



# Praying All the Time

Using Children's Books to  
Explore Different Kinds  
of Prayer



by Traci Lazenby Elliott



**LeaderResources**

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# Praying All the Time

## Introduction

- ✓ A program designed for children in Grades K-5
- ✓ Five sessions, approximately 45-60 minutes each
- ✓ Perfect for Lent, VBS, Sunday School and more!

### How can this program be used?

This program was originally conceived and created as a Wednesday evening Lenten program for children, but it does not contain material that is specifically about the season of Lent, so therefore could be used anytime as Sunday School units, mid-week gatherings or even VBS.

### Why Prayer?

There are three traditional Lenten disciplines – fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Of these three, prayer is often the easiest for children to learn and fully engage. For many children, fasting starts off with a bang and ends with a sputter, and almsgiving can be somewhat theoretical. Prayer, though, can come alive for children and be transformative at any age. Children can learn to pray and gain confidence in God's availability to them and in their own ability to reach out to God. These five sessions can be stones in the firm foundation of prayer that we hope to help our children build.

### Using Children's Books as Teaching Tools

This Lenten program for children uses picture books and crafts to focus on a different kind of prayer each week. Though many of the books used are classics for small children that will be familiar, the discussions and crafts are appropriate for kids from Kindergarten through fifth or sixth grades. The cyclical nature of spiritual formation means that we can re-visit prayer and other disciplines over and over again, so they (or we!) don't need to feel pressure to understand it all and apply it perfectly right now. The high quality writing in the chosen books allows them to serve as entry points even for children who may not find the text scholastically challenging. Using these books in a Christian formation setting allows us to encounter spiritual messages in them that might be less obvious in other contexts.

Though the program assumes a Wednesday night setting, this could be used or adapted for Sunday mornings or other times and uses. However, it does not include liturgical or theological information about the season of Lent, but assumes that children receive that information at another time. Whatever your format, observing rituals or ceremonies for coming together and departing helps to add structure to your time together, and helps children to know that their spirituality is taken seriously (even if the rituals themselves include elements of play and silliness).

## **Publicity and Excitement**

Building excitement about your program begins by sending each child a postcard invitation each week, including a riddle that will be answered during your meeting time. Templates for each week follow the program information. You might print the postcards on purple cardstock, and include the change of liturgical colors in your discussions, or you might print them on white cardstock and outline them with purple marker, or you might just send them out as they are, depending on your time and other resources. What is important is that you remind kids of your special time together, and keep them connected and engaged from one week to the next.

## **About VBS**

This program was originally conceived as a 60-90 minute program, which works great for some of the newer versions of Vacation Bible School that some churches are now trying. It would be great for evening or weekend formats, and would be especially wonderful for churches who use a more Intergenerational/Family approach for VBS because it does encompass some wonderful children's books that families can then borrow or purchase to use at home to continue the discussion.

If your church uses the more traditional VBS structure that often runs Monday through Friday for a few hours each morning, you can still easily adapt this program to fit that longer timeframe. If you do a traditional half-day VBS for five days in a row, you probably won't want to send postcards everyday to the children's homes, but you could have the postcards to hand out to children as they arrive. They could color the picture and try to figure out the riddle while they wait for the program to begin, even using their postcard or their guess to answer the riddle as a "ticket" to get in.

## Gathering Ritual

Each session you will begin by helping children prepare for your program time. You may choose to turn off the lights in the room where you'll meet and light a candle or two. If you'll use a laptop or other electronic device with a screen to play the music, you may want to have it set up, with a "visualizer" or other rhythmic screen saver running. Gather the children outside the door, or allow them to join you in a circle on the floor as they arrive.

When all the children are seated in the circle, start the music, and encourage everyone to sing along with the simple Taizé chant "Bless the Lord, my Soul". Single-voice recordings are easiest to sing with. There are many recordings and even free MP3 downloads from [www.thevigils.co.uk/vigils/Taizé.html](http://www.thevigils.co.uk/vigils/Taizé.html), which uses simple, melodic Taizé chants. Scroll down to "Bless the Lord My Soul," on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010. This repeats the psalm six times – you may want to allow it to play three times at the Gathering, pause it, and then allow it to play the last three times at the Sending. It is best to have the words posted on a chalk or whiteboard, or on a poster near your gathering area, so that children can read the words as well as hear them, which may make it easier for them to learn and sing along.

