"...illuminates the sacred in the everyday ... invites us to turn a lazy Saturday morning breakfast ... or the end of a stressful day into an opportunity to look for God, hiding in plain sight."

— Rachel Held Evans

FAITHFUL FAMILIES

CREATING SACRED MOMENTS AT HOME



TRACI SMITH

Originally titled *Seamless Faith* — now with more practices

After a Death

Bubble Prayers

Though we often think of bubbles floating up and away, in actuality they sink slowly down before they pop. Blow a stream of bubbles and you will see that they fall to the ground like rain, or tears. Bubbles reflect light and color before they are gone. They are fragile and beautiful.

This ceremony uses the qualities of a bubble as an analogy for the many complex emotions a person experiences after a death.

Designed for Ages 7+

Materials
A small container of bubbles

Time Investment: 5 minutes

How To
1. Choose a time for this ceremony that seems appropriate for your family, and tell family members that you are planning to have a "Bubble Prayer." See the notes below for guidance.

2. Blow a stream of bubbles and ask these two questions:

How do these bubbles move? (They float. They fall to the ground. They hang in the air. They pop.)

What do they look like? (They are round. They have lots of colors. They are different sizes.)

3. Conclude the question time by saying, *"Bubbles are so special. They have lots of colors. They come in different sizes. They fall to the ground. They pop. I love looking at bubbles, and sometimes I wish they didn't pop. Today we are remembering [name of person who died], and we have so many different things to think about. We are going to have a very special Bubble Prayer now."*

4. Instruct each person to blow a stream of bubbles and say, *"God, thank you for [person's name]."* Then watch as the bubbles fall to the ground and pop before the next person's turn.

5. At the end, everyone says, *"Amen."*

Notes
- Some families will choose to do this at the gravesite, on the day of a burial, or outside a church or funeral home on the day of a memorial service. An advantage to this time is the powerful connection it has to the strong emotions of that day. Also, choosing to do this ceremony at the gravesite on the day of a burial offers children a ceremony geared toward them, on a day that does not typically have child-friendly elements.

- Other families might choose to do this activity at a time that is somewhat distant from the memorial or graveside service. An advantage to choosing a later time is that the family has had some time to process the death, and the grief is not as fresh and new.

- This ceremony is listed as age 7+ because a child younger than 7 may not have an understanding of what has actually happened. Certainly younger children can appreciate bubbles, but they may not be able to participate fully in the understanding of what is happening, or the significance behind it. Follow your instincts or ask for help from a trusted minister, therapist, or friend.

After a Death: Bubble Prayers

- This is a very moving ceremony, one that is likely to cause adults to tear up. Use the tears as an opportunity to remind children that it's okay to be sad when someone dies or when we remember them. If someone is likely to cry uncontrollably or sob, it is wise to ask an additional family member, friend, or pastor to participate in the ceremony as well so there is someone to help the children feel protected and secure.

- If you choose to do this ceremony at a graveside or church where many people will be present, keep in mind that the sight of a family blowing bubbles might be misunderstood or confusing to others. Consider informing others ahead of time of your plan in order to make it a meaningful spiritual moment for your family.

Variations

- Instead of, "Thank you, God, for [name]," choose a different phrase. Some options:

  "Goodbye, [name].

  "The death of one that belongs to [God] is precious in [God's] sight" (Psalm 116:15, NCV).

  "I thank God every time I remember [name]" (Philippians 1:3, paraphrase).

- At the end, allow the children to blow bubbles and play (if appropriate).

Anxiety

Wash Away Worries

Adults often look at the life of a child and think, "Children don't have a job, a marriage, or dependents to take care of. They have no responsibility. They play and have their needs met. Ah, the easy life." We are even quick to remind children, "Wait until you are in the real world, then you'll know how hard it really is!" The truth is, though, children do live in the real world—their world. And a child is faced with any number of anxieties on a daily basis. This ceremony allows children to express their worries in the presence and safety of a caring adult and then have a moment to ceremonially "wash them away" and call on the Holy Spirit to carry them.

Designed for Ages 4+

Materials

1. Chalk
2. Bucket with sponges, or a garden hose
3. Sidewalk or driveway (see variations for options for apartment/condo dwellers)

Time Investment: 10–30 minutes

How To

1. When your child or teen comes to you with concern or worries, ask if he or she would like to do an exercise with you in which you "wash your worries away together." If the child says yes, grab your chalk and head outside!

