

R4d/Colloquy – Elizabeth Caldwell

Reading the Bible with Youth: Getting It Right the First Time

How do we help children read, engage and interpret biblical stories that are foundational for their religious formation? How do we make biblical tools available to them and at what age? How do we introduce them to biblical narrative so texts grow with them and don't have to be unlearned later? If we retold biblical texts in new forms for children and youth, what would they look like? What is the role of the church and the home in supporting their growth in biblical literacy so that they are able to participate as informed persons of faith within a multi-faith and multi-cultural public sphere. In what way do religious communities foster the identity formation of its children and young people with an eye on their participation in social and public spaces?

Main Concept

I have been teaching a course on reading the Bible with children and youth with a colleague in the field of Hebrew Bible for three years. In this class seminary students preparing for ministry in a variety of contexts both in the United States and other countries, are asked to consider their roles as biblical interpreters and pastoral educators with parents and their children, supporting their growth in the life of the Christian faith, living in a world with cultural and religious diversity. Over the course of a semester they select a text from either Genesis or the Gospel of Matthew or Luke, engage in their own exegetical work preparing a Teacher's Resource and story for children or youth that addresses these questions. At each step of development they work in peer editing groups.

1. Why this story and what are the values it is teaching? Why did you select this value or teaching to address in your children's story and why is it important for children and youth today?
2. What the original audience heard
 - The story's own cultural world – cultural and historical characteristics
What do scholars think the story meant to teach this audience?
How does the story reflect and/or challenge the cultural norms of its first audience
 - The story as a story - In what ways does the form of the form and structure of the story (including setting, characterization, and plot) further the teaching of the story?
3. How have other children's authors told/illustrated this story?
4. Why does this story matter now?
 - To what audience—age, cultural and religious context, etc.—are you writing your story?
 - What are the developmental issues, interests, and questions of this audience concerning the story and its teaching?
 - How are you building on and adapting the teaching of the original biblical story to speak to your own audience today?
 - What are the questions that your story answers?
5. Describe the creative process used in both writing and illustrating your story
 - Where are you in the story? What did you learn?

Methodology

Over three years of teaching this class, my colleague and I have become amazed at the tenacity of adult learners across the life span in taking on both well known texts like creation, birth of Jesus, parts of the Joseph saga as well as more difficult and challenging texts: binding of Isaac, raping of women in Sodom, healing stories and parables. We have also been amazed at the forms their stories have taken: zines, game boards, powerpoint, graphic comics, spoken word, dramatic re-enactment, picture books, poetry/music. They have illustrated their stories with clay, water color, word processing programs individually and with the help of friends and children. They have located their stories in barrios in Puerto Rico, urban contexts, in Korean/American congregations and written them for children and teenagers in suburban neighborhoods.

Through analysis and review of stories created for this class, review of relevant literature, and critique and analysis of Bibles and Bible story books for children and youth, I would like to focus our conversation in this Colloquium on how we engage children and youth with biblical content in ways that will enable them to represent their faith in the public sphere so they are able to engage in respectful discourse across faith traditions.

Sources

Sources for my research included: the content and process of teaching the class; my own biblical scholarship in writing stories for children and youth; learnings from teaching this topic in congregational settings; review and analysis of journal articles and relevant literature such as: Caroline Vander Stichele, Hugh S. Pyper, eds, *Text, Image, and Otherness in Children's Bibles*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012; Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "R-rated, How to read the Bible with children" in *The Christian Century*, (February 25, 2013) ; Melanie Dennis Unrau, "Where are all the girls in children's Bibles?" in *geez, holy mischief in an age of fast faith* (29, Spring, 2013); and analysis and critique of Bibles and Bible story books for children and youth.

Status of Research

I have an outline and a publishing contract for a book on the topic of reading the Bible with children and youth. I am most interested in how church leaders and parents become more intentional in the ways that they read and teach the Bible so that as one of my students wisely said, "they (children) get it right the first time." For the purposes of this colloquium, (which has been changed from a Research Interest group) here is an outline of concepts/research questions which I will use. We will also review actual stories written by adults we have taught in this class. The stories will be representative of the forms and contexts cited above. I would be helped by a dialogue with my colleagues in the field as you respond to both my research questions and the examples from my class.

1. "Getting it right the first time"
 - How do we teach our children so that the Bible grows with them?
2. "Taming the Text" (engaging text with head and heart and critical thinking tools)
 - How and when do we make good scholarship (translation, interpretation, biblical tools) accessible to children and youth?
3. Transparency – struggling with difficult issues
 - What biblical stories do we make accessible to children at what age?

A quote to ponder:

In his chapter, "Children's Bibles Hot and Cold" in *Text, Image, Otherness in Children's Bibles, What is the Picture?*, Caroline Vader Stichele and Hugh S. Pyper, eds, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, Timothy Beal writes that "One major effect of the Bible as generated in and by children's Bibles is its contribution to the cultural production of Christian faith as black and white certainty and religiosity as right-and-wrong morality. The Bible, as cultural icon of this supposedly childlike faith, is the book of books, the authoritative, authorial, univocal, comprehensive, final, graspable, and readable word of God. God publishes it to answer questions about the meaning and purpose of life, putting them to rest in the name of its divine author. It is the manual and guidebook for finding happiness with God in this world and salvation in the next." (Beal 2013, 314)

And some questions to consider: How can the ways that we read and teach the Bible with children and youth both support their faith formation and enable their participation in a multi-faith world? What kind of new children's Bibles and Bible story books do we need to be writing? If you agree that one is needed, what contribution does it need to make to the "cultural production of Christian faith"? How would such resources help faith communities to "foster the identity formation of their children and young people with an eye on their participation in social and public spaces?"