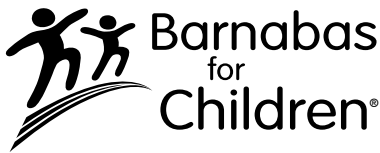


NOT SUNDAY, NOT SCHOOL

Bible Heroes!

*A once-a-month
children's programme
for small churches*

Eleanor Zuercher



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How to use this book

This book contains all you need to plan through-the-year activity programmes for children, exploring stories about Bible heroes. There is material for eleven sessions based on Old Testament heroes (one for each month except August, if you wish) plus a five-day summer activity programme on New Testament heroes. Each session is designed to last approximately two hours, although this timescale can be shortened or lengthened according to need. Each session contains the following elements.

- Suggestions for Bible stories based on the theme
- Suggestions for creating a display for the church
- Craft activities
- Games
- Suggestions for prayer

Timing

Each activity is designed to last between 5 and 20 minutes, and the ideas are intended to be used on a pick-and-mix basis to help you create your own programme. Sample plans for each session, showing an outline programme, can be found on the website www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk/extra-resources/. A sample plan for the story of Abraham is also shown on page 178 of this book (Appendix 1).

Since so much depends on the age, interests and abilities of the children, you may find that activities will take longer or much less time. Therefore, the timings given in the sample plans are guidelines only. Activities could also be run simultaneously, so that the children move in groups from one activity to the next if time and space round the tables is short.

The suggested activities for creating a display for the church are designed to last between 15 and 20 minutes. However, depending on the age and ability of the children, more time can be spent on them if required.

Additional material

Visit the Barnabas website, www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk/extra-resources/, for additional material, such as extra ideas for integrating children's work into the wider congregation (especially important if your children meet at a time other than Sunday morning). Additional materials can be downloaded free of charge.

Introduction

Although we tend to focus (quite understandably) on Jesus and Gospel stories when teaching children in Sunday schools and church clubs, Old Testament stories also deserve some airing. As children encounter fewer Bible stories in schools and at home than they did in the past, many Old Testament stories will be unfamiliar and fresh for children who have not heard them before. Many are action-packed and exciting and will appeal widely to children who are used to fast-paced films or television and computer or console games.

Some children can lose interest in stories that don't include a lot of dramatic action and, while there is plenty of drama in many Old Testament stories, you will need to consider how to present some parts of them in an appropriate way. If you are re-reading them for the first time since childhood, you may be surprised at some of the content. Old Testament stories can point the way to Jesus, and there are questions for children in each chapter of this book to help them think about the connection between the Old Testament and Jesus. In addition, the final chapters enter the New Testament to give a sense of the journey from old to new and fulfilment in Jesus.

Alongside reasons of faith development, there are important cultural reasons for hearing Old Testament stories: much of our culture's literature and music from a less secular (and quite recent) past makes frequent biblical reference.

Some obvious Bible heroes, such as Noah, Moses, and Jonah, are omitted from this book because materials on them have already been published in *Not Sunday, Not School!* and *Bible Journeys Holiday Club*, both of which are available from the Barnabas website, www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk.

The rural context

The material in *Not Sunday, Not School Bible Heroes!* is based on the experience of working with children in a rural context. However, many of the principles applied to the rural setting are equally relevant to an urban, suburban or larger town situation. Due to low numbers and the dispersion of the community, children's work in small rural communities can be immensely challenging and it is often not possible to presuppose that the work can follow the traditional model of meeting each week on Sunday morning while the adults attend the morning service. Therefore, it is paramount to consider a range of concerns, which may, of course, also apply to non-rural situations. These include the following considerations.

- The best day and time for your children's work.
- The best place to hold your meetings.
- The best mixture of activities.
- Who will be responsible for which tasks.
- How to advertise your club.
- How to identify suitable sources of funding.
- How to ensure that all child protection and health and safety measures are in place.
- What to do about potential difficulties, such as lack of toilets or kitchen facilities.

Opportunities and advantages

The challenge of working with a small number of children also provides an ideal opportunity for encouragement and reward. For example, small numbers mean that you will be able to get to know and serve individual children far better. Also, you have the advantage of being able to tailor your children's work to your own individual requirements.

Don't worry if you don't have a limitless expenses fund and all the state-of-the-art technology on the market. Concentrate instead

on making your programmes imaginative, creative and unique. The enjoyment the children get out of your sessions will not depend on technology; that is only a means to an end. Also, if you are lacking a nicely furnished, carpeted, warm room, make sure you use the symbolism, images and atmosphere available in the building you do use—especially if it is the church. The church building is entirely different from any other the children are likely to enter on a regular basis. They will appreciate that it is special, particularly if you make their time there special too.

Don't worry if you are unable to run a children's church alongside the main service on a Sunday morning. It is far better practice and richer in spiritual terms if the children are welcomed as part of the normal pattern of worship along with adult members of the congregation. Having the children present will also help adults and children to learn from each other in their understanding of faith and the Bible, so encourage your church leadership to ensure that provision is made to include children fully in Sunday worship.

