may find it helpful to get the scenes firmly in your mind. One method is to outline the

story and remember the outline by memorizing the opening words for each scene.

Have the opening and closing sentences firmly in mind. This is an exception to telling, not memorizing the story. Knowing how you will begin and end relieves some of the stress. Being prepared with a strong concluding sentence will keep the story from drifting away from you and the listeners.

When telling the Bible story, sound practice suggests that you do not ask a question of the children. Someone will answer you, and more often than not the answer provokes a chuckle from the congregation. Too many children have been hurt by that ripple of laughter, because they answer with all seriousness. The better road is to avoid asking questions.

Occasionally, a child will ask a question in the middle of the story. For example, a girl of about seven asked, “What does ‘getting even’ mean?” The story was about the rules from God in Leviticus 19, and the storyteller said, “When someone is mean to you, don’t try to get even.” The storyteller, in a sentence, explained “getting even.” The child responded, “Oh, I thought maybe it was getting everything right.” One can understand why a child might think that. Such distractions and other kinds will happen. Take them in stride and try to keep your focus.

Telling the Story to the Whole Congregation

Everyone comes along when a story is told well. And most people, with practice, can learn to tell a story well. Here are some things to consider:

Stand facing the congregation with the children facing you. Sitting in the congregation and listening to a disembodied story, when you know the storyteller is using motions and movement, is distracting. Encourage the children to look at you by saying something like, “Sit so I can see your eyes.”

Look at the children and focus on one child who is eagerly waiting to hear the story for a moment. Then begin with the opening sentence you carefully crafted.

When the story includes a quoted section from the Bible, as in a letter from the New Testament, write or type the quote. Roll it up like a scroll and open it to read during the story. Or place your paraphrase in the Bible and open it to read the paraphrase. Use a Bible that the children will recognize so they know that what you are reading is from this very book.

While motions and movement can contribute to the excitement and action of the story, try to keep your own actions to a well-selected minimum. Too much movement is distracting from the story. Constant pacing back and forth makes the listeners dizzy.

At the end of the story, after you have said that carefully prepared closing sentence, hold the gaze of a child who has been listening intently for just a moment before praying.

Enjoy telling the story. What a wonderful gift you are giving to each person who is listening, whether this is the first time a child has heard it or the adults know it backwards and forwards. But that’s the wonderful thing, the story you tell may invite adults familiar with it to look at the words from another angle. The wondrous thing about the Bible is that there is always more to say and ponder.

Writing Other Bible Stories to Tell to the Congregation

Sometimes the lectionary texts aren't what you want or the sermon text is not from the lectionary. Then the storyteller is responsible for writing a story. The story "Queen Vashti" (pp. xxv–xxvi) was written for that reason, since Esther 1 never appears in the Revised Common Lectionary. Once the text is chosen, follow these steps.

1. Read at least one commentary on the passage. Look for interpretations or information that will guide how you approach the story. For example, if the story text is from Philippians, explain that Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi while he was in prison. For the story of Queen Vashti, notice how the story begins because it is difficult to date the book of Esther and because it was certainly written long after the events it records.

2. Read the text in several translations, including one with a limited English vocabulary (CEV or Good News). Notice how the translations differ and where they are alike or similar. If you are the preacher and the storyteller, steps one and two will serve for the sermon preparation and the story preparation. The other steps may also help you move into the story as you begin your sermon preparation. Be open to the possibility.

3. Tell the story to yourself. If you aren't sure of the sequence, just keep going. This will help you establish a rhythm for the story and identify the parts of it that are important and memorable. Go back to the text and see what you missed or added.

4. Write the story as you would like to tell it. One of the

most difficult things about writing the story is selecting words that convey meaning to the children. Bible stories are not occasions to show off your vocabulary or clever phrasing, for the children or the adults. Paraphrase sections of speeches or letters you want to include. This is a rough draft. Pay no attention to grammatical details, misspelled words, or sentence structure.

5. Compare your written story to the text. Add missing details that are important to the story. Are there details that will enliven the storytelling that you can add without compromising the text? Check on the sequence of events. Is your story faithful to the text and what you know about it from reading the commentary? If you compare “Queen Vashti” to Esther 1, you will soon notice details that are not part of the story, such as the names of the king’s eunuchs and the details about the drinking party. Yet the essence of the story and Vashti’s role in setting up the necessity for a new queen come through clearly.

Generally, you can omit details that are inappropriate for children without damaging the intent of the story. For example, in Year B, the Gospel lectionary text for Proper 20 is Mark 9:30–37. Verses 30–32 are Jesus’ prediction of his death, while verses 33–37 tell of Jesus’ conversation with the disciples about who is the greatest. When preparing the story for telling in worship, base the story on verses 33–37. Omitting the first three verses doesn’t change the story about when Jesus and the disciples reach Capernaum. When you look at that text carefully, it is two stories. As a rule of thumb, keep to one story for this moment in worship.

