

# Beginning the Godly Play Year

## Welcome to Godly Play!

Godly Play offers a creative, child-honoring way of entering into and experiencing the biblical story. In Godly Play, we play with the language of God and God's People: our sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions, and silence. Through this powerful language, through our wondering, through the community of players gathered together, we hear the deepest invitation of all: an invitation to come play with God.

## What Happens in a Godly Play Session?

### At the Threshold

A doorperson waits by the door to the Godly Play room, warmly welcoming children as they arrive. He says (of course, "he" could also be a "she"), "I'm so glad you're here. Are you ready for Godly Play?"

### Building the Circle

Children make their way into the room and sit in a circle with the storyteller. She talks (of course, "she" could also be a "he") quietly and easily with the children, building a community where each and every participant is warmly welcomed.

The storyteller says, "We need to get ready for the story." She shows how by sitting quietly, legs crossed, hands at the ankles. Conversation yields to silence. She smiles and says, "Watch where I go to get this story."

### Presenting the Lesson

The storyteller goes to get the materials for the day's presentation—a box, a basket, or a tray. She brings these materials to the circle. Slowly, deliberately, she brings out the story figures and objects, gently moving and arranging them as she tells the story. The children's eyes

focus where her eyes and hands focus, on the small wooden figures, painted plaques, or beautifully finished props moving in the circle.

The lesson continues, moves forward...and concludes.

The storyteller sits back, but keeps her eyes on the figures. "I wonder," she says. "I wonder what part of this story you like best?" There is silence for a moment, and then a child answers...and then perhaps another. The storyteller affirms each answer.

"I wonder what part is the most important?" Children name different parts. Every serious struggle to answer is affirmed.

"I wonder where you are in the story or what part of the story is about you?"

"I wonder if there is any part of this story we could leave out and still have all the story we need?"

The storyteller listens respectfully to every answer, repeating it, never calling one response good or another wrong. It is the child's effort to speak theologically in a seriously playful way that is being supported.

### Response

The wondering sinks into silence. The children watch as the storyteller puts away the lesson. She invites them to think about what work they would like to do in response to the lesson. The children have been involved in the story and the wondering. Now that absorbed involvement continues as they, one by one, name what response they choose to make.

Some play mindfully with the materials from the presentation or from other presentations. Other want to paint. Still others work with



crayons. For at least a quarter of an hour, they work at their responses.

### The Feast

The storyteller turns the room lights off: a silent signal. She waits a moment, until all eyes are on her, then invites the children to put away their work and gather for the feast.

One child-server passes out the napkins to each child. Another puts down a healthy snack, and a third a cup of juice. After all have been served, a prayer is said, and the feast shared.

### Saying Goodbye

When the feast is finished, the storyteller draws the attention of the group: "It's time to say goodbye." One by one, children go to the storyteller and she holds out her hands. Some children take her hands, others lean forward and hug her. With each person she looks into their eyes, smiles, and says a quiet goodbye. "It was a pleasure to have you here today. Thank you for being with us."

## Ten Best Ways for Parents

The presentation for children about the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai is called "The Ten Best Ways." There are also ten ways that parents can effectively support their children in the Godly Play program.

1. Follow the schedule as faithfully as you can.
2. Please help your children arrive in plenty of time so they can be relaxed.
3. It is best to say good-by to your children at the doorway. This helps the door person help the child enter the room appropriately.
4. It is also best not to hover at the doorway. Once your child enters the room they will be safe. The mentors may be volunteers but they are well trained.
5. When you pick up your children they may not be able to put into words what the lesson for the day was. They are not asked to memorize a summary or a Bible verse. They are invited to wonder together what the lesson means and how it is important for their lives. Summaries and Bible verses are important but that is not what the emphasis is. The emphasis is on learning how this language helps them make meaning for their life and death.
6. When you pick up your children you will want to know what they have learned, but they will not always be able to tell you. They also may not have an art project or a worksheet to show you. We don't use either. The art is expressive art and they may want to keep this private. Much of the significant communication in the room is nonverbal and the history of the Christian Tradition is full of warnings about how the mystery of God's presence is difficult to express.
7. Please don't come into the room during the session, so the room can remain for the children. The mentors have been trained how to help this child-centered focus by talking softly and keeping down below the invisible ceiling that is about the height of the average child in the room. You are always welcome to come into the room after the class.
8. You are welcome to come to the parents' sessions when you can experience directly what your children do. That is a great time for good discussions about what is going on.
9. Would you like to help? We welcome volunteers to help with the "feast," to help repair the materials and refresh the room. There are things to do that can help make the program more effective in your setting.
10. Don't forget about the schedule for parent classes and the many books and articles about Godly Play. This is a very well researched program with a strong foundation. Godly Play is not the "latest and greatest" thing in religious education. It began about 1960 with Jerome Berryman's questions about how to make Christian education more appropriate for children. Ask about how Godly Play was founded and what these resources are.