Use your session times productively by keeping the teaching focused. Rather than coming to church on a regular basis, some children may only attend the monthly club, so this will be a golden opportunity for them to hear the basic Christian stories, perhaps for the first time.

Planning and preparation

As you would expect, if children's work is to be successful it needs careful planning and preparation. Some of the activities in this book require more preparation than others, but time spent in this area is always worthwhile. Make sure you give the children good-quality resources to use. It is a good idea to try out the ideas at home first, so that you know how they work and can show the children a finished example.

Alongside the workshop ideas, you may wish to add songs or percussion music to your programme. As well as using your own

style of music and favourite songs, it is a good idea to find out what songs the children sing at school and use this information to enlarge your repertoire.

You will also need to give some consideration to the presentation of the stories about the Bible heroes. This can be varied from programme to programme by using different storytelling methods. For example, you could use a child-friendly Bible translation, such as the Contemporary English Version, or a children's storytelling Bible, such as *The Barnabas Children's Bible* (Barnabas, 2007). Alternatively, you could tell the story using visual aids, actions, mime or drama.

There are some interactive stories in this book, together with some biblical guided meditations which encourage audience participation in some form. Old Testament stories in particular are often quite long or spread intermittently over several chapters in the Bible, so a paraphrase can help when presenting the stories to children.

The guided visualisations in this book help children to imagine or pray their way into the story. When using these visualisations, make sure the children are sitting comfortably. The words should be read quietly, leaving plenty of pauses for imaginations to work. It may take a few attempts for the children to get used to the technique, but it is worth persevering.

Integrating children's work within the church and community

One of the problems that may arise if your children's work does not operate on a Sunday morning is that the adult congregation may forget, or be unaware of, what is available for children. The ideas below should ensure that the profile is kept high and that everyone is encouraged to pray for the children's activities.

Identity

Choose a suitable name for your group and display it prominently in the church building. For example, you could make a simple banner with the name painted on it and children's handprints to decorate it. Also, make sure there are articles and advertisements in your church magazine, using your group name.

Children's council

Having a link between the children and the church council (or your equivalent) is a very useful way to ensure that your church leaders are informed about the children's work. This can also serve as a valuable way of setting up communication links, but make sure that it is two-way communication. You might want to consider having your children's leader or a representative specifically for children and young people on the church council.

To make the communication process easier, you might consider setting up a children's council. Many schools have children's councils, so children are often used to being asked for and articulating their views. If children's opinions are sought and respected in schools and other contexts, churches need to make sure children are also given a voice in the church setting. A children's church council will give them a chance to air their views, with regard to their own activities and to the life of their church as a whole. Adult members of the congregation may learn more about the spiritual maturity of children in their midst from this process than they might anticipate.

Worship

If the children's activities are run outside normal service times, there is a danger that all-age worship may be put slightly lower on the list of priorities. To remedy this, and to remind the rest of the worshipping community about the children, it is important to ensure that children and their families can be welcomed at any

service. Families need to have the opportunity to worship together, as well as provision being made for children to learn about faith with suitable activities and stories. For example, alongside the mainstream services, you may wish to find ways for the children to make a special contribution for the celebration of a major festival.

Local links

Local organisations, of which your church is one, can provide useful links. For example, your local school might find the resource of your church building very useful, not only for the provision of the RE curriculum but also for holding large festival assemblies, attended by parents as well as children. Schools often invite professional people to take assemblies, and children's work leaders are likely candidates for an invitation. An added bonus to visiting the school is that pupils will get to know you and what you do. Word of mouth spreads quickly, and more children may be interested in coming to church-based activities and events. Also, the local school may be a willing source for items such as harvest gifts or displays to decorate the church.

Other organisations or clubs might be able to contribute specialist themes. For example, a flower arranger could help the children to create special church decorations or something for Mothering Sunday; someone from the historical society could talk to the children about the locality; a local artist could demonstrate different media, and so on.

Longer-term projects

The children may enjoy being involved in slightly longer-term projects, such as producing their own version of the church guide. You could use the celebration of Pentecost as a starting point. Think about how the church is the people rather than the building, and invite the children to write and draw pictures about how different people contribute. Don't leave out the fascinating information about the building, but present it in a way that interests and involves the

children. You could include a plan of the church and a treasure hunt, which sends them round the building looking for historical clues. A photograph of a stained-glass window could be traced to produce a colouring page for younger children. Include children's pictures and ideas mixed with photographs, and adult-produced maps and puzzles.

If you have any keen needleworkers, you could organise a design-a-kneeler project. If your church already has modern handmade kneelers and you know of a supplier, you simply need to measure your existing kneelers. If this is not the case, suppliers can be found via the internet or through church journals. The children draw their design on a piece of A3 paper, using bold shapes and bright colours. Members of the adult congregation can then get involved by either stitching the designs or sponsoring the materials needed to make up the kneelers. The number of designs needed will depend on the number of stitchers and sponsors.

