Growing in Grace & Gratitude

Ages 5–7

Winter 2023–2024

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Introduction

As we begin Advent, we hear from the prophet Isaiah, about peace and justice. Isaiah gives us a vision for what the world would look like if we are people who always act in just ways. We continue with Mary's amazing response to bearing the Son of God. "Yes!" she says. Then the world will turn because nothing is impossible with God. Luke describes the shepherds' encounter with angels. We hear Matthew's story of the magi's visit with the baby, bringing gifts to God's greatest gift to us.

As the new year begins, we hear stories from the Gospel of Mark, beginning with Jesus' baptism. That is how Mark begins his story of the good news. Jesus is there, ready to get started in his ministry. In twenty-three verses, following Jesus' baptism, we learn of five different ways Jesus is doing his ministry: calling disciples, teaching, healing, praying, and proclaiming the good news of God's love.

In the next four stories Jesus is busy. He not only heals a young man and calls him to walk, but Jesus recognizes the faith and determination his four friends had in bringing their friend to Jesus. Later, Jesus and the disciples go for some rest on a boat, but a storm arises. The disciples are frightened and turn to Jesus for help. He says, "Be quiet!" and the storm is stilled. The disciples are amazed at his authority.

As Jesus teaches, heals people, and tells about the good news of God's love, the crowds that follow him grow and grow. One day, as the day grew later, the people were hungry and needed food. Jesus saw their need and provided sustenance, more than enough for everyone, even more than five thousand! While in the midst of these crowds of people, Jesus sees everyone, even the littlest among them. When adults want to focus on adults, Jesus call for the children. He listens to them. He blesses them. He takes time to let them know that they are loved by God.

As Lent begins, Jesus' attention turns toward his final days. He is asked what is the greatest commandment of all the laws the people must follow, and Jesus distills them all into his greatest lesson—love God and love one another. Another evening, at dinner, a woman anoints him with oil, so extravagantly that she is criticized by others, but with such love and purpose. Jesus understands that this act anoints him for his burial, something that will not happen after his death.

Overview of the Winter 2023–2024 Quarter

Session Dates, Titles, Scriptures, and Goals

The complete scope and sequence can be found at www.pcusastore.com/GGGdownloads.

December 3, 2023
God's Peaceable Kingdom
Isaiah 11:1–9
Goal: To recognize and work for God's peaceable kingdom in the world.

December 10, 2023
Say Yes to God
Luke 1:26–38
Goal: To name ways to say yes to God.

December 17, 2023
Nothing Is Impossible
Luke 1:37, 39–40, 46–55
Goal: To wonder what is possible with God.

December 24, 2023
Shepherds Glorify God
Luke 2:1–20
Goal: To understand the love of God that reaches out to all people.

December 31, 2023
Bring Him Gifts
Matthew 2:1–12
Goal: To learn and practice ways of sharing the grace of God in the world.

January 7, 2024
Jesus' Baptism
Mark 1:1–15
Goal: To explore the meaning of baptism today.

January 14, 2024
Jesus Begins His Ministry
Mark 1:16–39
Goal: To model Jesus' ministry in our lives.

January 21, 2024
Four Friends' Faith
Mark 2:1–12
Goal: To recognize the impact that faith in Jesus has.

January 28, 2024
Jesus Helps in a Storm
Mark 4:35–41
Goal: To identify with the disciples' fear and understand that Jesus offers peace in times of fear.

February 4, 2024
Jesus Feeds Hungry People
Mark 6:30–44
Goal: To wonder at Jesus' compassion and power to care for others.

February 11, 2024
Jesus Loves Children
Mark 10:13–16
Goal: To celebrate our place in God's caring family.

February 18, 2024
The Great Commandment
Mark 12:28–34
Goal: To consider why Jesus asked us to keep the great commandment.

February 25, 2024
Anointing Jesus
Mark 14:3–9
Goal: To do acts of kindness for others as the woman did for Jesus.

