

praying the psalms **WITH KIDS**

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Dear God, be with my cat. Be with my grandma. Be with my friend who broke his arm.

The prayers of young children, in spite of their “me-centeredness,” often reflect concerns with their immediate world. These basic intercessory prayers show that kids work to develop their own prayer life. They also prompt us to guide our children well in learning the full range of a rich prayer life with God.

Wise are the parents and church community who turn to the psalms to cultivate this prayer life. Eugene Peterson refers to the psalms as the “prayer masters.” They provide us with a complete toolbox to practice our prayers. As we put those tools to use, our prayer life will get better over time. In his introduction to *The Message*, Peterson writes, “Inexperienced, we suppose that there must be an ‘insider’ language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental, not advanced, language.”

To help introduce the psalms to children, consider these beautifully illustrated books. They provide an accessible way to help young children hear and see the psalms and begin to practice the language of prayer. If you have others to share, please email kvhulst@calvin.edu.



Psalms for Young Children by Marie-Helene Delval (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2008). Simple sentence paraphrases of more than forty psalms are paired with bright, colorful illustrations. All eight of the “vertical habit” words (see sidebar) show up throughout the book. A great choice for starting a psalms book collection.



Illustrated Psalms of Praise, by Amy Ribordy Reese, illustrated by Salmos de Alabanza (Liturgy Training Publications, 2005). This side-by-side English/Spanish translation of Psalms 104, 148, and 150 uses

The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version and the *Biblia Americana San Jeronimo*. Vibrant full-page illustrations accompany the texts.



Praise the Lord, My Soul: Psalm 104 for Children and Shout for Joy and Sing! Psalm 65 for Children retold by Christopher Webber, illustrated by Preston McDaniels (Morehouse Publishing, 2002 and 2003).



What Does the Sky Say? by Nancy White Carlstrom, illustrated by Tim Ladwig (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2001). Richly illustrated prose poem inspired by Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God.”



Morning Has Broken by Eleanor Farjeon, illustrated by Tim Ladwig (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1996). This hymn text was originally written for children and inspired by Psalm 118: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

VERTICAL HABITS: A FRAMEWORK FOR PRAYING THE PSALMS

One way to interact with this collection of psalms books is to use “Vertical Habits,” a faith vocabulary program being developed at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (see “Vertical Habits” by Betty Grit and “Bringing the Habits Home” by Carrie Steenwyk, RW 84). “Vertical Habits” words encourage children (and all worshippers) to engage more deeply in worship. Just as saying *I love you*, *sorry*, and *thank-you* builds our personal relationships over time, the same words in worship shape our relationship with God and the way we live out our faith. As you read through these books, identify with children the vertical habits and ask them how they think they could practice them in worship and in everyday life.



Glory by Nancy White Carlstrom (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2001). Playful illustrations sing and celebrate in this praise psalm to God. This was first presented as a children's liturgy at First Presbyterian Church in Fairbanks, Alaska.



Sing A New Song: A Book of Psalms by Bijou Le Tord (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1997). Psalm excerpts come off the page through soft watercolor illustrations. Includes the psalm number at the

bottom of the page, an important biblical literacy component for children.



Children's Psalms to Pray, Sing & Do by David Haas (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003). Designed for children to pray aloud and to color the rather intricate illustrations (ideal for elementary-age children). Each psalm prayer references the psalm number and provides several questions to help children engage with the psalm. A wonderful book to bring along to worship or use in a Children and Worship program.



The Praises: Psalm 148, a Psalm of David by Niko Chocheli (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000). Chocheli is a professor of art and a member of the Orthodox Church. His illustrations reflect his study and artistic achievement in Orthodox iconography. This is a beautiful book to return to often.

I also recommend the following three books on Psalm 23, a familiar psalm for children. Though these books set Psalm 23 in very different contexts, each helps children practice the habit of saying thank you in situations of both abundance and need.



Psalm Twenty-Three by Tim Ladwig (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1993). The familiar words of Psalm 23 come to life against the rich backdrop of daily life in the city.



Psalm 23 by Barry Moser (Zondervan, 2008). Beautifully illustrated in watercolors, Psalm 23 is presented through the perspective of a young boy in the rural setting of modern-day Antigua.



The Lord Is My Shepherd: Psalm 23 for Children, retold by Christopher Webber, illustrated by Preston McDaniels (Morehouse Publishing, 2004). Features childlike illustrations of a variety of children in different settings.

As children attend worship and listen to the prayers of the adults in their lives—parents, pastors, teachers—they repeat the words they hear. When the Lord's Prayer is spoken regularly in worship, many children learn it by heart and join in without prompting. Often families have a ritual meal time or bedtime prayer that children eagerly learn to say aloud. Some sing prayer refrains that remain with children and influence their prayers later in life. At church and at home, the language of prayer is a significant aspect of the way children practice their faith.



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