2. Tell your child that you'll take some time to draw (or write) your worries out on the driveway together. It's important that the adult do this activity with the child so that the child doesn't feel singled out because of her worry. Tell your child that at the end she will

have the opportunity to explain her drawing or words, but that she doesn't have to if she doesn't want to.

3. At the end of the drawing time, ask your child to explain his drawing or worry if he would like. Model this by sharing some of your worries.

4. Together, fill a bucket with water and find sponges, or get out the garden hose.

5. Wash away your chalk drawings with the sponges or the garden hose. As you do, say, *"Holy Spirit, we give you our worries and fears. Take them away."*

6. Conclude with a hug and a prayer:

"Holy Spirit, we have a lot of worry and anxiety. Help us to have peace and calm in our hearts. Amen."

Notes

- I advise adults to share some, but not all, of their concerns to model to children how to be both public and private in their sharing of concerns. There are times when we want to share our worries with others, and there are times when we'd rather keep them private. Modeling that God hears all of our anxieties, even the unspoken ones, is a great relief for children.

- There is a strong temptation in this exercise for parents to either suggest solutions to these problems or to minimize the problems. Both of these instincts are born out of the desire to be genuinely helpful to the child. I encourage parents to resist the urge to do this. Perhaps during the activity you will think of some solutions you

would like to present to your child at a different time. One way to approach this is to do the activity as written, then later say, "*You know, I was thinking about when we washed away our worries, and I had some ideas. Would you like to hear them?*" If the child says yes, offer your suggestions gently. If she says no, respect her desire to work through the problem herself. Certainly, there are exceptions to this, worries in which parents must get involved for the safety and protection of their children. However, consider doing the follow up after the washing away ceremony to allow the activity to stand alone as an exercise in quiet meditation.

- Adolescence is a time when worries abound! Don't be so quick to assume your teenager doesn't want to do an activity like this. During the teen years it is especially important to allow for symbolic drawings that might be worries "in code," and to not press your teen to divulge every detail to you. Follow up can happen in gentle ways as well: "I was wondering about that drawing from earlier. How's that all going?"

Variations

- Try this activity with personal chalkboards, a dry erase board, or even a pencil and eraser.

- Write down the worries and paint over them.

Traumatic Current Event

Snuggled under God's Wings

When I was an elementary student, the Challenger space shuttle exploded. In college, the Columbine Massacre happened. Then, soon after graduation, 9/11/2001. Each of these traumatic news stories affected me differently at different stages of my childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Though there are heartbreaking stories of violence and death in the news every day, there are some that seem to be too much for the soul to bear.

On December 14, 2012, I experienced my first traumatic news event as a mother. It was the day a 21-year-old man went on a shooting spree in a public elementary school, killing 26 people—20 of them children. On that day, and for many days afterward, the only thing I wanted to do was to be with my children and to hug and kiss them and to protect them.

This ceremony brings parents and children together at a time when a traumatic news story has affected the family. The beauty of this activity is that it gives children a space to talk about their feelings if they want to, but it does not demand that they speak at all. It also helps children to feel safe, protected, and sheltered.

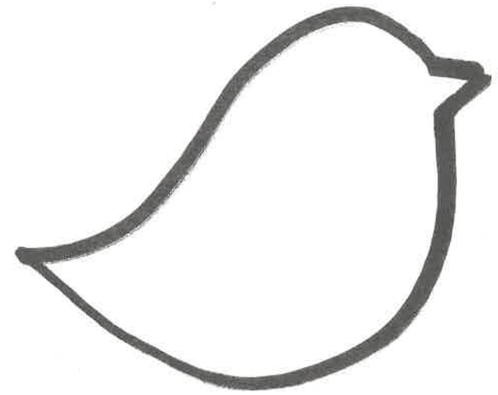
"[God] will cover you with [God's] feathers,
and under [God's] wings you can hide." (Psalm 91:4a, NCV)

Designed for Ages 6+

Materials
1. Paper
2. Scissors
3. Pen/pencil/crayons
4. Faux feathers and glue (optional)

Time Investment: 10–30 minutes
(Depending on how elaborately you decorate your birds)

How To
1. Draw several large birds on writing or construction paper. Use the template provided here or create your own.



2. Invite children to the table for a special activity.

3. Say, *"Today you may have heard a little about [X event]."*

Describe the event that has happened in bare terms, using age-appropriate language. See the notes for guidance.

