

Scripture Splash: Helping Folks Not Be Afraid of the Bible

By Margie Brown

Several recent studies have looked at the worship service to see when people fell asleep the most. The results varied somewhat, but they all agreed that people tend to tune out and glaze over when the scripture is being read. What is central to our faith and worship can come across as a duty to be done before we can get on with what is more relevant, creative, and participatory.

Here are some ideas to enhance the "Engaging the Word" movement of *The Inviting Word* liturgy of learning.

At one church, the pastor reminds the large number of children in worship that the two times when they need to be quiet and pay attention are during prayer and during scripture reading – not because they need to behave so that adults can hear, but because both children and adults need to continually grow in the awareness that prayer and scripture are real and vibrant.

There is a sacred awe and wonder in prayer and scripture, but people need to learn not to be afraid of them. In *The Inviting Word* resources, we use many exciting techniques to help us "engage" in the stories of the Bible, such as drama, role-playing, creative movement, storytelling, and visualization. Following are some exercises to help people overcome their fear of the Bible. Once we open ourselves enough to enter the scripture story, it is easy to be deeply moved by its immediacy in our lives.

What follows is not a specific workshop schedule, but a variety of exercises which can be adapted for different settings. They are listed in order of simple to risky, with icebreakers listed first. Invited interaction becomes less threatening as trust grows over the course of a workshop event. When using this with *The Inviting Word* leaders, invite them to look at the "Engaging the Word" section in upcoming lessons and use the ideas to enhance that movement.

Getting Here

People need to bring their bodies into the room before they can be creative. Without warming up, they're stuck in their heads.

Simple Breathing Together

"Breath" is the Hebrew word for the Spirit of God. Like the rests in music and the negative space in paintings, breath makes room for something new to come into being.

Singing Is Breathing

Singing songs the group knows keeps them in the room and doesn't require a book. You can use familiar, fun songs from camp or church school. Sing a line and have the group repeat it back.

Simple Stretching

Stretching our muscles before activity is important, and this can also be done in the context of spoken prayer – for example, reaching down through our roots in God and up through our branches for the fruits of the Spirit.

Reaching Out to Other Bodies

This can happen through the motions of a song or in a circle of backrubs, but some people hate group back rubs so let everyone know at the outset that you honor "first amendment rights." People can choose whether or not to participate at any given moment.

Centering with Scripture

Read the passage slowly, with small additions to craft it as a prayer meditation. Begin by asking the group to listen to who they relate to most in this story right now, and listening for the names of characters and other nouns in the upcoming story.

Craft a Question

Ask a personal question from an image in the story, and have members share their answers if they wish. Draw their sharing into a prayer.

Priming the Pump

Everybody knows something about the Bible, but there is also a lot that we don't know.

Invite silence, then ask the group members to each share a line or portion of scripture that comes to them when they are lonely, scared, tired, or hurting. This sharing serves as a quiet prayer.

Give the following pop quiz quickly to create energy in the room:

Name Santa's reindeer.

Name the continents.

Name everyone in your family, including grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Name all the people in the Bible. (When you recite the names along with the group, it creates more noise, which makes everyone feel safe.)

How many people knew all of them? How many people knew some? That means that all of us are Biblical scholars, helping each other with the parts we know and don't know.

Bible of Your Bones

Which Bible character are you the most like and why?

If you were the only way that people could get a glimpse of that story, what qualities would you need to keep that story alive?

Think of a time when you heard a Bible story and it especially struck you or was meaningful for you. Find a partner and talk about where you were when you heard it or the person you heard it from.

Now tell the Bible story to your listening partner as if that person had never heard it before.

Choose one character and tell the story again exclusively from his or her point of view, through his or her eyes.

Have one character, noun, or verb tell or act out the whole story from his, her, or its perspective.

Imagine yourself as the character of your own mother or a significant mother figure in your life. How would you move, talk, walk, react? Tell the story as if it were your mother's life story. Do the same by climbing into the character of your father or a significant father figure in your life.

In Your Hands

Work with a partner for this exercise as well. Hold a letter-size piece of paper in just one hand. Now crumple it up and release it. It will bounce back into an interesting shape. Look at that shape and decide what kind of fantasy beast or creature it is. How does it move? What sounds does it make? At first just play with your puppets, taking turns and then playing together with your partner.

Next, use your two puppet-creatures to act out the two Bible stories. Do it one time using only "beast language," and then again adding in your beast's knowledge of English.

Each of you pick up three common objects (for example, a comb, a watch, and a pen).

Explore the ways that these objects can move and take on character. The trick is to decide where the face is. Once you've decided that, others will see it, too. After a period of just playing, use these six puppets to act out your Bible stories.

Speaking the Words into Being

Self-Narration Stories

A church school class will often have children choose characters and read or act out a story, with the narrator reading all the material not in quotation marks. This can lead to long, boring sections. Instead, allow the children to read all the lines pertaining to their characters. The narrator will still have a part, but the characters' roles are juicier when they get to participate in the non-dialogue too. Take, for example, "They muttered among themselves, saying . . ." or "Judas threw down the coins and shouted. . . ." Muttering, throwing, and shouting happen during the self-narration, not only during the words in quotation marks, so these characters can speak the commentary that describes their parts even more

fully.

Self-narration sticks directly with the text, word for word. Self-narration can grow to include the nouns, adjectives, and verbs in the story self-narrating their own phrases and lines. For example, if several people take the part of the fish in Luke 5, and others are the net that catches the fish, then the fish will say, "They caught so many fish," and the net will say, "that their nets were beginning to break." The audience can also be given short lines as the crowd. Audience participation can be "lined out" by a leader who says the lines and invites them to repeat the words they have heard, rather than having written lines for the audience to read.

Symbolic Stories

Have small groups choose one Bible story each. Designate a "runner" from each group to rush the group's choice to you (the workshop leader) because stories are "claimed" on a first-come-first-serve basis. (Otherwise, the groups take too long to decide.) When all the groups have chosen, ask them to choose a circus act (lion tamer, trapeze artist, etc.), and send a runner as before. Each small group then creates a circus act based on its Bible story. While the groups are creating their skits, decide a reasonable order of events for your circus. Then the show must go on.

Fear Not

Jumping into most of these exercises cold is impossible. It is essential that you lay ground rules so that participants will feel safe and you are taking care of the needs of the group as a whole. Explain why you are asking them to do things. Allow them the option of not doing some things, but request that they do other things for the good of the group. Encourage as much participation as possible by offering modified alternatives if necessary. Protect the group's privacy by not allowing observers when people are doing deep or vulnerable work. Everyone feels awkward being spontaneously creative, and it isn't fair to those who are trying to let them be gawked at by those who didn't even want to try. Find playful ways to describe your ground rules.

"Fear not!" can mean "This is gonna be scary!" To give up our fear of scripture is potentially a very scary thing. And then it may have a whole new power and calling in our lives. To be intimate with scripture means that we can no longer be casual observers, that worship is no longer a spectator sport. We have to enter into the messy business of wrestling with God and daring to claim some authority as a translator of the text into the language of our own experience.

Approached with an attitude of playfulness and fun, the Word transforms us. Once again, we can participate in the great mystery of the incarnation, as the Word becomes flesh – this time our own flesh.

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