6. The opening and closing sentences of the story are especially important. Write the opening sentence carefully

to get the attention of the listeners right away. Look at “Queen Vashti” and notice how the opening sentence tells the listeners that this is a story from the Old Testament, a story that Jesus may have heard as a child. The words “A very long time ago, way, way longer than anyone here can remember” draws listeners in to hear how the story unfolds. The closing sentence is just as important because this may help the listeners remember the story and helps you draw the story to a close. This is not a moral or explanation of the story; it is the conclusion of the story. Look at “Queen Vashti.” The closing sentence encourages the listeners to ponder the story on their own and clearly marks that this is the end of Vashti’s story. Indeed, nothing more is said about her in the book of Esther. If you read Esther 1, Vashti’s story doesn’t have an ending. The closing sentence of the story doesn’t provide an ending either, but it does provide a way to end the story being told.

7. Now you are ready to rehearse. As suggested earlier, rehearsal of the story will make all the difference in your role as storyteller. Tell the story aloud often. Let your body move naturally to the story’s emotions and content. If you find motions difficult, try pantomiming the story, or if you enjoy drawing, sketch the story in scenes. You may discover some natural movements in the process. Examine vocabulary and figures of speech to be sure you haven’t strayed from language accessible to children. And memorize the opening and closing sentences so you have them firmly in mind. Incorporate them into the story so they sound natural.

Writing a Bible Story for Telling

1. Read a commentary on the story text.
2. Read the text in several translations.
3. Tell the story without referring to the text.
4. Write the story as you want to tell it.
5. Compare the story to the text and revise.
6. Write the opening and closing sentences.
7. Rehearse telling the story.

Queen Vashti

A very long time ago, way, way longer than anyone here can remember, King Asheruerus ruled over all the land from Ethiopia to India. He wanted to show all the important men of those countries just how rich and important he was, so he had a big feast, a banquet. He invited the councilors of the court, the generals of the army, and the governors of the lands. This feast was not just for one night, or two or three nights, or even ten nights. It went on for 180 nights.

When that big party ended, the king had another party just for the men of Susa where his royal palace was. He held it in the courtyard of the palace. The courtyard had big marble pillars. They were draped with fine blue cloth, held in place with silver rings. The floor sparkled with mother-of-pearl and beautiful colored stones.

While the king was entertaining the men, Queen Vashti had a party for the women. It was in another part of the

palace. I think they were far enough apart that one party didn't bother the other one.

On the seventh night of his party, the king was feeling pretty good and very important. He sent seven servants with a message for Queen Vashti.

The servants said to Queen Vashti, "A message from the king. 'Come to me. Wear your royal crown so all the men of Susa will see what a beautiful queen I have.'"

Queen Vashti thought for a moment. It was dangerous not to obey the king's command, but she was entertaining her own guests. She sent this message back to the king: "I will not come."

Was the king angry when he got her message! The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. "What must be done with Queen Vashti?" he asked the seven councilors of the court. They huddled together and whispered. "If the queen does not obey the king, our wives will find out and they won't pay any attention to us. We cannot have that!" So they said to the king, "Send a royal decree to all the land. Say that because Queen Vashti did not obey your command to come to you, she is never able to come to you again; and get a new queen."

The king smiled. He liked that idea. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. So a decree went out to all the land, from India to Ethiopia: "Because Queen Vashti refused to obey the king, she can never come before him again."

Now some people feel sorry for Vashti, but I think she was a brave and intelligent woman. Although she was no longer queen, she still lived in the palace, and I think she rather liked it that way.

A Word about the Lectionary

During Ordinary Time, or the season after Pentecost, the Revised Common Lectionary offers two streams, or tracks, in the readings: semicontinuous and complementary streams. Each stream uses the same Epistle and Gospel reading, but the Old Testament and Psalms lections are different. The semicontinuous track allows congregations to read continually through a book of Scripture from week to week. In the complementary track, the Old Testament readings are chosen to relate to (or complement) the Gospel reading of the day. In both cases, the psalm is understood as a response to the Old Testament reading. This book provides a story for each week during Ordinary Time, no matter which track a church uses. Many weeks include a story from each track.

Since the numbering of the Sundays after Pentecost varies from year to year, the designation of “Proper” is used here, as it is in the *Feasting on the Word* commentaries and *Worship Companions*. It can be confusing to navigate the various ways churches designate Sundays; a handy resource for viewing all those labels in one place can be found at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>, a user-friendly site provided to the public by Vanderbilt University.