**Scripture**


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**Safety in God’s Arms**

Jesus tells the parable of a loving father’s welcome to his returning son.

- Jesus tells the parable of a generous father, who, without hesitation, celebrates the return home of a wastrel young son.
- Young children flourish when they experience for themselves this kind of all-forgiving love. As one father said, “Children should be able to take for granted a parent’s love, just like air or gravity.” Our faith formation communities, too, need to make this kind of unconditional love the basis of our ministry to young children.
- In today’s core session, we tell Jesus’ parable as we continue to explore faith stories and the season of Lent.

**Question of the Week**

When have you acted like the younger son? the older son? the father?

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**Core Session**

- Getting Started
- Gospel Story: Lost and Found
- Coming Home Game
- Praying Together

**Enrichment**

- Discover the Good News
- Singing Together
- Music and Movement: Daria’s “Child of God”
- Party Cloth (scarves, play jewelry, paper table cloth, streamers)
- Info: Young Children and the Gospel
- Info: Daria Marmaluk-Hajioannou
- Info: Where You’ll Find Everything Else

**Helps for Catechists**

- More About Today’s Scriptures
- Reflection
- The Scriptures and the Catechism
- The World of the Bible: Tax Collectors and Sinners
Getting Started (5-10 minutes)

Explain:
- Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season of the Church year that helps us get ready for Easter.
- During Lent, we try to spend extra time praying, listening to God’s word and helping people as Jesus taught us.
- During Lent, we hear and tell special stories, too.

Invite children to practice one way to tell our special stories. We can use words we use to tell stories in our worship. Ask the children to repeat after you each of the following lines, one at a time:
  - He was lost and now is found.
  - The Word of the Lord.
  - Thanks be to God.

You can repeat this call-and-response game several times. Invite the children to make up new ways to move their bodies as we say the words standing stretched up, holding hands, kneeling together and so on. Then invite children to listen and hear who is lost and found in today’s story.

Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

Lost and Found

There was once a man with a young son. “Father,” said the son, “I’m tired of living at home. I’m ready to live on my own now. Give me my money. I want to leave.”

So the father gave money to his young son. The younger son took off! He traveled far away, looking for fun and friends. But before long, he wasted all his money on parties and toys and silliness. One day he found himself with no more money. “Goodbye,” said his new friends. “You don’t have any more money, so you’re not fun anymore.” Now he had no friends. Soon he had no food.

He found a job working with pigs in a muddy, mucky pigsty, but the pigs got more food than he did. He was hungry all the time. “If I don’t get food, I’ll die,” he cried. “I’m going home. Even if father doesn’t love me anymore, maybe he’ll let me work for him. At least then I would have food to eat. At least then I wouldn’t die.” So he began to walk home.

Now some days later his father stood looking down the road. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was his lost son—dirty and ragged, skinny and tired—but coming home! The father ran to meet the son, hugging and kissing him. The son wanted to say, “Father, I’m not good enough to be your son, but let me work for you.”

But the father didn’t even listen. He couldn’t wait to welcome home his son. “My son is home!” he cried. “Bring my son new clothes! Bring shoes to put on his bare feet. And make a wonderful feast! We will have a party to welcome home my son!”

Coming Home Game (5-15 minutes)

Teach the children to sing these words to the tune of “London Bridge”:

God is calling, “Come back home, come back home, come back home.”
God is calling, “Come back home. Come home (child’s name).”

Use different children’s names as you practice the song. Then say:
- Let’s take turns walking the way the young son did when he walked home to his father.

Help the children form two lines facing each other. Pairs of children who are facing each other hold hands with their partners, raising hands high to form a tunnel. Ask one child to walk, hop or skip through this tunnel while everyone sings to him or her. Once through, that child joins a line and another child walks through. Continue until everyone has had a turn.

Praying Together (5 minutes)

Gather in the prayer corner. Invite children to repeat the call and response used in today’s Getting Started activity:
- He was lost and now is found.
- The Word of the Lord.
- Thanks be to God.

Close by praying:
- Thank you, God, for leading the young son home.
- Thank you for our homes and families, too. Amen.

Note: If you use At Home with the Good News, either distribute this week’s papers to the children before they leave or e-mail the papers to their families.
Discover the Good News (5-10 minutes)
On page 1 of today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find an illustrated version of today’s gospel story.

