FAMILY RITUALS & LITURGIES

Rev. Dr. Shannon Daley-Harris

Author of *Hope for the Future: Answering God's Call to Justice for Our Children*

Co-Author of *The Just Love Story Bible*

Creator of National Observance of Children's Sabbaths

OVERVIEW

Why Family Rituals & Liturgies?

How Can Pastors and Christian Educators Support?

Mealtime Rituals & Liturgies

Evening Rituals & Liturgies

Threshhold and Sacred Moments Rituals & Liturgies

My Q & Your As

Q & A *(final 15 minutes)*

GOALS

By the end of this Collaborative Conversation we will:

- Be able to speak to the value of family rituals and liturgies;
- Identify types of family rituals and liturgies and gain one or more ideas for specific family rituals and liturgical practices to try or to promote
- Be aware of various ways congregational leaders can promote and support family rituals and liturgical practices
- Have reflected on our own and learned from others' experiences with family rituals and liturgies

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My Q & Your A
What Have You Experienced?

If you are in a congregational leadership role,

- What at-home practices and rituals are you aware of your families engaging with?
- What needs or requests for support have families expressed to bring faith practices home?
- What barriers do you see to families developing rituals and liturgical practices? How do you think we can help surmount or remove them?

If you have children,

- Are there family rituals or practices from your childhood that you carried on to practice with your own children?
- Are there some that you intentionally did not continue?
- Are there new ones you introduced?

I look forward to learning from your experiences in the time for my Q your A before the final Q & A!

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WHY FAMILY RITUALS & LITURGIES?

- **Children's innate spirituality** means it's never too early
- **Parents' role** as the first and most influential nurturers of children's spiritual development
- **Power of family conversation**
- **Impact of ritual** to connect heart knowing and head knowing
- **Weaving God into daily life**
- **Adaptable** to unique constellations of family members and their particular needs.

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Why Family Liturgies and Rituals?
Children's Innate Spirituality

"God's way of being with children and children's ways of being with God"

One of Rebecca Nye's definitions of children's spirituality

"Children's spirituality is an *initially natural capacity* for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences. This awareness can be *conscious or unconscious,* and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions, feelings, and thoughts. In childhood, spirituality is especially about being attracted towards 'being in relation,' *responding to a call to relate* to more than 'just me'--i.e. to others, to God, to creation, or to a deeper inner sense of self. **This encounter with transcendence can happen in specific experiences or moments, as well as through imaginative or reflective activity (thoughts and meaning making).**"

Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters, 5-6*

Why Family Liturgies and Rituals?
Children's Innate Spirituality

"Faith is a gift from God. It is neither a particular set of beliefs nor a well-developed cognitive understanding of all things spiritual. It is an act of grace in which God chooses to be in relationship with humanity. It comes to us in and through all our senses.

"***Faithfulness*** is a human response to God's gift of faith. It is a disposition that welcomes God's presence and seeks God's teachings. It is our age appropriate attempt to let God's love permeate all of our senses and guide our thoughts and behavior. A faith tradition helps us recognize God's presence within us and respond faithfully."

Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives by Karen Marie Yust, 6.

"Infants and young toddlers both symbolize the mysterious and miraculous nature of the spiritual realm and experience the love of God through positive relationships with adult caregivers....They spend their time 'overseeing' and 'overhearing' the wider community in which they live and incorporating their experiences into a sense of personal and communal identity. They populate their evolving image of community with the people, characters, and objects around them. **The presence or absence of spiritually significant objects, stories, rituals, and practices affects whether the very young child incorporates these specific signs and narratives of spirituality into his or her fundmental worldview."**

Yust, 11

Why Family Rituals and Liturgies?
The Vital Role of Parents

Research conducted by Christian Smith and others, summarized in *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), found:

- **Parents are the most important figures shaping the religious lives and futures of their children** while children are young and even after they leave home;

- "...All empirical data tell us that, f**or intergenerational religious transmission today,**
  - **the key agents are parents...**
  - **key location is the home...**
  - **key mechanisms of socialization are the formation of ordinary life practices and identities...**

- Research found that most parents recognize and affirm their primary role in nurturing their children's faith. But that doesn't mean that all parents feel well equipped to fulfill that role!

Dr. Bec Davis has written, "Educators, especially church educators, have always known that mature faith that is dynamic and relevant, that changes us at the core of our being and informs how we think and act, cannot be 'done' in an hour a week. The vows we take and the promises we make at baptism reflect the absolute necessity for partnership between church and family when it comes to nurturing a life-long sustaining faith."

