

BABY JESUS AND ESPN - A NEW TAKE ON THE BIRTH STORY OF JESUS

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How might 5th grade boys' engagement with varying historical perspectives of the birth of Jesus promote deeper connection with biblical text?

AREA OF STUDY

Over the past year, I noticed that boys in my fifth grade *Life and Times of Jesus* class seemed less engaged. They were having difficulty relating to the stories of Jesus, and it seemed as though they felt the Scriptures we were reading were static. They just couldn't find their place in the stories. I often heard "This happened a long time ago" and "Why do I need to study this now?" To many, the Bible was out-of-date and out-of-touch.

I experienced similar attitudes from boys I'd worked with in youth ministry as well. The biblical narrative did not have anything to do with the now, therefore, the Bible, and possibly even faith, were irrelevant.

I was curious about the faith development in boys ages 8-11, in particular, my 5th grade students.



Could I help them understand how faith pertains to everyday life? Could I help them connect to the biblical story on a deeper level? I wondered if different approaches to the biblical narrative might help boys get excited about and engage with the text in a more meaningful way. Taking on different perspectives of biblical characters could encourage boys to become flexible in their thinking and cultivate adaptable, resilient readers. Mostly, I hoped that by participating in scripture lessons in creative, concrete ways, they boys would recognize that the Biblical narrative is relevant, life-transforming, and useful in practical ways. Twenty years down the road they might think back to 5th-grade religion class and think “That was awesome!”

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

There are many considerations when thinking about how boys might best connect with the biblical text. For most 5th grade boys, faith development is in the storytelling phase, a time when we are most engaged with story and storytelling (Astley & Francis, 2016). Research suggests that for boys in particular, if you can help them to change their perspective of a story or help them to identify with a character, they are more likely to be engaged in that story. The more meaningful the story, the better boys understand it. If they can see themselves in the story, they are more likely to buy in (Zambo, 2007).

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Research also suggests that the development of faith happens similarly to that of the brain where preadolescent children tend to be most engaged with their faith if it is presented in a storytelling motif. Children in this stage enjoy being “trapped” in a story and are longing for a club or place to fit into. They have a measure of concrete perspective taking that allow them to find their place and voice in a story and faith narrative. (Astley & Francis, 1992, p.124)

Reichert and Hawley (2010) tell us that boys learn best when they are active and involved in the process. This has benefits for faith development as well. Studies show that the more boys can participate in faith activities, and not just be an onlooker or bystander, the more likely they are to develop a broad, rich faith as young adults and adults (Powell, 2011).

I planned to use a variety of engaging activities during our study of the Jesus’ birth narrative. Michael Gurian says that, “When teachers use different modalities and different ways to communicate information boys learn better. The ability to move around or learn while on the go makes a significant difference in a boy’s learning and relating to the material being taught” (Gurian 2011, p. 196).

METHOD

I conducted this research project with fifth grade boys during their weekly enrichment class entitled *The Life and Times of Jesus*. As part of an eight week curriculum unit, we looked at the birth narrative of Jesus through various lenses. The classes involved a combination of lecture, discussion, and interactive activities for the boys, allowing for different learning styles.

We began with King Herod’s perspective and the historical context of the early 1st Century. During the first class I gave a lecture, which was followed by classroom discussion and a short video. In the second lesson, I had the boys take on the role of Herod, a rich and powerful ruler who was not only a king but also a cunning and ruthless man. As Herod, they wrote a letter to Caesar explaining why this birth of a child in the backwoods of Bethlehem was a threat to his power.

Next, we explored the perspective of Joseph. This earthly father of Jesus, while often mentioned in the Bible, is not typically considered a significant influence on the life of Jesus and his journey to manhood. The first class was delivered lecture style followed by reading the birth narrative and answering questions. During the second class, the boys created a video blog using the digital tool Flipgrid. As Joseph, they shared a message that Jesus would listen to when he was older. This message related essential values and lessons, from father to son, that would help Jesus as he grew to manhood. The boys were allowed to dress up and be creative in sharing these life lessons. We then looked at the birth of Jesus from the points of view of the shepherds and wise men. I shared how the birth narrative is taken from different Gospel sources and often combined to make one story. We explored why different authors included different characters and what they may have been trying to communicate in the telling of their own story. We discussed how the perspective of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew were different and why. For the activity, the boys split into a Matthew group and a Luke Group. Each group had to discuss and decide who would be traveling to witness the birth of Jesus and why.



During a final lesson, the boys told the birth story from their perspective using creative mediums. The boys could use Legos to build the nativity scene, create an interview video blog, write a letter, or think of a different original idea. When we concluded the unit, I asked the boys to write an exit letter to share what they had learned and which perspective they enjoyed the most and why.

FINDINGS

Prior to starting the project, I gathered baseline information from the boys using a Google Form survey. I wanted to know how connected the boys typically felt when reading biblical text or hearing biblical stories, and if they ever considered the story later. I offered the survey to the 16 boys in the class. The majority of the boys said they sometimes feel connected to the biblical stories they hear, and they feel less connected when they do not understand what is happening in the story. One boy said, “The Bible is confusing, and sometimes the stories do not make sense.”

