

Pretending the Bible: A children's ministry of play

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE GUTHRIE

Years ago members of our children's church school went to visit the local synagogue. The children walked in quietly and respectfully, but when the rabbi invited them to look at the stone-studded ark containing the Torah scroll, they lost all reserve.

"Look! Aaron's breastplate! Rabbi! Rabbi! Which stone is Zebulun? Which one is Gad? Which one is Issachar?"

My kids knew that Joseph and Levi, although they were sons of Jacob, were not included in the tribes of Israel, but Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh were. The kids weren't showing off. They were genuinely thrilled. The rabbi was astounded at these blue-collar kids from a downtown church in Kingston, New York.

I was less surprised, but I did realize at that moment that the children had internalized three years of pretending Bible stories.

After all, these kids had *been* the 12 tribes. They had taken part in church school activities that embodied the text in such a way that they couldn't forget the stories. Each (with reliable parents) had carried friends up to cafeteria table "rooftops" and been lowered on a blanket onto the floor for Jesus to heal. Each had been the paralyzed man, each had been Jesus, each had been a person in the crowd. Each had been a complaining, skeptical Pharisee. Each had been the king who "feared neither God nor man" as well as the guard protecting him from "the crazy lady" who wanted justice. (They all loved being the crazy lady.) And on one autumn day, while blowing on noisemakers, they circled round and round a mountain of cardboard boxes and brought down the giant walls of Jericho.

My mission had been to redesign a church school program without spending money (there was none). I claimed a room behind the church's thrift shop and decorated the ceiling with fairy lights ("Your descendants will number as the stars"). The Tent of the Presence (mosquito netting) took up a whole corner. There were two racks of costumes—many appropriated from the thrift shop—and bins of scarves, leper's bandages, old costume jewelry, foam armaments, staffs, crowns, cloaks and belts.

I still own and can't bear to part with Rahab's red cord, Joseph's silver divining cup, the "goatskins" Jacob fixed to his arms to trick Isaac, and an Ark of the Covenant that one of the parents made for us to carry around when we staged the Exodus.

During the week, the thrift shop stored a rack of coats outside of our door. So when we entered the room to begin class, we had to push our way through the coats as if we were entering Narnia. We met on Wednesday evenings, sat down to a salad and pasta or anything that was easy to make for working parents and busy children. Then we had two hours of church school, ending with compline by candlelight. We all loved Wednesday nights.

Here's the method for Pretending the Bible that we developed: We light a candle. ("Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.") We read the text, but not from a children's Bible text—it's important to use scripture's poetry and classical phrases, although a teacher may want to edit the text a bit ahead of time. Read not from an adapted script, but from the Holy Book itself. Then choose characters and even inanimate objects or elements of weather or nature (golden calf, gate, sea,

wind, trees).

Because we're pretending, not performing, everyone has to participate even if he or she is "only" a rock. Once the characters are chosen, we read the text again, so that each person can think more deeply about his or her part. (Never underestimate the ability of even very young children to understand.) We blow out the candle and dress up. Then we begin to play. We might act out the story several times, so that the kids get to change character and experience different aspects of the story. (It is important to have more than two adults present, and all adults should have safe church training or its equivalent.)

It made me very happy to see preteen and junior high children, who become sexualized, defensive and tough so early in life, become children again after donning a single scarf. After acting out our story, we would put away the costumes and sit and talk about it.

"Moses, what was it like to come down from the encounter with Yahweh and find the people dancing around the golden calf?" "Aaron, what was on your mind? What did you feel?" "Golden Calf, what did you notice?" "People of Israel, what were the things that happened to you throughout your story?" The answers, always profound, moved me, as they did the children. Often we were simply quiet for a while and in awe of the insights gained through play.

One semester we had to separate the girls and boys because they distracted each other too much. But it meant we had less time. One night I taught a group of boys. We were studying the binding of Isaac. I said, "We only have time to read and talk about it." "Oh, no Amma! Please oh please let us play it! We *learn* it better."

Instantly they chose parts and grabbed costumes. The Voice of God came from the thrift shop behind the coats. "Abraham. Abraham. Take your son, your only son whom you love, and go to Mount Moriah!" Soon Abraham and Isaac left the servants behind and began to climb (walking in place). Isaac asked, "Father, we have the fire and the knife, but where is the animal for the sacrifice?" "God will provide a sacrifice, my son." Abraham tied Isaac, an angel intervened—and suddenly the boys realized that nobody had been chosen to play the ram caught in the thicket. So the boy playing the Voice of God jumped into an imaginary thicket.

While the ram was sacrificed, a girl came to tell us we were late for compline and everyone was waiting. We didn't have time to talk about the story.

Two days later I was flying to a retreat in another part of the country. I began thinking about my sermon, and the readings included the binding of Isaac. Suddenly I saw the children's rendering of the story in my mind. When I realized that God had substituted himself for the ram, my sermon wrote itself. I told what had happened Wednesday night.

The next Wednesday night in Kingston, I told the boys about my sermon and how I had talked about them, and how some people in the congregation had cried. I turned to the Voice of God: "Did you know what you were doing when you became the ram for the sacrifice?"

He shook his head no. But suddenly, thanks to the power of their collective imagining, he and the other boys understood the idea of God sacrificing himself for them.

Why should children who discern the social implications of pitting "pure bloods" (Malfoy) against Muggles (Hermione) miss out on the justice issues from which the ethics of *Harry Potter* derive? If the average eight-year-old can memorize 150 Pokemon characters within a week, why wouldn't preteens relish complex and richly nuanced Bible characters? And why not help children navigate the lectionary, notice connections and the playfulness of scripture in the context of beautiful liturgy, even if their parents are nodding off or daydreaming in church? I don't think there's any excuse for dumbed-down Christian education—except, perhaps, for the volunteer teacher's fear of scripture. Then why not learn and play together? This method of pretending scripture text has worked not only with children but also with multigenerational groups, elder hostel guests, retreatants and conferences and workshops for college students.

As my middle school-age group entered high school, we learned improvisational exercises and techniques and went "on the road." The students helped me reliably and professionally at many retreats and conferences.

Human beings have always learned through play. Better to work out the Christ event story by story in a safe place with other players before taking that dangerous work of subversion and reversal on the road of life.

Of the many activities of ministry, I believe playing is the best work I've ever done.