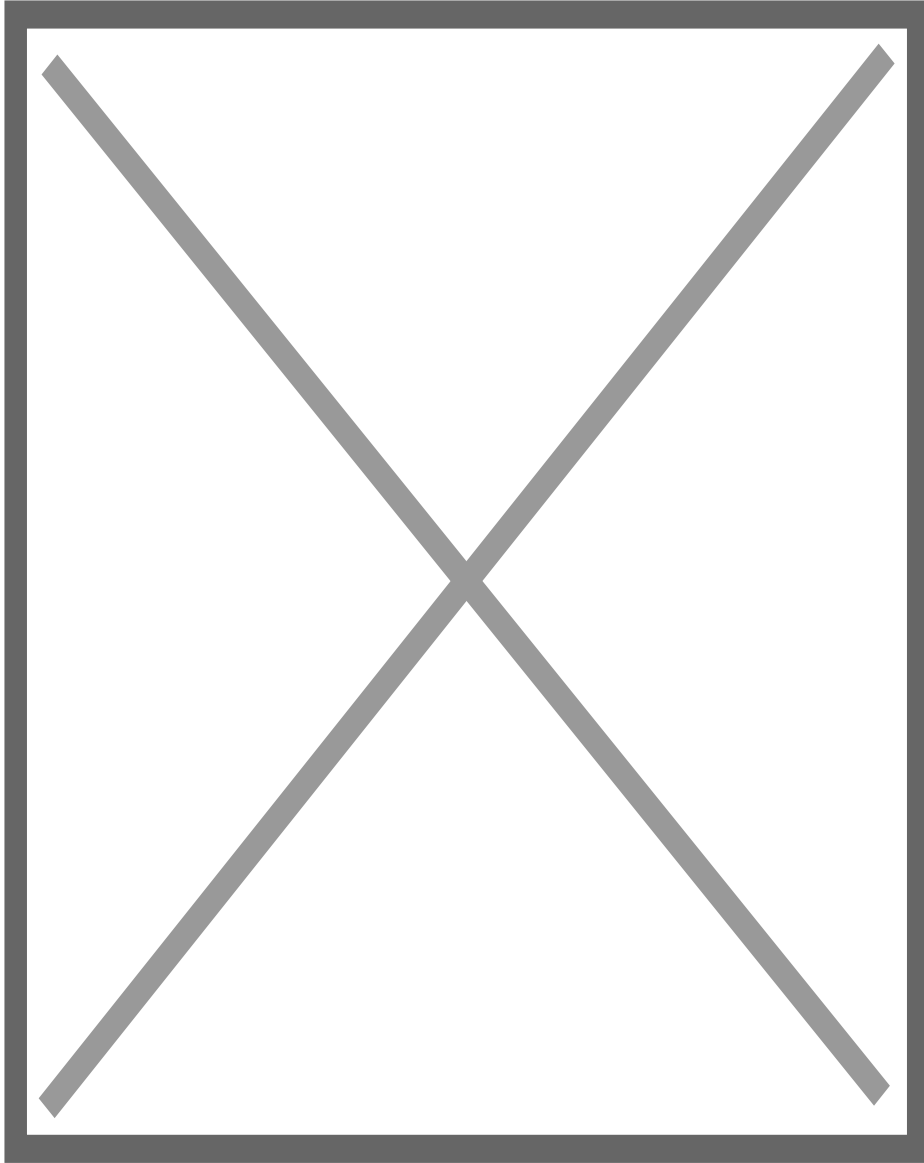


A preacher at play

I once asked a child to give a Sunday sermon—on the book of Job.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

Published on December 30, 2025



Century illustration (Source images: Getty & Creative Commons)

Early in my career as a pastor I served a church that celebrated Children’s Sabbath, an annual event organized by the Children’s Defense Fund. On the designated Sunday, churches invite children to lead the congregation in worship—reading scripture, ushering, displaying art, offering prayer. It’s an occasion to embody Jesus’ words, “Let the little children come to me” (Mark 10:14).