After analyzing the data, I discovered several recurring themes that pointed to a deeper appreciation for scripture, along with increased engagement and curiosity when learning about biblical texts.

The boys gained a deeper appreciation for the birth narrative of Jesus and scripture in general. They loved playing different roles, particularly the parts of Herod and Joseph. Most of the boys had never considered that Joseph was the main role model in Jesus’ development from a boy to a man. Joseph taught him the skills of being a carpenter which included being patient, hardworking and committed to finishing the work. The boys also wrote letters to Caesar from the perspective of Herod, and many were filled with emotion. One boy wrote “Help! Jesus was just born, and I believe that I will not be in power for long. What should I do?” He understood the political tension that existed between the government and Jewish community during the first century and had a new appreciation for why Herod was concerned.

I DISCOVERED THAT AS THE BOYS UNDERSTOOD

the context and various perspectives in Jesus' birth story, they developed a deeper appreciation for and connection to the biblical text.

I witnessed this new appreciation during our annual Christmas Pageant. Unlike last year, this year almost every boy wanted to be Joseph. At first, I did not think much about the renewed interest, but then I recognized the boys were connecting to Joseph and his story. As one boy said in a focus group, "I liked Joseph, I bet he was a cool dad." One boy wrote that Joseph "...was a great dad who taught his son to be patient and kind to everyone and what it means to be a leader. I want to be like that." They made the connection between Joseph's role as a dad and their own fathers. They found familiarity with him and the lessons he potentially taught Jesus.

By expanding Jesus' birth story, the boys were more engaged in class discussion, small group discussions, and in portraying roles in different mediums. They were able to find their place in the story of Jesus with characters they identified with or had an affection for, and it deepened their experience. In his Joseph video blog, one boy shared, "I want you to grow up as someone who understands

patience and how important it is to be kind to others." Another boy hoped that Jesus would grow up playing soccer because he needs to understand working on a team with his Disciples.

At the end of our nine weeks together, I asked if the boys' perspectives on characters involved in the birth of Jesus had changed. Almost 90% of the boys said yes. One boy said "I think the wise men were pretty cool because they didn't tell Herod where Jesus was. Also, I didn't know the angels played such a big role in the story and were so supportive, that is cool." Another boy said, "I had no idea Herod was so smart and powerful. No wonder he wanted to see Jesus killed."

Telling the story from their own perspective allowed the boys to be creative and promoted flexible thinking. Their personalities really shined! While not 100% historically accurate, the boys understood the big themes of the story and made real-life connections. One group of boys told the birth of Jesus from the perspective of ESPN Sports Center reporter. In their version, the evil super team Herod was trying to beat the underdog team Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Of course, the underdogs won. This analogy helped them to better understand the story and to place it mentally in something they already understood.

As the project progressed, the boys exhibited curiosity about the birth narrative. They started to ask more outstanding questions. One question that several boys asked was, "When the shepherds came to visit Jesus, what happened to their sheep? I mean, did they leave them in the field or bring them to Bethlehem? That is a lot of sheep." Another boy asked, "Why are the stories so different in Matthew and Luke? I mean I always thought they were the same but they are not." Another boy said, "I want to learn more about Herod and all of the palaces he built. He was a genius."

I discovered that as the boys understood the context and various perspectives in Jesus' birth story, they developed a deeper appreciation for and connection to the biblical text. They asked more questions and were more engaged in discussions. They began to understand the political pressures of the day and the economic setting of Jesus and his family. They recognized the different points of view of the Gospel writers make a difference in the way we understand the story. One boy said after learning so much about the story of Jesus' birth, "This changed my perspective of Christmas, it is a big deal."

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

Through this research investigation, I wanted to help the boys experience a deeper connection and appreciation for the biblical narrative. I wanted them to understand that the Bible is living and breathing and not an ancient artifact from thousands of years ago. The Bible is relevant to their lives now. The more they connect to the Bible in relational hands-on sorts of ways, the more likely they will grow in their spirituality as they grow older. The more they understand about the culture and the context, the more it helps them to fully appreciate the biblical text.

I will continue to incorporate engaging, hands-on activities into my Bible instruction. The opportunity to be creative and to share the birth of Jesus in their own words helped the boys dig deeper. The final perspective activity prompted the boys to really call on their own personalities and voice. This was best demonstrated by the telling of the birth of Jesus as if it was ESPN Sports Center with the underdog fighting for the victory. The boys were energized to have the opportunity to create. In the future, I will strive for more opportunities for boys to be original. I hope this flexible thinking, in which the boys captured the essence of the story in ways that made sense to them, will serve them well with other disciplines and readings.

Lastly, I was struck by the data that showed for many boys the reason they do not like Bible stories is that they are confusing. They shared that the stories often seem irrelevant and inaccessible. It makes me wonder if these sentiments contribute to why some adults, and in particular males, tend to fall away from faith. There seem to be too many aspects that do not make sense, and therefore they turn away from the whole thing. This area seems ripe for further research. For the time being, I can only hope that in helping boys relate to text at a young age, we can keep them connected into adulthood.

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