You can buy blank kneeler kits from suppliers and, using a squared grid, you will be able to work out how much of each coloured thread you will need to complete each design (not forgetting the sides, of course). You may need to adapt colours slightly for financial and aesthetic reasons. Transferring the design itself is easy: by placing the picture (or a copy of it) underneath the canvas, the design can be drawn on using felt-tip pen. After a few weeks' work, you will have a series of colourful, original and highly unusual kneelers for your church. It's a nice idea to stitch the designer's name and age on the side of the kneeler for posterity. Fuller instructions for this activity can be found on the website, www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk/nsns. (Click on 'Download the additional material'.)

As an alternative to stitched kneelers, you may wish to consider working together to produce some banners for the church. You will need to plan how many designs are to be incorporated and how they are to be arranged, as well as how they will be connected, whether by directly stitching one to the next or by stitching borders in between to frame each piece. The longevity and general finish of the whole project will also be improved by attaching a lining to

the back. As the designs will be displayed together, it might also be appropriate to plan the finished piece around a theme—perhaps the life of your patronal saint or a biblical theme. When all the pieces are finished, you could organise a social stitching event to join everything together, unless it is easier for one person to take charge to produce the finished product.

Child protection and health and safety

It is essential that you give both child protection and health and safety considerable attention. Your diocese (or equivalent) should be able to provide you with detailed information about what is required and how to go about fulfilling the requirements. You must follow your diocese's guidelines. It is vitally important that all your helpers have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) criminal record checks (visit the website www.homeoffice.gov.uk/agencies-public-bodies/crb for more information) and that you comply with the law by making sure that you run your sessions with proper attention to child protection and health and safety. Remember that the safeguards are there to protect not only the children who are in your care but also the adult helpers. Where you need assistance, ask for help. Obtaining clearance and holding records can easily be done by someone who wishes to support your children's work but may not be able to offer any physical help.

Child protection

Make sure you know how a child's disclosure of neglect or abuse at home should be handled. Check this with your diocese or equivalent. You should find that there is someone nominated by the diocese to deal with these issues, which will avoid the situation (particularly destructive in close-knit communities) of neighbours being told, or perhaps the minister becoming aware of too much detail, which could make it difficult for him or her to continue to support the whole family. You may think that this scenario is

unlikely in a small community where everyone appears to know everyone else's business, but we can never be sure what goes on behind closed doors. Waiting until after the disclosure has been made before finding out how it should have been handled is too late.

Check the requirements for the ratio of adults to children at your sessions. This will depend on the age of the children present, but you should always have enough adults to ensure that there are at least two present at any time with any child. Allow for the possibility of one adult having to leave the room for some reason: there should always be two left behind.

First aid

At least one adult in each session should be a qualified first aider. If you need more people to be qualified, find out about local training courses for child first aid.

Registration

Make sure you have documentation giving information about the children in your care. A simple registration form will suffice. It should give the name and date of birth of the child, contact details including emergency contact details, information about any allergies and the name of the child's doctor. Permissions for things like administration of first aid and taking of photographs should also be included.

A signing in and signing out form for parents as they drop and collect children will ensure that you know which children are present at any time. You will need to know exactly how and when this form will be completed so that it is always accurate. The form should include space for parents to notify you if someone else will be collecting their children.

Sample forms for registration, parental consent and signing in and out can be found on the website www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk/nsns/.

Health and safety

Carry out a risk assessment by viewing the building or room(s) you will be using from a child's point of view. Take particular note of doors that may need to be watched to ensure that children don't escape during the session.

If you are using an ancient church building, be aware of steep stone steps, unguarded heaters, things that are shouting out to be climbed, or other hazards. Such hazards may not preclude the use of the building, but some will need to be dealt with, for example, by placing secure guards around heaters and designating certain areas as out-of-bounds. No room can ever be completely safe, but you must take every precaution to safeguard the children in your care.

Make sure that the electrical checks on wiring and equipment, and the fire extinguisher checks, are all up to date and that you have appropriate insurance cover. Check this with your PCC or governing council if you are unsure.

Finally, make sure you know where the fire exits are, and that they are accessible in the event of fire.

The story of Abraham

Key Bible focus

Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you. I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation. You will become famous and be a blessing to others.

GENESIS 12:1–2

In the story of Abraham, we learn about his unquestioning obedience and trust in God and discover that history might have been very different if it hadn't been for Abraham's faith. In recognition of his obedience, God made promises to Abraham about his son in particular and his descendants in general on quite a few occasions. In your exploration of the story of Abraham with children, you might want to think about how God promised to reward Abraham for his obedience. The difficult story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac demonstrates the lengths to which Abraham was prepared to take that obedience.

We can learn that God does reward obedience, although perhaps it is not always an immediate reward.