Resources and Session Components

Growing in Grace & Gratitude curriculum is available for fall, winter, spring, and summer in two formats: 1) print and ship, and 2) downloadable PDF. Each season's material for the leaders includes:

1. **Session plans for embracing children in the grace of God through engagement with the Bible**

2. **Session title, session goal, and background information**
   - *Recognizing God's Grace* helps leaders explore the Bible story with a focus on God's grace in Scripture.
   - "In Your Children's Experiences" and "In Your Relationships with the Children" provide leaders with an understanding of the children's needs, abilities, and interests.

3. **Three movements that echo Presbyterian and Reformed worship**
   - *Gathering in God's Grace*
     A hospitable welcome calls children to sing and pray to God, to hear and reflect on the Bible story.
   - *Responding in Gratitude*
     A choice of age-appropriate activities based on the group size and time available. Some activities (noted as "more prep") require advanced planning and/or additional supplies.
   - *Loving and Serving God*
     An invitation to discipleship that inspires children and their families to practice hospitality, generosity, and love.

4. **Grace Notes (GN)**
   - Black-and-white reproducible pages that provide activities and crafts.

5. **Stories, Colors & More (SCM)**
   - Colorful resources are provided to aid in the flow of the sessions.
   - The Support Map offers practical suggestions for working with children who have difficulty communicating, transitioning, reading, or writing, and children who are visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, or in need of mobility support. The Support Map also provides tips for celebrating the strengths of children through leadership, generosity, and fairness.
   - Colorful illustrations of the Bible stories spark imagination. The stories appear on the back of the illustrations to make it easy for the leader to show the art while reading the story.
   - Other colorful resources, such as teaching pictures and maps, are organized in session order.
   - **Music & Melodies:** Song lyrics sheets are gathered in the back of the resource.

Supplemental Resources

- **Music & Melodies** (**MM**) includes tracks with familiar lyrics as well as new child-friendly tunes. *Music & Melodies* is available as a separate purchase. Purchase one CD per age level.
- Free **Grace Sightings,** an online resource to print or email home, includes a summary of the week's session and age-appropriate activities for home use.
- Free **story audio** of the weekly Bible stories.
- The *Grace Sightings* and story audio recordings are available at **www.pcusastore.com/GGGdownloads.**

Basic Supplies

All materials beyond this list will be specified in the supply list for each session:

- Bibles
- CD player
- cleanup supplies
- coffee filters
- cover-ups or smocks
- craft supplies (e.g., cotton balls, craft sticks, glitter, stickers)
- crayons, large and small
- cups, napkins, plates, utensils, drinking straws
- glue and glue sticks
- hole punch
- office supplies (paper clips, rubber bands, self-adhesive notes)
- paint, paintbrushes
- paper (card stock, construction, drawing, index cards, mural paper, newsprint)
- paper bags (lunch-sized, grocery-sized)
- pencils, colored pencils, markers, pens
- pipe cleaners
- plastic bags (ziplock, garbage)
- play dough
- rhythm instruments
- ribbon, string, yarn, scarves
- round-tip scissors (some left-handed)
- stapler, staples
- tablecloths
- tape (duct, masking, painter's, transparent)

Reusing Materials

Encourage church members to collect a variety of materials for art projects, such as:

- buttons, ribbon, yarn
- clothespins
- egg cartons
- plastic containers
- shoeboxes
- old magazines, catalogs, newspapers
- paper tubes (from gift wrap, paper towels, or toilet paper)
- used gift wrap and cards

Including Children with Disabilities and Special Needs

Create an environment that helps children of all abilities experience God's grace by becoming familiar with the developmental terms, descriptions, and icons on the Children with Disabilities and Special Needs Support Map (in *Stories, Colors & More*, **SCM iii–iv**). Colorful icons (LG T) from the map and notes about specific needs are incorporated into each session to offer ways to adapt activities. (Note: While many of the activities could fit in multiple categories on the support map, for simplicity only those that require particular attention have been identified.)

Use the Visual Schedule (in *Stories, Colors & More*, **SCM i–ii**) to provide clear expectations and a visual cue for the group. By consistently using these tools, you will help your faith community discover and practice grace-filled ways to be the body of Christ with and for all children.

