

4 Bible storybooks that leave space for children's imagination

In God's kingdom, sometimes less is more.

by [Emily Zimbrick-Rogers](#) in the [August 15, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Growing in God's Love

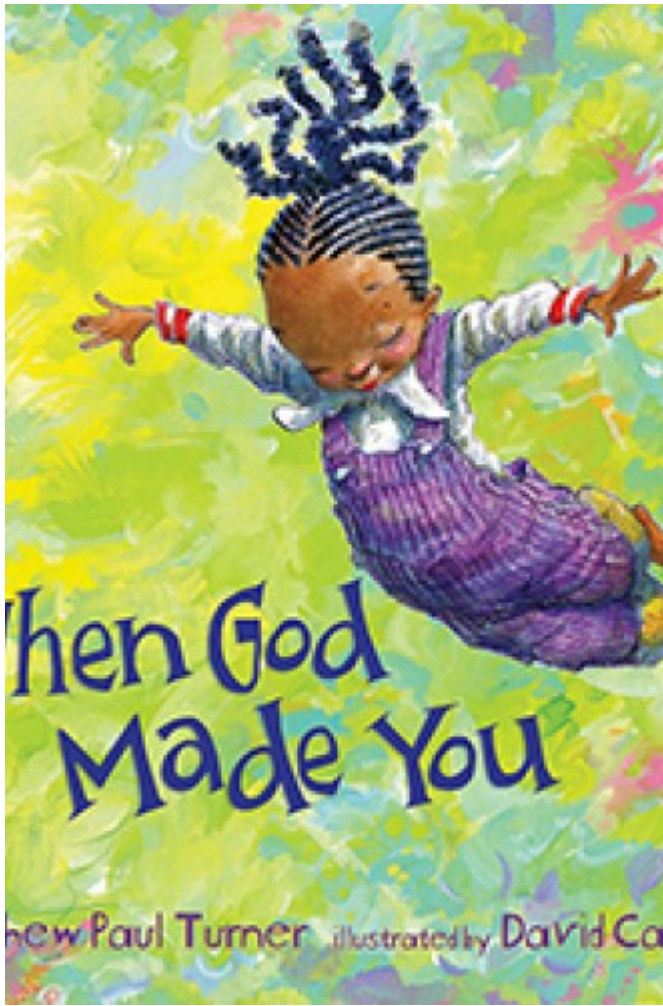
A Story Bible

Edited by Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Carol A. Wehrheim
Westminster John Knox



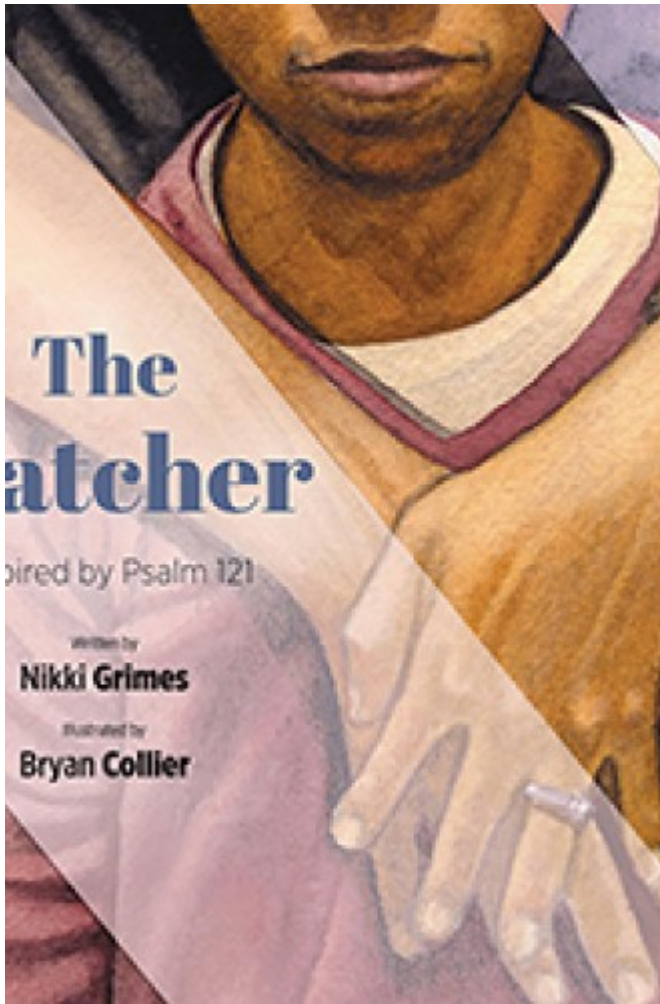
The Marvelous Mustard Seed

By Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, illustrated by Margaux Meganck
Flyaway Books