Read the story of Abraham from a children's Bible or Bible storybook.

- What other Bible stories involve people obeying God? Were they rewarded? (Jesus provides the ultimate example of obedience to God's will. What was his reward? Sometimes the reward isn't one that we can understand or perceive.)
- What other Bible stories involve someone sacrificing their own son?

Displays for the church

Fingerpaint a crowd

This display reflects the idea of Abraham's descendants being so numerous. Whether or not we are his actual descendants, all believers are his spiritual descendants.

You will need: a large sheet of paper (size will depend on the number of children but lining paper or plain wallpaper cut from a roll would work for larger groups, or A1 sugar paper for smaller ones); paints; felt-tip pens; hand-washing equipment.

Make it

Invite the children to create a crowd scene by dabbing fingerprints on to the paper to make the faces of the crowd. (To speed things up, they can print up to five faces at a time per hand.) When the paint is dry, use the felt-tip pens to draw features on to the faces. Perhaps children could start by making a face for every person they can think of.

You could finish the frieze by adding the words, 'I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation.'

Chat about it

Talk about what it means to be a descendant of Abraham. In what sense are we his descendants? Who else is a spiritual descendant? (You might want to go into the question of Judaism and Islam, which, in this sense, also 'descend' from Abraham.)

Trinity icon

There are several iconic depictions of Abraham's three visitors (find the story in Genesis 18:1–15). Have a look at some pictures and talk about what they show. You should be able to download suitable

images from the internet. If you have a small group, you might wish to create a tableau of the scene.

Alternatively, you could make a large collage icon of the same scene. Sketch the outline of the scene on a large piece of card mounted on a solid board. Then supply glue and collage materials, such as fabrics, tissue, different papers and so on, and invite the children to complete each section in collage. If you are doing this in the style of an icon, make sure you have plenty of gold paper and rich colours.

Chat about it

Talk about how we might recognise an angel or even God himself. How do we know when God is asking us to obey him?

Craft activities

Trinity spinners

Because the visit of the three men to Abraham is sometimes interpreted by Christians as a representation of the Trinity, you could make spinners to demonstrate how three colours can become one.

You will need: white card; compasses; cocktail sticks; Plasticine®; colouring pens or pencils.

Make it

Mark circles of card using the compasses and cut them out. Mark the circles into three roughly equal segments. Give each child a circle and invite them to colour each of the three segments a different colour. Push a cocktail stick through the hole in the centre and use a small piece of Plasticine® both to keep the stick in the right place and to give a bit of weight to the top, to balance it. Spin the top and watch what happens to the colours: three become one.

Sand pictures

You will need: card (thick enough to take glue and sand); different coloured sands or grit (available from aquarium shops); PVA glue; string (optional).

Make it

Show the children the different coloured sands or grit and demonstrate how to spread glue on the card, sprinkle the sand on top and shake off any excess (exactly like glitter). Invite the children to create their own pictures using this technique and the different coloured sands. If the children want clear definition between areas of colour, use the string to mark out the picture and fill in the various areas. You could try making colours you lack by mixing different sands together.

Chat about it

Talk about God's promise to Abraham about his descendants. How many might there be? Just like the sand, we're all different colours, too.

Flicking stars into space

You will need: pictures of the Milky Way; black paper; white or silver paint (you could use other pastel shades too); toothbrushes; paint; hand-washing equipment; plastic sheeting to protect the surrounding area.

Make it

You will probably need to practise first with some paper and paint to judge the right consistency for the paint. Show the children pictures of the Milky Way and talk about the huge number of stars

and planets it contains. Show the children how you can load a toothbrush with paint and then, by drawing your thumb across the brush, splatter the paint on to the paper. (Make sure you move your thumb towards yourself.) Invite the children to take turns to create their own galaxies.

Chat about it

There is plenty of scope here to talk about the number of stars. If you are using coloured paint, you could also talk about how stars have different colours when viewed through a telescope, depending on how hot they are. You might also show the children some colour images from the Hubble space telescope.

Cooking

Angel cakes

You will need:

- 2 eggs
- 115g sugar
- 115g butter
- 115g self-raising flour
- pinch of salt
- flavouring such as vanilla extract or lemon zest if required.

You will also need: mixing bowls; mixing spoons; paper cake cases; scales; hand-washing equipment; icing ingredients (icing sugar and water or lemon juice); edible sprinkles.

Make it

First, make sure everyone has washed and dried their hands properly. Make the cake mixture by creaming together the butter

and sugar until they are light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, mixing well between each, add any flavouring you are using, then fold in the flour. Put about one and a half teaspoons of mixture into each paper cake case (if you are using muffin cake cases, you will need to use more). Bake in the oven at about 180°C/Gas 4 for around ten minutes. This quantity should make about 16 small cakes.

If this seems like too much effort and mess, you could always buy some ready-made plain cupcakes and ice them.