Traumatic Current Event: Snuggled under God's Wings

4. Say, *"I want you to know that you are safe and protected. Sometimes I want to snuggle you up like a [Mommy/Daddy] bird! There is a verse in the Bible that says:*

[God] will cover you with [God's] feathers, and under [God's] wings you can hide'[Ps. 91:4a, NCV].

Today we can remember that God wants to snuggle and protect us just like your parents snuggle and protect you."

5. Hand out the bird outlines and say, *"This is your bird to decorate. I have these materials (crayons, feathers and glue, markers, etc.) for you to use to decorate it."*

6. While each child is decorating a bird, talk a little about what has happened. (See notes for details.)

7. At the end of the activity, write the Bible verse under each bird and hang them up somewhere in the house as a reminder to the children that they are safe.

8. Give the children hugs and snuggles and say, *"You are like my baby birds and I will always do everything I can to make sure you are safe. I love you."*

Notes

- How you describe the event will depend on the children's ages and what they have already heard. A good guideline is to start out with less information and then encourage questions/elaboration from the children. Use your instincts about what is necessary to share, and err on the side of sharing less if you are unsure.

- During the discussion time, it is important to be truthful, but not volunteer extra information if it is not necessary. Be sure to reassure children that they are safe. Ask if the children have questions and encourage them to ask as many questions as they would like.

- While it is good for parents to be able to express emotion in their children's presence, ask for help from another adult (spouse, friend, etc.) if you don't feel you can remain calm and offer a sense of safety to the children during this activity.

- Children respond to these types of events in very different ways depending on age. Preschool children might mix up what is real and what is pretend. Pre-teens and teens might have much more complex and detailed understandings of the implications of traumatic events.

- If the event is catastrophic and likely to linger in the news for days or weeks, help children focus on good and positive things to do. See: "Compassion" and "Tolerance" in chapter 7 for two ideas.

Variations

- If there is a large difference in age in your children, do this activity one-on-one to allow for age-appropriate discussion, or involve teens in helping younger children with the activity. Have a follow-up discussion with the teens.

- For very young children, play "parent bird, baby bird." Drape a blanket over your arms, as your "wings" allow children to run and hide under them. Scoop them up and give them hugs. Let the children be the mama or daddy bird.

After a Natural Disaster

Butterfly Hug

The butterfly hug is a calming technique created by therapist Luciana Artigas after Hurricane Pauline struck Mexico in 1997. It's a simple technique that can help children (and adults) relax and find peace. I learned about it when I was struggling to manage my own anxiety and panic attacks and have found it to be a useful tool for my children to find focus and rest. In researching this technique, I learned that Ms. Artigas developed this technique after one of the young children she was counseling asked, "Who will embrace me after you are gone?" Determined to come up with a way for children to feel accompanied in their trauma, Ms. Artigas and her husband developed the butterfly hug. The butterfly hug is a great reminder to children that there is nowhere we can go God is not with us. With practice, children can learn to practice the butterfly hug without the aid of a parent or guide.

Designed for Ages 5+

Materials
None

Time Investment: Varies

How To
1. Say, *"The psalmist says this about God, 'Suppose I had wings like the dawning day and flew across the ocean. Even then God's powerful arm would guide and protect me. Or suppose I said, "I'll hide in the dark until night comes to cover me over." But you see in the dark because daylight and dark are all the same to you.' [Psalm 139:9–12 CEV] This passage reminds us that God is always with us, in darkness and in light. Let's ask God to be near to us and to help us find calm and focus."* Guide your children through steps 2–8.

2. Sit or lie in a relaxed position.

3. Take a couple of deep breaths to begin to calm down and relax.

4. Cross your arms across your chest so that your fingertips rest just under your collar bone. Fingers should point more toward the top of the head, rather than the side of the body. Thumbs can interlock, or not, depending on what is most comfortable.

5. Gently close eyes, or softly focus ahead.

6. Alternate tapping fingers, left and right, at whatever speed feels most comfortable.

7. Continue to breathe deeply while tapping, left and right. Keep tapping for at least three minutes.

8. Either end the butterfly hug naturally (when the children feel calm and ready) or by saying *"Thank you, God, for peace. Help us to feel peace whenever we feel worried or unsafe."*

Notes
- Though this practice is listed as a ceremony for after a natural disaster, it can also be used as a spiritual practice for children who struggle with rest and worry. Remember that it takes patience and practice.

- Also, this practice works well with the Bedtime: Night Time Blessing in chapter 1. Practice the butterfly hug for a few minutes, and then say a blessing for children.