When God Made You

By Matthew Paul Turner, illustrated by David Catrow
WaterBrook



The Watcher

By Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Bryan Collier
Eerdmans

God's word may be timeless, but its translation and transmission are always culture-bound. This is especially apparent in the way Bible stories are transmitted to children.

Russell Dalton, who teaches religious education at Brite Divinity School, notes that in the past children's Bibles were heavily tilted toward moralism and fear of God. A century ago, Bible stories for children affirmed status quo virtues and tended to emphasize obedience to those in authority. Today, Dalton says, children's Bibles are more likely to transmit the message: "God is nice and wants you to be nice and God will take care of you." The moral of the Noah story, for example, was once: "God will punish the wicked and only the righteous will survive." But it has evolved into "a

story about a nice friendly God who didn't cause the flood, where no one dies, and happy anthropomorphic animals smile as they float in the ark."

Growing in God's Love, a story Bible published by Westminster John Knox this year, is a 21st-century effort to open up the Bible for children. The brainchild of Elizabeth F. Caldwell, professor emerita at McCormick Theological Seminary, and coedited with Carol A. Wehrheim, *Growing in God's Love* tells 150 stories from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Its contributors include 25 authors and 21 illustrators.

This Bible has many strengths, from its diverse and colorful full-page illustrations to its inclusion of an equal number of stories about women and men in the Old Testament. Likely due to Caldwell and Wehrheim's long careers in religious education, it is particularly suited for religious educators. The stories each fit on a two-page spread, and each spread offers a few reflection questions centered on the concepts "hear, see, and act." There are several series of stories, including three stories from the book of Esther (including one on Queen Vashti), three from the book of Ruth, and eight from the book of Acts. The book concludes with a section called "Listening to Jesus," which the editors explain as "the top-ten list of things Jesus wants us to remember." This list is balanced between law and gospel: "Remember to pray" and "take care of others" appear alongside "Jesus is the bread of life" and "children are a special blessing in this world."

Caldwell is a Presbyterian minister who has spent her career training future ministers about faith formation for children, stressing the need to teach children in such a way they don't have to unlearn things later. She decided to try her hand at a new children's Bible in order to put her teaching principles into practice. She was driven by three goals: using inclusive language for God, sharing good contemporary scholarship with children, and recognizing diversity and difference in modern families. "So many of the Bible story books are simply taking traditional Bible stories and just doing it again," Caldwell said.

Growing in God's Love breaks out of the traditional mold in several ways. It's organized by themes, ignoring the canonical order of the stories. It also includes several rarely told stories and leaves out some of the most familiar stories. For example, it includes the story of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24), but not the story of the Fall (Gen. 3). Caldwell also was keen to include some conceptual stories, like "Where Does God Live?" These stories are where this Bible particularly

shines, with lines such as “These images are like a pin in a map, giving us great ideas of where to look for God. Breath, mother, and father suggest that God lives very, very close to us. God is in our homes, in the people we love the most, and in our own bodies.”

As she worked on the story Bible, Caldwell was also particularly attuned to the pastoral implications for various kinds of families. “There’s a whole range of families that aren’t covered by other Bibles, which just address a mom and a dad,” Caldwell said. *Growing in God’s Love* is by no means an explicitly LGBT family Bible, but it veers toward gender neutrality and contains images of modern-day families that also pay attention to diversity around race, religion, age, and physical abilities.