## Sending Ritual

At the end of your session, after you have completed your craft and other activities, you'll all return to your circle on the floor. You'll turn off the lights and light your candle, and say a short prayer of farewell (included at the end of each session). Then, the children will again sing the Taizé chant, though this time you might invite or encourage them to sing it the final time as loudly as possible. This is a good way to send everyone home with laughter and a sense of goodness about your time together.

## Program Preparation

- Locate and purchase or borrow books you will need. All of the recommended books should be readily available from public libraries.
- Photocopy and prepare postcards for each child and each week, so that they can be mailed to arrive on Monday or Tuesday of every week.
- Prepare MP3 or other recording of Taizé chant "Bless the Lord, my Soul"
- Gather candles and candle holders, matches or lighter.

- Write out the words to “Bless the Lord, my Soul” on a poster board or large piece of newsprint so you can post it in your room as children learn the words. You will want to keep it up for all five sessions.
- Invite parishioners to donate #6 plastic containers you will use in Session 2.
- Ask for a seamstress volunteer to sew together prayer blanket from the squares children create and decorate during Session 3.
- Line up volunteer assistants and leaders for each session.

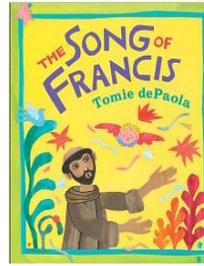
## **Bless the Lord** (from Psalm 103)

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Bless the Lord, my soul,  
and bless God's Holy Name.

Bless the Lord, my soul,  
who leads me into Life.

# Session 1



## Summary of Session

### BOOK

*The Song of Francis*, by Tomie dePaola

### PRAYER IDEA

Prayer praises God, shows our joy in God's gifts and goodness. We can communicate with God through music, whether it has words or not.

### CRAFT

Decorate a mirror with feathers, like the birds in the story.

### PRAYER METHODS

Psalms, songs, music and hymns

## Supplies

- Recording of "Bless the Lord, my Soul" Taizé chant + media player (if desired) for gathering ritual
- Candle(s) + matches or lighter
- Unbreakable mirrors – one per child. We used 4" circle ones. (Acrylic mirrors can often be found at craft stores. Also camping stores or <http://shop.vtarmynavy.com/unbreakable-mirror-p2766.aspx>)
- Small feathers
- Fun foam
- Magnets – one per mirror (or more, depending on sizes of mirror and magnets)
- Craft glue
- Craft sticks
- Bird shape cut out of card stock or cardboard
- Scissors
- Masking Tape
- Fine-tip Permanent Marker (like a Sharpie)

## Preparation

Preview the music and prepare your space with candles, media player, and craft materials.

Read the book.

For the craft, you will need to have copied the bird shape onto cardstock or cardboard, and to have cut it out. You will use it as a pattern for the children to cut birds out of fun foam to decorate their mirrors. If you have time, complete the whole craft before you meet, so that you have a sample of the completed mirror to show the children.

## Gathering Ritual

Prepare for your program time by turning off the lights in the room where you'll meet, and lighting a candle or two. Set up the music. If you'll use a laptop or other electronic device with a screen to play the music, you may want to have it set up, with a "visualizer" or other rhythmic screen saver running.

Gather the children outside the door, or allow them to join you in a circle on the floor as they arrive.

When all of the children are seated in the circle, start the music, and everyone will sing along with the Taizé chant "Bless the Lord, my Soul". Simple, single-voice recordings are best, like the one found here: [www.thevigils.co.uk/vigils/Taizé.html](http://www.thevigils.co.uk/vigils/Taizé.html). Scroll down to "Bless the Lord My Soul," on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010. This repeats the psalm six times – you may want to allow it to play three times at the Gathering, pause it, and then allow it to play the last three times at the Sending. It is best to have the words posted on a chalk or whiteboard, or on a poster near your gathering area.