For the icing, wait until the cakes are cold (or use bought ones). Mix the icing sugar with a little water or lemon juice (which takes the extreme sweetness off the icing) to a smooth but not too watery consistency. Invite the children to dribble icing, using teaspoons, over the cakes. If you're feeling adventurous, you could use different colours to get some interesting effects. Finish with a generous helping of edible sprinkles.

Chat about it

How did Abraham feed his guests? What might you give to an angel who came for tea? How would you know if one did?

Think of other times in the Bible when angels or even God came to visit someone, perhaps sharing food with them.

Games

Truth or lie

Abraham believed in God's promises, but it's not always easy to know what to believe.

There are two ways to play the truth or lie game. The first method is to write a series of amazing facts on envelopes. Inside each envelope, insert a card indicating whether the fact is true or false. As the children take turns to read each fact, the others guess whether it is true or not.

Alternatively, organise the children into two teams. Give each team an amazing fact and ask them to make up another two false statements to go with it. The opposing team has to guess which of the three statements is true. This version of the game requires the children to be mature enough to be able to write some bluff statements that have a ring of truth about them.

Auction of promises

If you need an idea for fund-raising, you could launch an auction of promises on the back of this session. If parents have had lots of involvement in the session, it might be something that they could organise for themselves. Be aware that if you want to use this as an opportunity for the children to raise money, there are safety implications: you need to think about what is being promised and who is buying the promises. For this reason, it may be better to organise a group promise such as litter-picking or weeding in a safe environment, or car washing or a shoe-shine service, so that the promise can be performed as a group with supervision.

Prayers

Sandy prayers

Provide a large tray of dry sand. As prayers are said, invite the children to allow a handful of sand to trickle through their fingers. You will need to make sure the children are in a quiet, reflective mood, or risk the over-excitement brought on by sandpits!

This session might present a good opportunity to thank God for our community of faith, deriving from our descent from Abraham, and to remember those who walk with us or have gone ahead. You might want to ask for help to bridge the gaps between denominations or faiths.

Candle prayers

Give each child a candle and light them. (Do this only if the children are old enough to handle a candle responsibly. Alternatively, light a group of candles on a table out of reach as a prayer focus.) Think about the symbolism of Jesus as the light for the world and ask for grace to recognise God or his message when it presents itself even if we are busy, or if it comes in an unexpected form. Ask for grace to obey when we hear God's call.

Guided visualisation on stars

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Read the text below softly, allowing plenty of pauses for the children's imaginations to work. You will need to adapt the sounds that children might hear, at the beginning and end of the visualisation, to your particular environment.

Invite everyone to sit comfortably—back straight, shoulders relaxed, feet on the floor—and close their eyes. The children may take a little while to settle, and it may take a few attempts at this sort of activity for them to get the hang of stillness.

Listen to the sounds you can hear around you. Focus first on the sounds you can hear that are far away. What is the faintest sound? An aeroplane flying overhead? The wind in the trees outside? Birds singing?

Listen to the sounds from other parts of the building—perhaps conversations happening in another room. Now try to hear sounds within the room—the hum of the lights, the tick as the hands on the clock move round, the sound of my voice and of people sitting nearby shifting slightly.

Now listen to the sounds within yourself—the thump of your heart, breath filling and emptying from your lungs, blood rushing through the veins in your ears.

Imagine a perfect, beautiful, warm summer evening after a blissful day spent in the most beautiful countryside. You are lying outside. It is comfortable and you feel completely safe and relaxed. You gaze up at the sky as night begins to fall.

Watch the colours of the sky as the golden sun slowly turns to orange, then a burning red as it sinks beneath the horizon. The pale blue sky in the west slowly darkens, through all the shades of blue you can imagine to inky midnight blue, as you gaze upwards. You feel the warm breeze on your face; you feel at home here. This is your place in the universe.

Watch as the stars begin to appear, gradually at first as the sky continues to darken, then more and more thickly as the sky begins to look like the inside of a huge dome dotted with bright points of light—so many that you couldn't possibly count them. You can see the glow of the stars in the Milky Way spread out over your head, sweeping across the sky. Enjoy the beauty of the sky, its majesty and grandeur.

As you watch the stars, you realise that you are not just seeing black sky and white light. Each star has a different sort of light, almost like a colour, some tinged with red, others yellow or even blue. You realise that they do not stay in the same places but seem to be moving across the sky, making patterns.

Imagine you can listen to the stars. What might they sound like? Might they speak or sing? What sounds might they make? How could they sound all together?

Think about how far away they are. How long have they been shining? When did the light that you see today leave each star? Marvel at the vastness of the universe, the variety, the diversity. Take time to wonder at it. This is your home, where you belong.

Although the stars seem to be moving slowly, you can imagine that at such a distance they are whirling and dancing at

a joyous pace all through the heavens. You realise that you too are part of the dance. The earth is part of the pattern they make through space and you are part of the earth. Take a moment to enjoy the dance... to hear the sound of it, to relish the joy of it, to take hold of it, own it and be part of it. Become one with it.