Caldwell and Wehrheim’s shift away from a harsh, judgmental, or vengeful God is evident. In *Growing in God’s Love*, there is no snake, no Fall of humanity, and no sin. There are two stories about Hagar, but she is euphemistically called Abraham’s second wife, and the story minimizes the magnitude of the abuse and near-death she and her small son experienced. The story of Jesus’ death masterfully avoids blaming any one person or group of people, but it also avoids mentioning or picturing the cross. The soldiers take Jesus up the hill to die, and then he dies. A young reader might assume that he dies of hunger and thirst, or of sadness and fear, rather than through a distinctively first-century Roman mode of execution.

As for Noah’s ark, *Growing in God’s Love* fits within the happy animal category. The illustration, by Israel-based artist Darius Gilmont, shows smiling animals looking out of a colorful ark at a sunny day with a bright rainbow. It’s an engaging, whimsical picture with dolphins jumping out of emerald and sapphire waves. The story begins with a note that many people in the world have stories about a time when the world almost ended and that most of those stories are about a flood. The writer then simply says that it rained and rained and “every living thing died—almost. Just one person, Noah, built a boat, a boat so big there was room for his whole family.” God is not the cause of the flood, the ark, or the animal collection.

God speaks at the end, saying: “Don’t be afraid that the world will end. . . . I’m going to make a promise to all of you, to the whole world and to everyone who lives in it. I will keep you safe.” Safe is an interesting word choice for this story. During the 40 days of the flood, either God failed to keep the majority of humans and animals safe or God was absent and only enters the story at the very end. Perhaps the authors are trying to evoke a spiritual or eternal sense of safety. Yet, in the reflection

questions, the writers back away from God's ability to keep everyone safe with the question: "How can you help God make sure that everyone God promised to protect is safe?" It seems that the writers did not know what direction they wanted to go with the story. The happy jewel-toned animal and ark illustration was chosen for the Bible's cover, in spite of the difficult theological concepts embedded in the story.

Of course, anything that calls itself a Bible for children or even a "storybook Bible" is difficult for adults to assess fairly. It's natural for adult readers to compare a storybook Bible to *everything* they know or believe about the Bible and find it lacking. A book for children—no matter how educated the authors, how beautiful the illustrations, and how careful the theological agenda—will inevitably lack the complexity and range of the biblical text itself. Further, themes adult readers love may be heavy-handed or moralistic, or simply uninteresting when shaped for a child. Conversely, a child's most beloved book may include writing or illustrations that adults would label as flat, stilted, or reflecting "bad theology."

Bible stories adapted for children can hardly be as complex as the original.

The most important question to ask of a Bible story for children might be: Does it draw upon important biblical ideas to actively engage a child's imagination with the wonder and mystery of the life of faith? When we shift our emphasis toward imagination—that intangible quality that Maurice Sendak has identified as the mark of excellence in literature—we may be able to engage more deeply with the religious ideas present in the words and illustrations. Freed from concerns about accuracy, transmission of values, and completeness of content, we may be able to give ourselves over more to entering the imaginative space where biblical themes come alive and God's presence is palpable.

From a theological, literary, and artistic perspective, books that focus on a brief portion of scripture or a single concept may be able to accomplish more than children's Bibles. Because of their narrower focus, these books have room to be both subtler and more imaginative than a project that tries to squeeze the whole biblical canon into a few hundred G-rated pages. In a sense, the less a children's religious book tries to do, the more successful it may be at immersing its readers in the wonder and mystery of faith.

Religious publishers have recently produced some theologically rich children's books that prioritize readability and quality of artwork. One of the best new books in this

category is *The Marvelous Mustard Seed*, written by New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine and Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and illustrated by Margaux Meganck. This book is the second collaboration for the three, following *Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10, Coins, and 2 Sons*, and it's the first book published under Westminster John Knox's new children's imprint, Flyaway Books. The authors retell and greatly expand Jesus' short parable of the mustard seed, with engaging full-page color illustrations of a diverse community set in a modern city. There's not too much text on each page, and the story builds up to its theological conclusion both beautifully and simply—although prior knowledge of the parable would likely be helpful to appreciate the book in its fullness.