On page 2, you’ll find a work of art depicting Jesus with the beloved disciple. We use this work of art to spark a simple discussion with the children on love and trust. You’ll also find a To Parents activity for families to use at home.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News, sing together:
◆ “God Is Before Me” (songbook p. 44, also available as an MP3)
◆ “God’s Love Is Forever” (songbook p. 45, also available as an MP3)

Note: To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Spring-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Singing the Good News.

Music and Movement
Daria’s “Child of God” (10-15 minutes)
Play for children the African-inspired song of affirmation, “Child of God.” (Open your Spring-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.)

Explain that we can walk with Jesus, just as the young son walked home.

Teach children simple movements to go with the third verse of the song. Movements for verse one are found in the session for the 1st Sunday in Lent on page 3.

I’m walking and I’m talking now for
(Walk or march in place.)

Peace on earth, peace on earth, peace on earth.
(Open arms wide, as if reaching out to hug the child on your left and on your right.)

I’m walking and I’m talking now for
(Walk or march in place.)

Peace on earth,
(Open arms wide, as if reaching out to hug the child on your left and on your right.)

For every little child of God.
(Cross arms over chest.)

Party Cloth (5-15 minutes)
Party for the Youngest Son
In Winter, children explored the gospel story of the wedding at Cana by making a mock party. If time allows, using similar activities for today’s session emphasizes the underlying eucharistic theme of celebration.

Tell children that the father in today’s story was so happy to see his son that he made a special party for him. Explain that every week, Christians celebrate a special meal of their own: Holy Communion. Invite children to prepare a simple party for the youngest son.

Children can dress up in “party clothes” if you provide simple scarves, cloths and plastic jewelry. Cover a table with a blank paper table cloth, and invite children to use felt pens or crayons to decorate the cloth. You might suggest that they include drawings of party food on the cloth. They can also festoon the table with crepe-paper streamers secured with masking tape.

Children can gather around their party table for today’s music, as well as for any snack time. You can also invite children to gather around it as you retell today’s story.
Young Children and the Gospel

Today’s gospel is often called the “Story of the Prodigal Son.” A more appropriate name would be “The Story of the Recklessly Loving Father.” He denies his son nothing. When his wastrel son comes home duly chastened and ready to ask for richly needed forgiveness, he doesn’t even wait for his son to open his mouth. He welcomes his son without hesitation as beloved and honored.

This is the kind of love we are called to model to children in our faith formation ministries. The message we give in every greeting, every gesture of attentive respect and even in every admonition should be: you are a valued child of God. You are fully welcome here.

Daria Marmaluk-Hajioannou

The singer known as Daria was born in a Russian-American family living in Pittsburgh. She travels around the world, collecting music from countries and cultures that range from South America to the Middle East to the former Soviet Union. Not only does she strive to perform the music she collects in authentic style, but frequently uses such native instrumentation as the finger cymbals of the Middle East or the shell rattles of Native American music.

With a focus on preserving and celebrating the diversity of languages and cultures, Marmaluk-Hajioannou hosts hands-on musical experiences for families both here and abroad. One recent project in northern Israel provided an opportunity for her to work both with an Arab community in Nazareth and a large Jewish collective farm. The work was interrupted by an outbreak of hostilities between Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Israel, a painful reminder of the obstacles to peace that remain.

You can find more information about Daria, together with interactive musical activities, at her website: http://www.dariamusic.com.

Where You’ll Find Everything Else

- Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  - Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled More about Today’s Scriptures.
  - A version of today’s Old Testament story titled New Food.
  - An optional game related to today’s Old Testament reading titled New Land.
  - An optional activity titled Tasting Matzo, in which children sample this traditional Jewish Passover food.
  - A handout of today’s Gospel Story, to distribute or e-mail to children and families.
  - This week’s At Home with the Good News to distribute to children or e-mail to their families.