One year I got the idea that it was time to hand over to children a piece of worship firmly in the grip of adults: the sermon. I had Hannah in mind for the job. She was naturally curious, and she could see herself in the role. One Sunday after Hannah read scripture from the perch of a 150-year-old lectern, she had turned to her mother and said, “I have been waiting my whole life to get up there.”

Because I was brave or foolish, or because the line between the two is very thin, I also decided we would stick with our already assigned reading from the book of Job. When I met with Hannah for sermon preparation I recounted the arc of the narrative, how God makes a strange wager with Satan that allows this tempter to kill off Job’s family, destroy his home, wreck his business, and then cover the faithful servant of God with sores from head to toe.

Hannah and I read this story aloud to each other, paragraph by paragraph of oozing sores, piles of trash, heaps of ash. At the end she turned to me and said, “I don’t think this story is appropriate for children.” We persevered and wrote a sermon together.

Hannah’s conclusion about Job was forthright and serious. She told me that in the book of Job, God doesn’t do a good job of being God. Instead, God acts like a person, a person who is drawn into silly bets that overlook the human cost and then disappears when things get tough. She noticed that it is Job who acts the way we expect God to act. Job never gives up, remains faithful, sits in the depths of his pain—literally in ashes—but does not stray from the path of love. God, the one up in the clouds, peers down, seemingly unaware of Job’s life. Hannah told me that we want a God like Job.

I was nervous about this reading. I am both a grown-up and a religious professional. Devastating assessments of God’s behavior can be difficult to offer from the pulpit. Often pastors are in the position to clear up those concerns by concluding in favor of God. But Hannah was right. When it comes to Job, as in all our suffering, no answer is sufficient. And God is somehow on the hook.

That, I realized, was the real gift of inviting Hannah into this space. While I preach like an adult, Hannah came to the scriptures as play. In the expanse of her imagination—unbridled by a sense of which questions are the right ones, unaware that there are places we shouldn’t push the congregation or that certain thoughts are off limits—Hannah called the text as she saw it. She played with our ideas about retribution and grace, about who God is and what God should or shouldn’t be doing. She imagined, we might say, rebelliously.

One of the reasons I put Job in Hannah’s hands is that I wanted to follow her into that play. My role was to amplify her voice, to help adults hear the things that she saw as she saw them, as a child. Sometimes that was uncomfortable. I had to fight my own desire to preserve order, to keep things in line. It was also my job to make sure the church took Hannah seriously as our preacher. I wasn’t parading her out because kids say the darndest things but because children are also interpreters of scripture, are also broken and battered by a careless and casuistic world, and also long for a God who will right the wrongs around us.

The more time I spend with children like Hannah the less surprised I am at how often Jesus calls them forth as exemplars of faith. Before my years in children’s ministry, I assumed that Jesus’ admonition to be like children (Matt. 18:3) has something to do with innocence or unencumbered faith. Now I suspect instead that Jesus knew that children are excellent at play. Children at play are in what scholar Jack Halberstam calls a “potentially permanent state of rebellion.” Play is a space of freedom amid children’s lives, which are almost entirely outside their control. Play is how children manage and often relativize the structures that keep adult life in order.

Epiphany is one service in which I love to see children reenact the scripture. A dozen small kings with paper crowns come forward during worship, blankets for capes. Sometimes they lay down their own precious gifts on the communion table: a baseball trophy, a beloved stuffed animal, a blue feather found on the sidewalk. Through

children, a story of royalty and prestige is transformed into reality. There before us the powers of this world are translated into children. It reminds us that we all arrive vulnerable before the vulnerable Christ, no matter our station, each of our earthly treasures no more or less significant than gold, frankincense, or a baby blanket held for comfort through the night.

Children stumble upon the truth of scripture and place it before the congregation. They have no regard for nation-states and powers (Isa. 40:15); they are as playthings, and we might better be served, as citizens and Christians, to be as rightly oriented. Children, in their rebellion and unseriousness, their refusal of the unimaginable, are the gift Jesus invites into our midst. May we take heed.