## Opening Comments

"Did anyone get a postcard this week, inviting them to come to our event today? Does anyone remember the riddle on your postcard? Can you guess the answer to the riddle: **What's something that the sun does, the moon does, the birds do, and the trees do? And you can do it, too!** (*Entertain guesses, but don't give the answer yet.*) "Those are all good guesses. During our time together, I bet we'll figure out which one of them is right.

"Who knows what LENT is? (*The 6 weeks before Easter; the season that helps us get ready for Easter.*) When we're together during Lent this year, we're going to talk about praying, because prayer is one of

the ways we get ready for Easter. What is prayer?" (*Acknowledge and affirm all answers.*) "We might say that prayer is a little like talking to God, or having a conversation with God. There are lots of ways to talk to God, and lots of ways to listen to God. We're going to read a book tonight about a man called Francis, who lived a long time ago and who loved God and God's creation."

## Book

While the kids are still on the floor, read the book, *The Song of Francis*, by Tomie dePaola. Then lead a discussion. You might include some of these questions about the book itself:

- Why did Francis want to sing?
- What was the song about?
- What does it mean to be blessed?
- Who came to hear Francis sing?
- What does Francis plan to do next?

Then, connect the book to the church. "When do we sing in church?" (*The processional, anthem, sanctus, doxology, hymns, psalms, etc. Acknowledge and affirm all answers.*) "Sometimes, people sing to help them remember things, like the ABC song. The Psalms are a whole book of the Bible, right in the middle of it, made up of songs. One of them is the song we just sang.

"Why would we sing a song like this one, or like the St. Francis song?" (*From joy, because we felt grateful, because we needed God's help, other answers. Affirm all answers.*)

"Does that help us answer our riddle: What is something that the sun does, the moon does, the birds do, and the trees do? They praise God, just by being themselves! Can we praise God that way? Yes, of course we can!"

## Craft

You will probably want the children at tables for this craft. Each child needs a handful of craft feathers, a small mirror (4" round ones work well), sheets of fun foam in two different colors, and magnets strong enough to hold up the mirror. They will all need craft glue and a craft stick to spread it, pencils and scissors.

- Have children arrange feathers around the edge of their mirrors, without gluing them. One way to arrange them is to start with smaller feathers near the top, then progress to larger ones at the bottom, then change back to smaller ones as the mirror curves back to the top. They might alternate colors in a pattern, or place them randomly.



- As children work, have an adult go around and write each child's name on masking tape in permanent marker and affix the tape to the back of that child's mirror so they don't get mixed up with another child's work.



- Once children have created a pattern they like, they can remove the feathers from the mirror (pushing them just slightly off the glass, so that they stay close to where they'll be glued back on the surface of the mirror), spread glue around the outside edges, and then press the feathers into the glue.



- While the children work with their feathers, you or an assisting adult or youth can work your way from child to child, and trace the bird shape on one color of fun foam and then on the other color.



- When the children have glued their feathers on the mirrors, they need to cut out the bird shapes you've traced on their fun foam, and glue the bird shapes on their mirrors. If you have any tiny feathers left over, they can be glued onto the foam birds as "wings."

- Remove the backing from your magnets and press them onto the back of each mirror.

