

Preschool Chapel Lessons on Death and Grieving

by Kari Robinson

Avoiding discussions with children about death is a disservice to children. One of the gifts of the church is that we have spiritual language to explain death. We also have hope for an eternal future with God. We know that every human being will have to reckon with death, and this is true even for children, who are likely to encounter the death of a pet or loved one at a young age. They will also see leaves change colors and fall from trees, flowers in a vase turn brown and wilt, and small insects or animals who have died in nature. It is our work to learn best practices in discussing death and supporting those who are grieving and to create a space for people to openly wonder and process their grief and questions.

There are times in the church year where we routinely have opportunities to address death with children liturgically. I have created three preschool chapel lessons that tie into some of these: All Saints' and All Souls' Days, Ash Wednesday, and Good Friday. The other three lessons included here address other aspects of grief or processing death. These lessons are not written to be a one-time series on the topics of death but are meant to be interwoven liturgically and proactively.

Those who work with children should not wait for a death to occur to introduce these theological ideas, as they are a core part of our faith and understanding about God. Though it may make people uncomfortable, we can normalize these conversations so that the ideas are already accessible to children in times of loss.

Lesson 1: The Invisible String

This lesson can be used any time would be especially appropriate for All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, or dealing with a death in the community. It is a reminder that love does not end with death but extends beyond space and time. Love connects us to God and to everyone who has gone before us and who will go after us.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "Peace Like a River" (African American Spiritual)

"I've got peace like a river,
I've got peace like a river,
I've got peace like a river in my soul."
(repeat words)

"I've got love like an ocean,
I've got love like an ocean,
I've got love like an ocean in my soul."
(repeat words)

"I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain in my soul."
(repeat words)

3. Book – "[The Invisible String](#)"

Written by Patrice Karst, illustrated by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff (Little, Brown, 2018)

This book is about how love connects us all like an invisible string that we cannot see but can reach across any distance, even to those who have died.

Say: "Love is like an invisible string. Just like love connects us to everyone we care about, it connects us to God. God is love. And love never ends."

4. Prayer and Sending Song

5. Extinguishing Candles – "Change the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."

Note: For older children, there is another beautiful version of the "changing of the light" in "[Breathe: A Child's Guide to Ascension, Pentecost, and the Growing Time](#)" in the section titled "Breathless" (written by Laura Alary, illustrated by Cathrin Peterslund, Paraclete, 2021, pp. 6–10).

Lesson 2: God Is Always with Us

It is easy to feel alone or far from God in times of incomprehensible loss. We don't have all the answers as to why we must say goodbye to the people we love. This lesson provides a necessary reminder for people of all ages that God is present with us even in our suffering. It can help children to see God in big and small ways as they go about their days. It can be used any time or after a traumatic event.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "This Little Light of Mine" (Spiritual)

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

3. Book – "[What Is God Like?](#)"

Written by Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner, illustrated by Ying Hui Tan (Convergent, 2021)

There are beautiful illustrations in this book and different descriptions of God. Some of them reinforce the idea of God's constant presence and the comfort and safety we get with God.

Say: "Even though we can't see God with our earth eyes, God is close to us. Even when we are having hard times, God knows and can send us comfort and peace. Everywhere you go, God goes with you, and you are never alone. When you feel love, you are noticing God. When you notice something beautiful in nature, you are noticing God's work. When you feel peace in a sad time, you are feeling God's presence within you."

Note: Another book option is "[In Every Life](#)," written and illustrated by Marla Frazee (Beach Lane, 2023); an option for older children is "[Maybe God Is Like That, Too](#)," written by Jennifer Grant, illustrated by Benjamin Schipper (Beaming, 2017)

4. Prayer

You might want to talk about how prayer can happen with or without words and offer a short moment of silence and connecting with breath during this time.

5. Extinguishing Candles – "Changing the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."

Lesson 3: All Emotions Are Welcome

Helping children identify emotions is an important part of their socio-emotional development. In a time of grieving, children may have many big feelings. They may have feelings they don't know how to express. Sometimes this can manifest in negative social ways. This lesson can be used at any time, but it is especially helpful for children who are grieving. It is a reminder that all feelings are holy. The church should be a place children know they can always come to when they are in need of support.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "If You're Happy and You Know It" (expanded emotions version)

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands . . .
If you're sad and you know it, get a hug . . .
If you're mad and you know it, stomp your feet . . .
If you're frustrated and you know it, ask for help . . ."

Note: You can make up new ones too. The idea is to give suggestions for prosocial ways to cope with big feelings.

3. Book – "[Visiting Feelings](#)"

Written by Lauren Rubenstein, illustrated by Shelly Hehenberger (Magination, 2013)

This is not a religious book, but it identifies the many emotions we experience.

Note: An option for older children is "[My Favorite Color Is Blue. Sometimes.: A Journey Through Loss with Art and Color](#)," written by Roger Hutchison (Paraclete, 2017)

4. Emotion Pinwheel Game

To create an emotion pinwheel, I combined the emoji faces from the [Emotional Prayer Wheel](#) by StoryMakers NYC with a [rainbow pinwheel](#) from Dollar Tree. To play the game, spin the wheel, stop it, point to a feeling, and ask the children to make a face to show that feeling.

Talk about how big feelings are welcome in church and that God sees how you feel. Talk about how Jesus was a human and experienced every feeling too.