Why Family Rituals and Liturgies?

The Power of Family Conversations

"...Parents regularly talking to their children about religious matters during the week has a very powerful association with the children growing up to be religiously committed and involved...Religious beliefs are not only embodied but also linguistically constituted and meaningful." (Smith and Adamcyzk)

- **Supports learning the language of faith**
- **Signals religion's importance to the family**
- **Connects religion to every day life**
- **Allows conversation about faith to be woven naturally through larger discussions**
- **Nurtures "self-reflexivity"** asking questions like, 'How am I doing? What do I care about? Am I being my true self? Why am I feeling this way? Should I be making different choices? Is there something important that I'm missing?'

By initiating and guiding ...conversations, parents can communicate what matters to them.... And at the same time, because such talking at its best is conversational, not lecturing in monologue, parents can through them also create spaces for their children to sort out and express what they think, feel, believe, and desire for themeslves. By engaging such natural, recurrent, interactive conversations, parents can be both proactive and receptive...."

(Smith and Adamczyk, chapter 3)

Why Family Rituals and Liturgies?

The Power of Ritual

“Ritual and symbolism–music, stories, incense–are sensory cues for [connecting head and heart knowing.] Together they deepen your child’s attunement to the transcendent experience. You want your child to develop that eventual cognitive connection between head knowing and heart knowing. How do these simple acts or stories hold such power?

Ritual creates a special bond that physically ‘holds’ the transcendent, connecting body and heart. What begins as a physical or sensory experience, we invest with meaning and emotional content. We light a candle to honor a moment or memory. We sing a song, share a meal, say a blessing. In this way, ritual also opens the moment to ‘something more.’ From the most ancient rituals to the most newly created ones, ritual by definition invests a moment with meaning; spiritual or religious ritual inherently carries meaning that resonates with transcendence. Remember the study of parents who kept journals of their children’s spiritual questions of wonder and why? The most common spiritual questions, next to questions about an ultimate God, were about religious ritual. **Rituals provide intense spiritual experience a system of interpretive meaning**….In my observation, the symbolic language is particularly compelling with children as a way to hold their experience–just look at a child’s face as you read the Bible, a picture book, or a symbolically driven story of any sort.

Symbolism connects mind and heart. The symbolism of ritual and story allows the child to hold and understand her intuitive knowing, her heart knowing.”

Lisa Miller, PhD. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, 166-167

Why Family Rituals & Liturgies?
Awe is a universal human experience and aspect of our spirituality

Dacher Keltner in *AWE: Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* found eight universal experiences of awe, experienced around the world and across ages and other demographics.

- Other people's courage, kindness, strength, or overcoming. (moral beauty)
- Collective effervescence (experiencing a big WE)
- Nature
- Music
- Visual design
- Spiritual or religious experience
- Life, death, cycle of life
- Epiphanies (big AHA about life)

Rituals can create opportunities for these experiences of awe and be a time to reflect on where and when else we encountered them.

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HOW CAN PASTORS & CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS SUPPORT FAMILY RITUALS & LITURGIES

- **“Try It On” Family Gatherings:** Quarterly or occasional gatherings at the church (perhaps for dinner) where all try one of the rituals and liturgies which they can then continue at home.
- **Homecoming:** Beginning of the church school year--in person and written communications--coming home to church, but also remembering to take church home. Advent and other existing points
- **“Take Out” Faith:** Materials and resources for families
- **All Kinds of Families:** Include the broader congregation to engage all kinds of families including those without children. Creates shared practice, language, conveys these as life-long ways to nurture faith.

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We can encourage parents to...

- **Adapt! P**arents know their children best, and we can support them to adapt any materials and practices to meet their particular families--ages, learning styles, abilities and disabilities, personalities...

- **Find What Resonates:** There are lots of varieties of rituals and practices. Lean into those that connect with your kids and let go of those that don't.

- **Go for the Easy Lift:** Lean into what will be easiest to incorporate (already do family dinner? story time before bed?)

- **It's Not about Having the Answers:** Release any sense of pressure to have the "right" answers...the gift and practice is wondering together, exploring, journeying and learning together.

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MEALTIME RITUALS & LITURGIES

- Candle-Lighting Liturgy
- Blessing Bowl Ritual
- Micah Moments Monday
- Around the Table Question
- Prayers and Litanies

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CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

God calls us together
as a family here,
and as part of God's big family throughout the world.

God gives us the light of
Love
Hope
Peace
Justice and
Faith

Light the central candle.