Now we need to return to that perfect spot, lying beneath the heavens, gazing at the starry night sky, feeling the warmth of the breeze and the comfort of the ground. Watch as the sky begins to pale and the stars fade against the brightening sky of another day. As you lie there, listen to the sound of the blood in your ears... air filling and emptying from your lungs... your heart thumping. As you allow yourself to come back into our room, begin to listen to the sounds in the room, the hum of the lights, the tick of the clock, the sound of my voice. Now listen to sounds outside and the furthest sound you can possibly hear.

When you're ready, have a good stretch and open your eyes.

The story of John the Baptist

Key Bible focus

John said, ‘I am just baptising with water. But someone more powerful is going to come, and I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’

LUKE 3:16

John the Baptist provides the bridge between the Old and New Testaments: he was the last of the prophets and one of the first people to recognise Jesus as the Christ. There isn’t a great deal of detail about him in the Gospels, but what we are told is colourful and intriguing, from his ascetic way of life to the gruesome and bizarre manner of his death. The story of John baptising Jesus is perhaps the obvious one to tell the children, since it marks the start of Jesus’ ministry. The story of John’s birth and naming in Luke’s Gospel is a good way to tie in John with his role as the great last prophet, preparing the way for Jesus. The story of his beheading at the instigation of Salome is also likely to fascinate children, but perhaps as a footnote.

The Gospel of Luke contains the most detail about John the Baptist. The story of his birth is in Luke 1 and Luke 2; the baptism of Jesus is in Luke 3:15–22. The story of the death of John the Baptist is told in Matthew 14:1–12, with a more detailed version in Mark 6:17–29.

- John spent his ministry preparing people for Jesus. How could we make ourselves ready for Jesus?

Displays for the church

Waterfall banner

You will need: a prepared fabric banner, hemmed on all sides, with casing for a pole at the top or some other means of hanging it; strips of different blue fabrics and ribbons to make a waterfall effect; sponges (the sponge sides of rectangular pan scourers are good for this and can make angular rock shapes); fabric paint in grey, brown and green; glue; appliqué letters and/or fabric pen for lettering.

Make it

Invite the children to use sponges and grey, brown and green paint to create a rocky effect down each side of the banner, then glue the blue fabric strips and ribbon between the rocks to create a waterfall effect. The strips can be twisted and looped as they are stuck to the banner to make the waterfall look lively and give it some texture. You could even add some white tuile fabric for a foamy effect. You could end the waterfall in a painted or fabric pool at the bottom of the banner. Add a suitable Bible verse at the bottom, such as, 'The water I give is like a flowing fountain that gives eternal life' (John 4:14).

This banner also looks good with the word 'WELCOME' in appliqué letters down one side of the waterfall, which would make it appropriate to be hung at the entrance to your church.

Chat about it

Waterfalls carve a path through a landscape, just as John set out to make a path for Jesus. You could talk about this or, if geography has no appeal, use the opportunity to talk about how John used water to baptise people, as a ritual cleansing to prepare them to hear and believe Jesus. What sort of cleansing was required? Do we have to

have a bath before coming to church or do we mean some other sort of 'clean'? How can we make ourselves 'clean' for God?

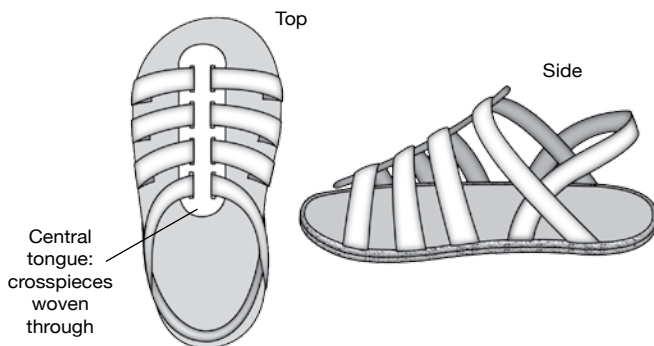
Craft activities

Sandals

You will need: two layers of thick corrugated card cut into sole shapes (one with the lines running lengthways, the other widthways); strips of card to make the 'uppers' (these need to be flexible, but also able to keep a loop shape, so bendy card is likely to be ideal); scissors; glue.

Make it

Show the children some pictures of Roman-type sandals, which the people of Jesus' time might have worn. Invite them to try designing and making their own sandal by folding the ends of the card strips over and sticking them to the top side of the sole. The children could make their designs more exciting by cutting slots in a lengthways strip in order to weave crossways strips through. If you want to neaten up the sandal, a card shape could be stuck inside to hide the ends of the strips.



Chat about it

Sandals like these would have been worn in New Testament times. What might it have been like to wear them? What would the advantages or disadvantages have been? What might it be like to walk in the footprints of John the Baptist or Jesus?