Wind Prayers for the World

Many cultures and countries have the custom of hanging flags in the wind. The image is a reminder that as the wind blows, the prayers are carried away with it and everyone who is touched by the wind benefits from the prayers. Flags are left up, even when they are weathered and worn, and, then, eventually burned. In this prayer, the family makes their own prayer flags together and hangs them outside. For Christians, a prayer flag is a way to talk about the presence of the Holy Spirit. Evidence of the Holy Spirit's work is all around us, even if we can't see it at times. (See also "Pentecost" in chapter 2.)

Designed for Ages 6+

Materials

1. 5 x 10 inch squares of fabric
2. Hot glue gun or fabric glue
3. Yarn
4. Fabric markers, or fabric paint and paint brushes

Time Investment: 30–60 minutes

How To

1. Explain the prayer flags, saying, *"This prayer is special, because we will write or draw it on our prayer flag and hang it outside. Then, when we look at our prayer flags outside, we will see them moving in the wind and remember how the Holy Spirit always hears our prayers. We can imagine that our prayers for the world will be spread around the whole earth, just like the wind."*

2. Ask each family member to answer the question, *"What is one thing that you hope for our world?"*

3. Give each family member a fabric square and fabric markers (or paint) and say, *"Let's draw a picture of what our prayers would look like or write a word to represent our prayer."*

It is easiest to orient the rectangles vertically. When the flags are completed, the top two inches will be folded over the string to hang, making a five inch by eight inch rectangle. Instruct family members to allow this room at the top for the flags to be folded over.

4. After designs are complete and dry, hang the flags. Cut a piece of yarn long enough to hold all of the flags with 2–3 inches of room between each. Fold the top of each flag over the yarn and secure it with hot glue or fabric glue.

5. Find a place outside to hang your flags.

Notes

- Fabric that is not sewn or finished in some way around the edges will fray easily in the wind. This is part of the evidence that the wind has moved through them!

- Doing an Internet search of prayer flags will yield rich galleries and examples from around the world for inspiration.

Variations

- Make flags out of construction paper or canvas.

- Make one large prayer flag that all the family members decorate.

- Hang the flags without decorating them, and guide family members in allowing them to represent whatever prayers are on their hearts and minds that particular day.

Compassion

Secret Helpers Week

Awareness is central to compassion. Those with the ability to be compassionate are often very tuned in to the needs of others. Like other skills, compassion can be learned and practiced. This simple family practice helps children not only recognize ways in which they can show compassion to other members of the family, but also allows them to experience acts of kindness and reflect on how good it feels when someone helps them.

Designed for Ages 5+

Materials: None

Time Investment: 30 second—2 minute intervals throughout a week, plus a 30 minute sharing time at the end of the week

How To

1. Explain to the family that for the period of one week, effective immediately, the family will be having a "Secret Helpers" week. Anytime someone sees a family member with a special need, he or she will make the special effort to go help that person, immediately, without being asked, and without expecting something in return. Because it is secret helpers week, no family members will draw attention to what they are doing.

2. Throughout the week, parents and caregivers will vocalize little clues that help children remember the challenge for the week. "Wow, Daddy helped me carry the groceries in from the car; he's really paying attention to secret helpers week," or, "I can't wait to do something special for each of you tomorrow for secret helpers week."

3. At the end of the week, have a conversation about the experience. Use the following questions as a guide:

- *How did it feel to give special help to your family members this week?*
- *Were there times that you did something special that your family members noticed? What about times that they didn't notice?*
- *What things did others do for you this week?*
- *Was it easy or hard to help family members?*
- *Should we do this again? How often?*

Notes

- One of the limitations of this exercise is that it seems to imply that family members are only helping others out because of this special exercise. During the debriefing session, a parent can point this out by saying, *"It's nice to help each other out all the time, not just during the secret helpers week."*
- Some children might benefit from a little (or a lot) of prompting and encouragement: *"Wow, it looks like Dad could use someone to hold that dustpan for him; maybe you would like it to be one of your jobs for secret helpers week!" or, "Your sister has had a hard day at school, why don't you and I pick a flower from the garden and leave it in her room with a note? It will be a chance to participate in secret helpers week."*

Compassion: Secret Helpers Week

Variations

- Try secret helpers days rather than weeks to get the family used to the idea.

- At the beginning of the week, have each family member draw a name of someone else in the family and have each person focus on helping the person whose name they drew. At the end of the week, try to guess who your helper was.

- Do this activity on a regular basis (every Monday, every 5th of the month, every March, etc.)