When we share a flame, it creates more light and warmth, never less.

So too,
We share our love *and love grows*
We share our hope *and hope grows*
We share our peace *and peace grows*
We work for justice *and justice grows*
We share our faith *and faith grows*

One person lights their taper from the central candle, and then turns to the next person who tips their unlit candle into the flame.

Continue around until all have lit their candles from another. Set the lit candles down next to the original pillar candle.

Let's pray.
O God, source of light and love,
Warm our hearts that we may share your love and hope with others.
Shine a light into the shadows of injustice, that we may see how to work for peace and justice.
Move in our spirits to help us share and grow in faithfulness.
Amen.

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BLESSING BOWL RITUAL

- **Blessings** are words that call upon and share God's deepest desire for our wholeness and well-being.
  ***Being* a blessing** is how we embody or enact God's desire for everyone's wholeness and wellbeing.
- **Scripture:** "I will bless you so that you may be a blessing"
- **Blessing Bowl Ritual:**
  1. Choose a beautiful bowl to be your family Blessing Bowl.
  2. Have slips of paper& markers/pens by the bowl *(or simplify with assortment of glow-in-the-dark stars to drop in bowl after verbal sharing without writing step)*
  3. Write, draw, or dictate responses to the sharing questions--one answer on each side.
     - One way I was a blessing...
     - One way I was blessed...
  4. Take turns sharing. After you share, put your slips or stars in the bowl.

This practice helps us...

- be attentive to gratitude, with related mental health benefits
- nurture a sense of self on a deeper level than peer group measures
- cultivate a sense of agency at any age
- focus on relational (not material) dimensions of blessing

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MICAH MOMENTS MONDAY

- **Ground yourselves in Micah 6:8.** When you first start this practice as a family, read a Bible story about the prophet Micah. Talk together about what you think Micah meant, how you understand each part of the call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

- **Learn by heart** "What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

- **Look for "Micah Moments."** Every family member is invited to look for "Micah Moments" throughout the week. When did you see someone or when did you yourself do justice? Love kindness? Walk with God?

- **Share the Micah Moments.** At dinner each Monday, share the Micah Moments you noticed throughout the preceding week. How did it feel when you did or saw one? What difference did they make? Did others notice the same things? Did Micah Moments someone else enacted inspire you to do the same? Wonder together about the various ways we can live out the call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Recall Dacher Keltner's finding that "moral beauty" is the most common source of experiences of awe

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AROUND THE TABLE QUESTIONS

Around the Table Questions are questions posed when the family is gathered around the table for a meal, and you go around the table giving each person a chance to respond to the question.

- Every family member gets a chance to be heard
- Any one is allowed to pass
- You can take turns coming up with the question of the day
- You might place a number of questions on slips of paper into a bowl, bag, or other container, and let one person put there hand in and pull out the question for the table.

Kinds of Questions:

- **A Consistent Question** each night, e.g., “Wow and Whoops,” “Peaks and Valleys” or “Rose, Thorn, Bud” (Ignatius’ “Desolations and Consolations”!)

- **Varied Questions of the Day**: e.g., “What surprised you today?” “What was something new you experienced today?” “If your day today was a book, what would the title be?”

- **Storytelling Questions:** Tell about a time when… (family story telling)

Prayer: You might end with a prayer that picks up on the question theme (E.g., O God who surprised the world by coming as a baby not a king, we thank you for the good surprises of our days, and are grateful that you are with us in the surprises that are hard. Help us to be surprised by the ways you continue to come to us throughout our days. Amen.”)

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WIND-DOWN AND BEDTIME RITUALS

- **Examen**
- **Storytelling**
  - Story Bible
  - StoryPath
  - Family Stories
- **Prayers and Songs**

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EXAMEN

- **Center in stillness.** Pray for grace to see clearly.
- **Pray in thanksgiving.** Recall three moments of your day for which you are grateful.
- **Review your emotions from the day.**
- **Choose one emotion from your day and pray about it.** Listen with a gentle and open heart to understand what God as a loving friend might say to you about it.
- **Look toward tomorrow.** How might the grace and insight from this time help you live tomorrow with deep love?