While some storybook Bibles try to cram in information or address parents through the stories, Levine and Sasso put their academic notes on a separate page addressed to parents and teachers, more clearly delineating the didactic elements from the imaginative, immersive story. Thus, children get to hear “the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed in the garden, right outside our windows, growing from itsy-bitsy, teensy-weensy to colossal, from impossible to see to unable to miss.” And parents get to read about what the authors “imagine Jesus' original audiences might have heard,” which may be surprising to some:

That audience, of Jewish people listening to a Jewish storyteller, would have expected a parable to challenge them. There is no challenge in hearing that from small beginnings come great things. They would not likely have thought that the seed represented faith, the Gospel, or the Christ. It would not have occurred to them that the tree is the church, or the birds, or the gentiles. Parables were not originally allegories, with every element in the story containing secret meaning. Parables can open up our imagination, if we let them.

In a book for children, the goal is to suggest the wonder and mystery of faith.

When it comes to imagination, Levine and Sasso seem to be saying, sometimes less is more.

Another book that foregrounds imagination through creative text and immersive illustrations is *When God Made You*, written by Matthew Paul Turner and illustrated by David Catrow. No particular biblical passage is mentioned, and the book celebrates broad themes: God's creativity, human creativity, and the uniqueness of

each human person. The rhyming at times can be a bit awkward and stilted: “God loves you creating, your true self displaying, when light on the inside through art is portraying.” But the illustrations are so luminous and the ideas so life-affirming that the book manages to simultaneously engage a toddler and bring tears of joy to a parent. “God pictured your nose and all ten of your toes: The sound of your voice? God had it composed.”

The main character is a brown-skinned girl with cornrows, yet the book is not a diversity tale. It’s a celebration of the *imago Dei* in every child. There is no heavy-handedness here, just the beauty of creation and creating.

One of the most successful recent expansions of a biblical story for children is *The Watcher*, inspired by Psalm 121, illustrated by the Caldecott-winning artist Bryan Collier and written by the poet Nikki Grimes. Both Grimes and Collier have received multiple Coretta Scott King awards for their contributions to African American children’s literature. Grimes uses the words of Psalm 121 to create a series of “golden shovel” poems. The golden shovel form was recently created by Terrance Hayes in honor of poet Gwendolyn Brooks. A line of Brooks’s poetry can be found reading the last word of each of Hayes’s new lines from top to bottom. In *The Watcher*, the lines of Psalm 121 can be found by reading the last word of each line of Grimes’s new poem, as in this one:

I wake, a hail of hot words hitting **my**
bedroom wall, like bullets. “God, **help,**”
I pray, hoping the answer **comes**
quickly. My heart bleeds **from**
the sound of my neighbors’ war next door. **The**
sun and I both shrivel, hiding behind the **Lord.**

The poems in this book create a poignant story about two children, an African-American girl and a white boy, in which compassion and faith bring about a change in their relationship and in themselves. The golden shovel form helps Grimes make the biblical text integral to the story, yet also subtle. The illustrations are done in one of Collier’s signature styles, using collage and paint.

Much of Collier’s other work is influenced by religious imagery. In *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (written by Laban Carrick Hill), which won both a Caldecott Honor and a Coretta Scott King Award, Collier painted the title character with his arms

outstretched, in a pose similar to Jesus on the cross. And Collier illustrated Rosa Parks with a halo of light in his Caldecott Honor *Rosa* (written by Nikki Giovanni). Yet, when I asked Collier about the religious themes in his illustrations portraying important historical African Americans, he said nobody had ever asked him that question. He thought for a moment. “When I illustrated Rosa Parks, Dr. King, and Dave the Potter (artist, poet, slave), I pay attention to light and colors, body gestures—these are ways to pronounce a higher power and broader strength,” he explained. He found illustrating *The Watcher* a challenge, because “I had to balance the thematic story—bullying—and then incorporate the religious element of God looking down from above, without confusing the reader.” Ultimately, he succeeded in finding this balance: text and illustration combine in a way that sparks and sustains imaginative engagement.

Of course, no single book (or set of books) can do the work of keeping a child engaged in lively relationship with God and God’s people. That’s the continual task of the church, of pastors and parents and religious educators, and of the Holy Spirit. But if—as the parable of the mustard seed reminds us—less really can become more in God’s kingdom, then books like *The Watcher*, *When God Made You*, and *The Marvelous Mustard Seed* are very good places to start.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Imagining the biblical story.”