Writing tablets

You will need: pliable modelling material such as playdough or clay (you need to be able to roll it out like pastry); rolling-pins; sharpened pieces of dowel or blunt pencils. If you have them, you could use old picture frames (without the glass) to contain the material and give a more realistic tablet effect.

Make it

Give each child a lump of the modelling material and a rolling-pin (or one between two). Show them how to roll out the material to an even depth and write on it with the dowel or blunt pencil. Show them how the marks can then be flattened out using fingers or the end of the rolling-pin so that the surface is smooth again. Try to dissuade them from re-rolling, as their tablet will get too thin. Invite the children to have a go.

Chat about it

Talk about how people in biblical times often used 'tablets' to write on. These weren't electronic like ours, but were sheets of clay or wax in a wooden frame. Their equivalent of paper was very expensive, so these tablets were used as a cheap alternative. Children were often taught to write using them, or people would write reminders for themselves. Zechariah used a tablet to tell people what John's name would be.

What do you think it would be like to be able to communicate only using one of these tablets?

Play it

To extend the experience, prepare a series of cards and invite the children to take turns to communicate the idea on the card using only the tablet. Older children might, for instance, try to describe the plot of a book or a news event. If the children are younger (or you have insufficient time) ask them to communicate an idea or object by drawing on the tablet.

If you didn't want to make tablets, you could use a game of charades to illustrate how difficult it can be to communicate without being able to speak.

Sackcloth painting

You will need: sacking or hessian fabric already glued on to thick card; brushes; plenty of acrylic paint; water.

Make it

Give each child a hessian-covered board and invite them to use the paint to create their own picture. They might want to illustrate the story of Jesus' baptism or create a picture of some water (a river, the sea or a lake), or they might choose to paint the dove. As the surface is rough, they are likely to use plenty of paint. Encourage them not to use a plastering technique, but to allow the texture of the fabric to show.

Chat about it

Talk about the story and, if you wish, about John's chosen attire. Why might John have dressed like this? How might people today show devotion to God in the way they dress or show how they feel about something (such as a protest movement or a rock band)?

Water painting

You will need: thick paper; water; brushes; powder paint; small spoons or shakers (such as old empty salt/pepper shakers).

Make it

Show how you can paint with plain water and then, gently and sparingly, sprinkle powder paint over the wet paper. Look at how the paint dissolves and forms patterns.

You may need to experiment first in order to get the quantities of water and paint right. Allow the children to try it out before using the technique to create patterns or a picture.

Chat about it

Just as this technique can produce some surprising and interesting results, the way that God prepares for each one of us can turn out to be unexpected.

Doves

You will need: pre-cut card dove shapes with slots cut in them (see template in Appendix 3); paper; garden sticks; pens or collage materials and glue; thread and hole punch (optional).

Make it

Give each child a dove shape and ask them to decorate the doves in whatever way they wish, making sure they keep the wing slot free. When this is done, make a concertina fold with the paper you have chosen for the wings, and thread the folded paper through the wing slot. Open the folds out on either side to make wings.

If you wish, punch holes in the doves and put thread through so that they can be hung from the ceiling. For the wings, paper that has different colours on each side can be very effective.

Chat about it

Talk with the children about why they think the Holy Spirit was 'like a dove'. In what ways might they be similar?

Cooking

Honey sandwiches

As with any food-related activity, you will need to check whether any of the children have food allergies. It is not recommended for babies under one year to have honey.

You will need: sliced bread; butter or spread; honey; knife; plates.

Make it

Show the children how to make honey sandwiches and supervise them as they have a go. Pile the sandwiches on to a plate and invite the children to offer them to everyone as a snack at break time.

Chat about it

Do the children like honey? How tasty do they think their honey sandwiches are? Remind them that John the Baptist ate honey but he would have needed to find it himself from wild bees, which might not have been keen to share it with him. How would they feel about having to eat honey all the time?

You could also talk about eating locusts: some insects are considered delicacies in some parts of the world. How would the children feel about eating locusts? We don't know whether John did this, but might they have tasted better with honey on them?

Games

Quick-on-the-draw memory game

You will need: items from the story of John the Baptist, such as sand, rock, sandal, honey, picture of a locust, water, feather, sackcloth; tray; tea towel; paper and pencils.

Play it

Prepare a tray with all the items arranged on it and cover it with a tea towel. Give each child paper and a pencil. Remove the tea towel and invite them to spend two minutes looking at the tray and memorising the objects. Then remove the tray from sight or cover it and ask the children to draw the tray from memory. You could offer a small prize for the most accurate and best-executed drawing.

Locust pairs

You will need: pairs of pictures of insects, printed on card and cut into playing card size. If you have access to a computer and printer, clip art or an internet search is likely to provide some good pictures. Include a locust, but only a single one.