- Cued Examen, with one person naming each step
- Shared Examen, with invitation to share aloud as you move through the steps
- Journaling Examen (shared or private)
- Silent Examen

Adapted from *The Examen Book: Exploring Every Day with God* by Paul Mitchell, illustrated by Katie Broussard (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2022)

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STORYTELLING

- Story Bibles with wondering questions
- StoryPath
- Family Stories

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STORY BIBLES

Story Bibles with wondering questions

Four good questions for any and every story:

- I wonder what we learn about God from this story?
- I wonder what we learn about ourselves as God's people in this story?
- I wonder why this is one of the long-ago stories that we still tell today?
- I wonder how we might understand this story differently today than when it was first told?

Or start with another open-ended question, like "What did you think about the story?" or "What would you say that story was about?" or "How did that story make you feel?" or "What are you wondering about, after hearing that story?" "Did that story give you any new ideas or raise any new questions?" "What part of the story did you like the most? What part did you like the least?"

Family Guide to Using *The Just Love Story Bible*

Resources for families to use tailored to each of the 53 stories:

- Read Together
- Share with Each Other
- Create
- Move and Play
- Care
- Try a New Practice
- Connect with a Children's Book
- Act for Justice

Forthcoming, anticipate that it will be available to download at www.middlechurch.org by Dec. 2026

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StoryPath: Connecting with Contemporary Stories

- Union Presbyterian Seminary's Center for Excellence in Christian Education's **StoryPath** provides for each children's book:
  - Summary
  - Theme
  - Biblical Text
  - Scripture Notes
  - Faith Notes
  - Faith Questions
- Union Presbyterian Seminary's Children's Spirituality Resource Hub (realkidsrealfaith.org)
- Family Guide to Using *The Just Love Story Bible*

FAMILY STORIES

"[Psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush] discovered that the **children who knew stories from their family-**-origin stories, stories of how parents met and fell in love, stories of family successes and failures--**had the best chance of developing a strong sense of self and an inner resiliency."**

"It wasn't the accumulation of various historical facts that made children competent and resilient; **it was the relationships and interactions in which these stories were communicated that strengthened a child.**....The stories became a continuation of these relationships and connected a child across generations, helping children foster what Duke and Fivush call the **'intergenerational self':** a sense that they are part of a community larger than themselves."

"There are three kinds of family narratives, according to Duke and Fivush, each with different impacts on a child's sense of strength and competency [: the ascending story of success, the descending narrative of failure and misfortune] "The stories that offer the greatest strength to a child, however, are those stories that oscillate. **The family stories that help children develop the intergenerational self are the stories that show resiliency despite varying circumstances:** 'We've had good times and bad times, but through it all we stuck together.'"

From *Between the Listening and the Telling: How Stories Can Save Us* by Mark Yaconelli (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022)

Family storytelling gives...

The gift of presence, relationship * The gift of attention, listening
The gift of time, repetition * The gift of identity, "intergenerational self"

Story prompts and stems:

- **Story Prompt:** "Tell about a time when..."
- **Story Stem:** "Wow, I never saw that coming! See, when the day started, I expected..."
- **Story Stem:** "It was an experience that changed me..."
- Can give each other prompt or stem, take turns with the same stem.

Family Midrash:

Tell a story about an event that every family member was a part of, but each person has a turn to tell the story from their perspective. After, compare notes--what was the same, what was different, what hadn't you realized about another's experience?

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WIND-DOWN OR BEDTIME PRAYERS & SONGS

- Breath Prayer:
  - Read a one-line verse
  - Regulate your breathing together-breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.
  - Then add a phrase for the in and out breath
  - Examples:
    - Psalm 50:8 “Deep in my heart, God’s wisdom teaches me.”
      In: Deep in my heart; *Out:* God teaches me.
    - Psalm 139: “O God, you have searched me and you know me”
      In: O God; *Out:* you know me.

- Kenotic, or “self-emptying,” Prayer:
  One example:
  - Be still and know that I am God. (paus e)
  - Be still and know that I am. (pause)
  - Be still and know. (pause)
  - Be still. (pause)
  - Be. (pause)
  - Be still and know that I am God.

- Songs: simple, soothing, repetitive songs, like those from Taize or church school

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THRESHHOLD AND SACRED MOMENTS RITUALS & LITURGIES

- First Day Of...
- Moving
- Repeating a grade
- Graduation
- Leaving home
- Death of a pet
- Death of a loved one
- Divorce
- End of a friendship
- Doorway
- Birthday

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LITURGY & RITUAL FOR MOVING

Opening Words

“O God, you know and love us; there is nowhere we can go that you are not with us. You understand all of our feelings. Hold us in the giant hug of your love now as we say goodbye to this house and prepare to move to a new home.”