Say: "When you come to church, you can come happy or sad or however you are feeling. All of your feelings are welcome to come with you. All feelings are okay. When we have big feelings, talking about them can help. Our church is a safe place for you to talk about your big feelings and to ask for help with those feelings. We all need to treat one another and ourselves with respect no matter what we are feeling, and that can be hard to do sometimes with big feelings. It's okay to feel mad at church, but it's not okay to push your friend because you feel angry. So when your feelings get big, you can always ask for help here."

5. Prayer

6. Extinguishing Candles – "Changing the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."

Lesson 4: You Are Stardust: An Ash Wednesday Lesson

Talking about ashes can cause fear for adults or children, especially because it is a prominent reminder of our own mortality. For children, I like to frame the conversation within the concept of how we are all interconnected. Our ephemeral lives are tied to the lives of others and to all of nature in a mysterious, cosmological way but also in a scientific and true way. We are all made up of the same atoms as stars. We are all connected. This can bring us comfort.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are."

3. Book – "[You Are Stardust](#)"

Written by Elin Kelsey, illustrated by Soyeon Kim (Owlkids, 2011)

This book is not a religious story, but it has gorgeous artwork and offers examples of many ways that we are miracles of salt, electricity, carbon, and cells, connecting us to all of creation. This is based in science but still prompts imaginations. It is a poignant reminder for all ages of our interconnectedness.

4. Imposition of Ashes (optional)

We chose to impose ashes on the foreheads of any preschool children who wanted them during our Ash Wednesday chapel. I think it is important to tell the children that the ashes have come from the burned palm fronds from last year's Palm Sunday. (We don't want them to think that they are human remains.)

When we draw the ashen cross, we sometimes say, "Remember that you are made of stardust, and to stardust you shall return" as an alternative to "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

5. Prayer

6. Extinguishing Candles – "Changing the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."

Lesson 5: Good Friday

The Passion of Christ gospel reading can be a traumatic and emotionally challenging experience for adults, and the detailed descriptions of torture are not developmentally appropriate to share with children. However, the story of Easter does not happen without Good Friday. If we sanitize the story of Christ's death and suffering, we are eliminating a crucial part of our faith. It can be tricky to find the balance in how to talk about Jesus dying with kids without traumatizing them. There are many good children's books on Holy Week that I use. The cross is a reminder of Christ dying and that it is not the end of the story. We call Good Friday "good" because we know Easter is coming.

Note: Depending on your context, it might be important or helpful to talk about the liturgical colors for Passion Sunday (red), Good Friday (black or red), and Easter (white or gold) during this lesson. I recommend consulting resources like the [Godly Play Foundation's Equity Audit Toolkits](#), particularly "Creation" and "Circle of the Church Year," for developing language about these colors that is racially inclusive and that challenges possible associations of death with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color identities and of life with whiteness.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "Jesus Loves Me"

"Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so,
Little ones to him belong,
Let the little children come.

Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so."

3. Book – "[A Very Happy Easter](#)"

Written by Tim Thornborough, illustrated by Jennifer Davison (The Good Book, 2019)

This book focuses on the many emotions of Holy Week, which makes it a good tie-in with the emotions lesson above.

Note: Another option is "The Mystery of Easter" story in Godly Play; for older children, a good story is "This Is the Mystery of Easter," written by Amelia Richardson Dress, illustrated by Lilly J. Moore (published by Dress, 2020)

Say: "Talking about Jesus dying is a sad part of the story, but we know that is not the ending. When we celebrate Easter in a few days, we will celebrate that he was no longer in the grave, and we will say, 'Jesus is risen!' We can be happy knowing that Jesus now lives with God forever. But in this part of the story, we can still be sad that Jesus died."

4. Prayer

5. Extinguishing Candles – "Changing the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."

Lesson 6: What Is Heaven Like?

Because we are a Christian community, our church believes in the hope of eternal life with God. This lesson draws upon "The Christian Hope" in the Catechism of "The Book of Common Prayer" (861–862). It is easy to go into too much depth for young children. Keep it simple without diluting the meaning.

1. Lighting Candles

Say: "God is light, and we light the candles as a reminder that God is here with us."

2. Welcome Song – "When the Saints Go Marching In" (Spiritual)

"When the saints go marching in,
Oh, when the saints go marching in,
How I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in."

(march while singing, then repeat with different motions: "swimming in," "jumping in," "sitting down")

3. Book – "[Water Bugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children](#)"

Written by Doris Stickney (revised and expanded, Pilgrim, 1982)

This book is small in size. The illustrations are simple. I recommend drawing larger pictures yourself on poster paper or using some props of a water bug, lily flower and stalk, lily pad, and dragonfly. The story is about how water bugs transform into dragonflies, but they can't return to their other water bug friends. They have a new body and a new, wonderful life and will be reunited with their water bug friends someday. I like that this book supports the mystery and unknown of another realm in God's presence in a parable-like way that is accessible for children.

Start by asking the children if they have heard of heaven and what they have heard about it. Validate their responses by listening and mirroring back what they say without judgment or correcting them. Explain that even grownups wonder about heaven because there is so much we don't know about it.

Say: "People would ask Jesus about heaven and about what the kingdom of God is like. Jesus would answer people by telling a mysterious story called a parable, which explained one little piece of what the kingdom of God is like. Just like Jesus told stories, I have a story for you that tells you a little bit about what heaven is like."

Note: For older children, another book option is "[Grandpa's Tent](#)," written by Mary Davila and Sarah Kinney Gaventa, illustrated by Paul Shaffer (Forward Movement, 2018).

4. Prayer

5. Extinguishing Candles – "Changing the Light"

Say (from Godly Play): "Watch what happens to the light when I change it. It is not gone, but it is spreading out and filling up the whole room. Wherever you go today, the light will still be there, even though you can't see it anymore."