Support Highlight: Sensory Defensiveness SD

Many children have strong reactions to things like sounds, smells, touch, or visual stimulus. Talk to children, parents, and caregivers about what these triggers might be and provide alternatives for children or assistive devices like headphones to block noise or hand wipes to clean their hands right away. Often children feel most comfortable when they are in charge of the challenging sensation—actions like turning the lights on or off, turning the radio on, or adjusting the volume may give children who struggle with sensory issues the reassurance they need to be successful.

A Few Notes about Children and Reading

All versions of the Bible are above second-grade reading level. *Growing in Grace & Gratitude* tries to provide a way to share the Bible stories while engaging both pre-readers and readers. Since the Holy Scriptures were written for adults, curriculum writers try to choose sections of Scripture that children can understand. Still, at times, the children in your group may seem to struggle to understand a verse or passage. When that happens, assure them that God will help them understand the Bible in new ways as they grow. Encourage a sense of wonder at God's amazing ways. Reassure the children of God's grace, a grace that does not depend on how much they know or understand.

Some of the following strategies may enhance your time with the children:

- When you write something for children to read, print the words. Many of them cannot read cursive writing.
- If an activity sheet has something to read, ask for a volunteer to read it aloud rather than calling on an individual child. Even better, have the group read it aloud in unison. If most children in your group are pre-readers, ask them to point to the words on the page as you read them aloud.
- Make a poster with church vocabulary words. Each week, add a word to learn, such as *God*, *Jesus*, *love*, *Bible*, *pray*, *bless*, *thanks*, *disciple*, *praise*, and *worship*. Give each child a few sheets of paper folded in half and stapled to make a word book to keep in the room. When an activity calls for children to write a word, name, or simple sentence, let them know you are happy to write it in their word books so they can copy it.
- Expect children of this age to occasionally reverse letters (for example, using "b" for "d") and to make errors in spelling. It is not important to correct such errors during the session.

- If children need to know a repeating response for a litany or drama, write it on newsprint. Invite them to read it with you in unison several times before beginning the litany or drama. Adding actions to the words will help children remember them.
- Many children love learning through rhymes and songs. Try to include music in each session.
- Many children enjoy acting out stories. Invite them to act out certain parts of the story as you read it aloud. Challenge them to act out what they think happened next in a story. Some children will be able to act out responses to questions more easily than writing them.
- Be careful not to characterize children for whom reading comes easily as being somehow "better." Resist putting them in the role of leader.
- Affirm each child by name—whatever his or her reading and writing skill level—two or three times each session.

Flyaway Books

Flyaway Books (flyawaybooks.com) is a children's picture book imprint from Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. These books reflect themes of diversity, inclusivity, kindness, compassion, self-esteem, and care for our world, as well as retelling familiar religious stories in new ways. Flyaway Books titles are available at www.pcusastore.com.

Ideas for Working with Pre-readers

- Keep small pieces of scratch paper handy to write a word for a child to copy.
- If a child is struggling with an activity that calls for writing a word, write the word using dotted lines so he or she can trace it.
- Form pairs to solve puzzles. Encourage children to help one another—there's no need to cover their papers so others can't copy!
- If you observe a child struggling to work independently on an activity, offer to be his or her partner. If many are struggling, work as a group to complete the activity.
- If a child seems frustrated by writing, suggest that he or she draw a picture of the response or act it out. You also might offer to write what the child dictates to you.
- Offer old family-friendly magazines with pictures that can be cut out and used to illustrate a response or complete a project.
- When a child is trying to sound out a word, don't be too quick to jump in and help. Whether he or she finally decodes the word or you provide it, affirm the new skill of reading and how hard the child is trying.

A Note about Candles

Growing in Grace & Gratitude suggests the use of a candle in the worship space for most sessions. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The lighting of the candle reminds us of this and signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. Most churches have a policy about candles and either lighting real candles or using battery-operated candles. While we simply state "candles," *Growing in Grace & Gratitude* recommends using battery-operated candles for safety with children.

Team of Contributors

The development team of *Growing in Grace & Gratitude* is grateful to have an amazing team of educators and writers to collaborate in the production of this curriculum.

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