Read Psalm 139 or a Bible Story

In the Bible, lots of people were on the move! From Abram and Sarai in Genesis, to Ruth and Naomi, to Mary, Joseph and Jesus, to Jesus’ friends like Peter. Most of them had mixed feelings about the move; it wasn’t easy to leave what they knew and loved and go someplace new. Read one of those stories or a retelling in a story bible, and wonder in what ways your experience of moving and the feelings you are having might relate to those in the story.

Children’s Story about Moving

Depending on the ages of your children, you may want to read/reread a children’s book about moving, e.g., *Leaving 4 B, Homegrown House.*

Memories that Move Us

Going room by room, each person has a chance to share a memory--it could be a one-time event or something that happened there regularly--it could be happy, sad, funny, serious…it’s all welcome and part of this life and moment.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you God for the good and loving times we shared here. Thank you for *[each person can add their memory, or the one leading can name what was shared]*. Help us know that while we are leaving this home, we can take with us the memories we love best.

Thank you God for seeing us through the challenging times here, too. Help us leave behind what weighs us down or holds us back, and guide us toward a new start in our next home.

For life together as a family and our lasting love, and for our life as your children, O God, and your big love, we give you thanks. Amen

Blessing

Now may the God who created us,
the Christ who holds us,
and the Spirit who moves in and among us,
be with each of us this day and evermore and everywhere!

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SERVICE FOR A PET WHO DIED

Opening Words

“O God, you love every part of our world.
You know when a pet dies and you know when we are sad. You loved *[name of pet]* and you wrap your love around us in our sadness now.

Reading (Psalm)

Remembrances

This is a time for any who wish to share a favorite memory of the pet--perhaps when the pet first joined the family, how they liked to spend time together, something about the pet’s personality, perhaps something funny the pet would do.

Committal

O God, we are thankful to have been trusted with the care of *[pet’s name]* during *his/her* life. We now trust that *[name of pet]* is in your loving care forever more.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We thank you for the years we had with *[name of your pet]*. *[Can reference the memories shared]*
We thank you for the love we received from *him/her*, and for the chance to be *his/her* loving family.

Blessing

Now may the love of God who created our good world,
the grace of Christ who knew the fullness of human emotions, and
the Holy Spirit who moves in and among us to bring comfort and hope,
be with each of us this day and ever more.

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Family Faith Formation Liturgies

by Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Davis *in Presbyterian Outlook*

Welcome

Invite various family members to bring a designated item and use this liturgy as a way to begin your time of learning together.

One: Come, let us gather around and see how the Spirit will nurture our faith today.

All: Who is with us?

One: Christ, the light of the world.

(Place a candle on a table in your gathering place and light it.)

All: Who is with us?

One: The Love of God, who came to meet us in the world.

(*Place a cross on a table in your gathering place)*

All: Who is with us?

One: The Wisdom of God, who speaks through the scriptures

(Place an open Bible on a table in your gathering place.)

All: Who is with us?

One: The Grace of God, who proclaims we are children of God

(Place a symbol of baptism – a bowl of water, a seashell – on a table in your gathering space.)

All: Who is with us?

One: Our risen Lord, who meets us at the Table.

(Place a symbol of Communion – a plate and cup, a loaf of bread and grapes – on a table in your gathering space.)

One: We are here, Holy Spirit, ready for your leading.

God Sightings and Prayer Offerings

Invite each person to share where they saw or experienced God this week. Invite each person to share something – a person, community, experience, event, etc. – for which they want to offer prayer.

Good and gracious God, we thank you for all the ways you were and are present in our lives and in the world …

[Invite each person to say aloud the sighting they named earlier.]

We bring our prayers to you, prayers for …

[Invite each person to say aloud the prayer need they named earlier.]

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Connecting with Scripture

Connecting through Story

A children's book, brief video, animated retelling, or other

Connecting with Our Lives

Wondering questions that invite all to engage with the story and connections to our lives, experiences, feelings

Prayer

Close your time together by praying for one another, your neighbor, community and the world.

My Q & Your A
What Have You Experienced?

If you are in a congregational leadership role,

- What at-home practices and rituals are you aware of your families engaging with?
- What needs or requests for support have families expressed to bring faith practices home?
- What barriers might there be to families developing rituals and liturgical practices? How can we help surmount or remove them?

If you have children,

- Are there family rituals or practices from your childhood that you carried on to practice with your own children?
- Are there some that you intentionally did not continue?
- Are there new ones you introduced?

I look forward to learning from your experiences in the time for my Q your A before the final Q & A!

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Q & A