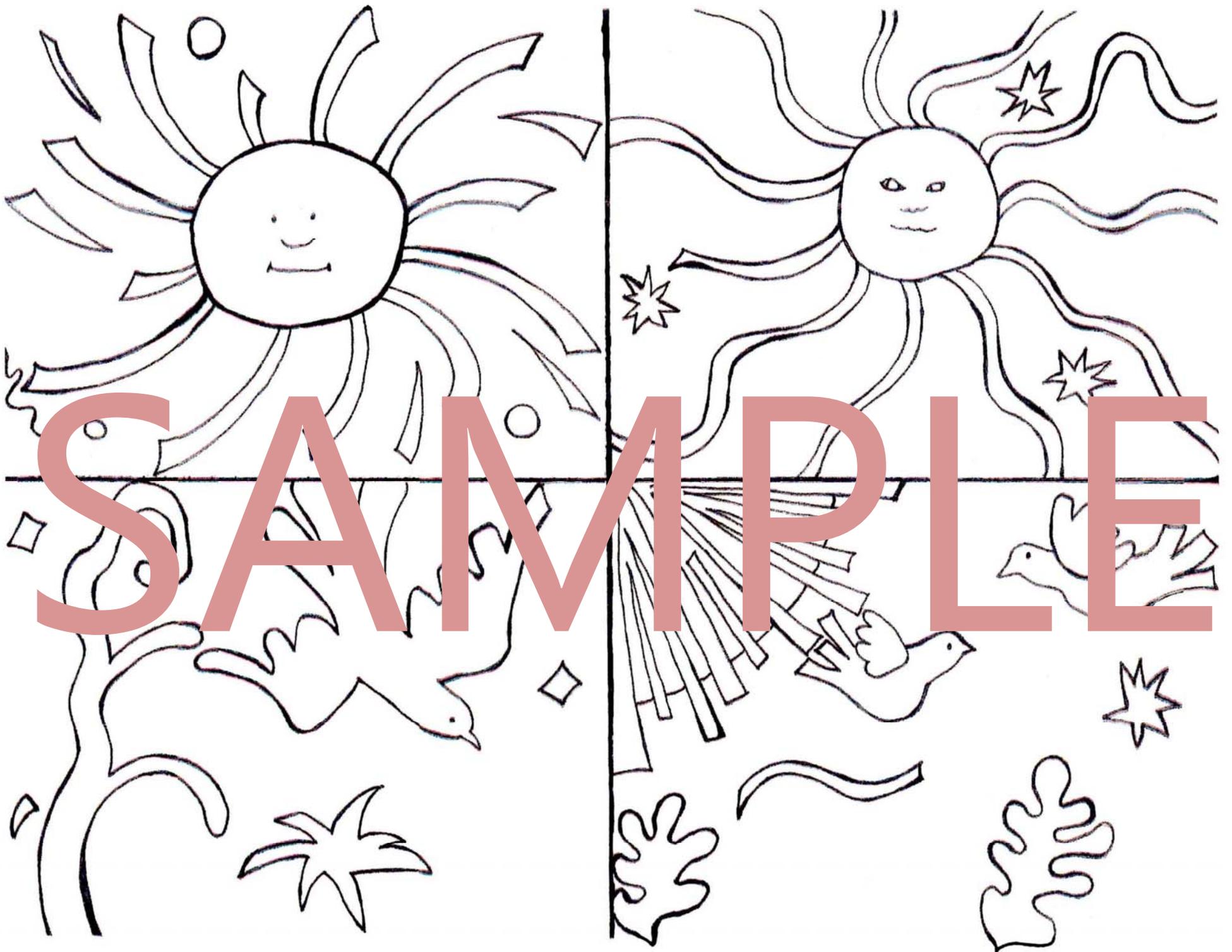
\*\* Note that pets – both cats and dogs – find these completely irresistible. If you leave them within reach, they will lick off all of the feathers and the glue, even after the glue has dried.

## Sending Ritual

At the end of your session, after you have completed your craft and other activities, have everyone return to your circle on the floor. Turn off the lights and light your candle again, and say a short prayer of farewell, such as:

*Wonderful God,  
we praise you with our whole bodies,  
and with our hearts and minds and voices.  
Amen.*

Then have the children sing the Taizé chant “Bless the Lord, my Soul” again, though this time you might invite or encourage them to sing it the final time as loudly as possible. This is a good way to send everyone home with laughter and a sense of goodness about your time together.





## HERE'S A RIDDLE:



What's something that the sun does,  
the moon does, the birds do, and the trees do?  
And you can do it, too!

### WHAT IS IT??

Come find out:

Sunday, February 12 - 4 pm  
Parish Hall of St. John's Episcopal Church

*We'll have a story, a fun craft, and  
most importantly, discover the answer to the riddle!*



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