- Open your Spring-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  - Information on Spring-C’s Models of the Faith.
  - An article for catechists titled Keeping Lent.
  - An article for catechists titled Lenten Disciplines.
  - An article for catechists titled Creative Writing in Faith Formation.
  - The Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten for Living the Good News.
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings invite us into the welcoming, forgiving arms of our loving God. In Joshua, the people of Israel celebrate their homecoming in the promised land, eating, for the first time, of the produce of Canaan. Paul describes our reconciliation to God in and through Christ. The gospel story tells of a father’s prodigal love for his lost sons.

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

Today’s reading is excerpted from the account of the events that ceremonially ended the exodus period and opened the way for the conquest of the promised land. The crossing of the Jordan echoes the crossing of the Red Sea. Then the people are circumcised, so that they might celebrate the Passover. The nature of the “disgrace of Egypt” (their slavery to the Egyptians? the skepticism about God’s ability to provide and protect them in the wilderness?) is not clear.

The celebration of the Passover marks the end of the exodus just as it had marked its beginning. The people are now ready to change their wandering way of life into a more settled life of farming in the promised land. The change is signified by the cessation of the manna.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Paul presents the new reality of human existence “in Christ”—it is a new creation! Old attitudes and relationships based upon a human perspective have been superseded. In the midst of the old creation, Christians, by faith, now live on the terms of the new creation in the new community inaugurated by God through Christ. God does not keep track of sins, but rather offers forgiveness. The Christian’s ministry is to announce reconciliation for all.

Reconciliation and life in the new creation are possible because of the salvation effected in and by Christ. He who was innocent of sin, nonetheless was “made...to be sin”; that is, Christ became the offering for sin and was made one with the sinfulness of humanity. Christ stands in the place of humankind, alienated from God, so that humankind may be made one with God again.


Like many of Jesus’ best-loved stories, this is both an account of human relationships and a parable of God’s relationship with humanity. It has been called the parable of “the two lost sons,” for both are self-centered, each in a different way, and both misunderstand their relationship to their father.

But the parable could be called “the parable of the waiting father,” for it is the father who takes the initiative, watching for his wayward son and having compassion on him as soon as he is seen. The father invests him with the clothing that marks his restored status as a son, not a servant—as one who is free (servants did not wear shoes) and in authority (signified by the ring).

The elder son, out of hatred, fear of loss or self-righteousness, is angry at his father’s response. Again the father takes the initiative and comes out to him. However, the elder son perceives his sonship as servitude, an exacted obedience for the sake of reward. He acknowledges real relationship neither to his father (whom he does not greet) nor to his brother, “this son of yours.”
Reflection

Sometimes home just gets too complicated and we have the impulse to flee. Grandpa has told the same stories for 27 years, the adolescents are sulking, the bills are mounting and three major appliances are broken. Surely, we think, without the clinging family tentacles, we could be holy as God intended. Magazine ads are so seductive: maybe a week in Tahiti would make the domestic scene more bearable.

Few can afford a cruise to the South Pacific, but we leave our families on a daily basis in subtler ways. Our friends are more entertaining; home is stale and demanding. So we create a distance, either physically or emotionally, between ourselves and the ones we should be closest to. One valid interpretation of today’s familiar parable is the call, “return to yourself; come home.”

Family therapists tell us that those who are in trouble have put everything else first. The job, the good cause, the needy relatives, sports and shopping consume so much time that family relationships suffer and decay due to neglect. We assume that these relationships will somehow amend themselves, and are amazed when they collapse entirely. If the father in the parable is a God figure, then he is waiting to welcome us—at home.

The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today’s readings remind us how God has changed us and our world by the forgiveness of sins (CCC, #1441–42). Jesus likens God to a father (CCC, #238–42, 370, 2779) who is extravagant with his love and always eager to forgive his children. When we entered into the Christian community through baptism we were made new. And if we sin, we can experience the divine forgiveness of sin through an encounter with Christ in the sacrament of reconciliation (CCC, #1440–60).

The World of the Bible

Tax Collectors and Sinners
In Jesus’ times, Rome set the amount of revenue to be raised by a district and then sold the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder, who could charge whatever he wished in order to make a profit. The tax collector was thus viewed as an extortioner and traitor and so was an outcast to his fellow Jews.

“Sinners” were both those who led immoral lives and those whose occupations were considered sure to lead them into immorality—tax collectors, shepherds, etc. Jesus turns this attitude around by noting God’s unchanging love toward the sinner, whose response should be conversion.