Play it

Make sure the cards are shuffled, then lay them out on a table face down in a grid pattern. Invite children to take turns to turn two cards over. If the two cards match, the child keeps them. If they do not, they must be turned face down again and the next child has a go. The object of the game is to collect pairs. If a child turns over the locust card, they miss the next go. The winner is the child with the most pairs. The single locust should be left at the end.

Discussion activity

Baptism of Jesus told with textures

You will need: sand; rough scratchy cloth (for example, sacking); water; feathers.

Try telling the story using different textures. Do this without a book if you can and invite discussion, particularly at the beginning, about the setting of the story.

As an introduction, allow the children to spend some time feeling the texture of dry sand in their fingers while you talk together about the desert and what sort of place it is. You could then move on to talking about the sort of person John the Baptist was and give them some very scratchy, rough cloth, like sacking or hessian, for them to feel. Talk about why John might have wanted to wear such fabric and what it tells us about him. When you begin to tell the children about how John baptised Jesus, allow the children to dip their hands in some water. You might want to tell this part of the story around the font or a large bowl of water. When you describe how the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, give the children some soft feathers to feel and look at.

When you've finished the story, talk about how the different textures help us to understand the story. What contrasting textures were there?

Prayers

Water blessings

Use a large bowl and some water to help the children pray. If you wished, you might pray round the font. Talk to the children about how John used water to baptise Jesus and how baptism is still an important part of church life. Discuss what the water symbolises—

not just ritual cleaning but also an essential support to life, available to rich and poor, people and animals alike. What would the world be like without water?

In the prayers, you might give thanks for our baptism if children in your group have been baptised. You could ask God to help us be ready for Jesus to enter our lives, to make us open enough to hear his teaching. The children might also list the things they have to be grateful for; you can then either include them in a general prayer or invite each child to say a short ‘thank you’ in turn. With each line of the prayer, add a little water to the bowl or font. When the prayer is finished, say a few words to gather everyone’s prayers together. Then invite the children in turn to dip their fingers into the water. If they wish, they could dab the water on their foreheads or draw a cross shape.

Guided visualisation: John the Baptist in the desert

The environment in which John lived and preached is very foreign to us, so try this visualisation with the children to help them think about what it might have been like. Read the text softly, allowing plenty of pauses for the children’s imaginations to work. You may need to adapt the details about the place where you are, at the beginning and end of the visualisation. The children may take a little while to settle, and it may take a few attempts at this sort of activity for them to get the hang of stillness.

Try to sit comfortably: back straight, shoulders relaxed, feet on the floor. Close your eyes and think about the wonderful planet we live on, with the great variety of habitat and life—oceans, deserts, mountains, forests, wastelands and farmlands. Think of our place in the world, in Europe, the islands of Great Britain, this country, our town. Think of the communities that make up our town—the shops, the organisations, our own church. Think of the building where we are now. Think of where you

are in relation to the walls. Think how high the ceiling is above you. Feel the hardness of the floor beneath you.

I want to transport you to another place and another time. It's a hot, dusty country, nearly 2000 years ago. Imagine you are walking the wilderness of John the Baptist.

Imagine a night spent there in the open. Imagine the feel of the rough, rocky ground digging into your back as you stare up at the night sky, littered with thousands upon thousands of clear bright stars stretching across space. Listen to the scuttling of night creatures that you can't see—though you might be able to sense larger animals passing nearby. Feel the bitter chill of the night air as you shiver, wrapped in a large heavy blanket or cloak.

As day dawns, the rocks around you fade into infinite shades of grey as definition grows and the sky shows a pearly tint. Creatures of the wilderness forage for food or seek shelter before the heat of the day. You may need to catch what insects you can now for food during the day.

You get up, unrested, from the stony ground and begin to walk for warmth. As the sun rises, the mountains in the distance begin to glow with the pinks and yellows of sunrise and the sun begins to warm your cold bones. You have basic leather sandals on your feet but you can feel the uneven rocky surface through them. The ways in the wilderness are uncertain, so you may often stumble and stones will get inside your shoes. The path might be steep and slippery; you may have to climb mountains or descend them. There are a few scrubby plants that you might cling to, but the thorns on some of them could cut your hands.

As the sun rises further into the sky, you have to take off your blanket or cloak to cool down. The sun reflects off the mountains, which now appear in shades of purple and brown in

the distance. Exposed skin burns and blisters. You need to find water. Imagine how thirsty you are and how hungry. Animal life has now disappeared. Everything living is sheltering out of the sun, except you. Hear the silence around you: the only sound might be the slipping of your feet or the wind rattling a tree.

Think about why you are here. You know that God is in all places. Here, where you have nothing to distract you, where you are unburdened by possessions, where there is silence, here you may find God more easily. Think about what you might say to God, and what God might say to you in this wilderness.

Now you need to come back to our room in our time. Feel the hardness of the floor; remember the position of the walls and ceiling of the room. Instead of the silence of the first century AD, you can hear sounds of our busy 21st-century life and you need to take your place within it again.

When you are ready, have a good stretch and open your eyes.

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