The Prodigal Son February 25, 2024

**Bible Verses:** Luke 15:11-32

**Spark Story Bible:** pages 378 to 383

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Overall Lesson Takeaways

* **We can see ourselves in the Prodigal Son.**

The season of Lent contains a wealth of themes, but it is typically most closely associated with repentance – something that this parable has in spades. The turning of the younger son away from his prior mistakes is certainly cause for celebration, but the joyous forgiveness offered by the father is an easy connection to God’s forgiveness to us whenever we confess our sin and apologize for our past misdeeds. Using Lent as a season of self-examination and confession allows us an opportunity to think about ways that we may be falling short of God’s call to us. Our changes may not be quite as dramatic as that of the Prodigal Son, but what changes could we make that would make a positive difference in our lives and/or the lives of others?

* **We can see ourselves in the Older Brother.**

Although the arc of the younger brother’s journey is the much more well-known aspect of this parable, perhaps the most important piece for us comes at the conclusion. The Prodigal Son’s older brother has been the consummate child – always listening to his father, doing what he is told – but has never been celebrated in any way. After witnessing his younger brother’s welcome and celebration, he rightly wants to know “What gives!?”. The answer, I think, gets at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus is reminding his disciples that there are no promises of earthly rewards for following him – we serve not to be recognized, praised, or celebrated, but because that is what God has called us to do. There will always be a part of us that wants to be celebrated and acknowledged for the work that we have done – it’s the fair thing in our minds – but we are being asked to take a more magnanimous, divine sort of view that celebrates that there is someone ready to answer God’s call.

* **This parable is a reminder of God’s unconditional love for all.**

Although often referred to simply as a parable about forgiveness, it’s clear that Jesus was using this parable for that and much more. The parables that immediately precede the Prodigal Son are the “lost sheep” and the “lost coin” – two parables that remind us of God’s desire to welcome all back into the Kingdom of God. Note that these parables were prompted by the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus eating with sinners at the start of Luke 15 -- viewing this parable through the lens of the parables that came before it, the Prodigal Son is the lost sheep and the lost coin – the 1 out of 100 whom Jesus has come to call back into the fold.

Checking In

**Before the reading:**

* **Check in with the kids – welcoming any newcomers warmly.**
  + Younger kids: What is one of your favorite books to read?
  + Older kids: Highs and Lows from the past week
* **If you had a free day where you could do anything that you wanted, what would you choose to do?**

Bible Lesson / Discussion

**Reading the Bible:**

* Today, we are learning about one of Jesus’ most famous parables – the story of the Prodigal Son who ran away from home.
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
  + Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
  + Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!

**Questions About the Passage** (see next page for PreK/K questions)

* What would you have said to your father if you were the son that ran away and spent all his money? Why do you think his father forgave him?
* His older brother is mad at their father for throwing a party for his brother – do you think it was fair for the father to have the party?

**Connections to Our Lives**

* The younger brother leaves home and spends all of his father’s money, but quickly realizes that he made a mistake. What would you miss the most about your family if you left home?
* The older brother is jealous of how his father treats his younger brother, especially since it seems like he doesn’t deserve it. Have you ever been jealous of someone else? What made you feel that way? Was it helpful being jealous, or did it just make you feel worse?

**Biblical/Church Connections**

* One of the themes that often gets lifted up during Lent is the idea of humility. What does it mean to be humble? Why would that be important to our faith and how we live our lives?

**Alternate Preschool and K/1st Questions**

Younger ages, particularly those in our preschool class, may have a hard time discussing the biblical text for very long (if at all). My hope is that these questions (and especially the activity) can help with engagement!

**Opening Questions / Activity**

* **Take some time to welcome / get to know the kids!**
  + What is one of your favorite books to read?
  + Our Bible passage talked about someone who ran away from home and did whatever he wanted -- if you could do anything for a day, what would it be? Where would you go? What would you eat?

**Warm Up Game – Father Says**

* Like I was sharing, our Bible passage today was a story about a child who ran away from home and did the opposite of what he was supposed to do, so I thought it would be fun to play the game Father Says… except you do the opposite of whatever I say!
* (Explain that you’ll give out commands, but the kids should instead to the opposite of what you’re saying. For example:
  + Father says: Open your eyes (kids should close them)
  + Father says: Keep your arms down (kids should raise them up)
  + Father says: Don’t jump up and down!
  + Father says: Look down
  + Father says: Don’t hold your nose
* Play as long as kids are having fun, then transition to the Bible questions.

**Bible Discussion/Questions**

* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
  + Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
  + Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!
* The child who did the opposite of what his father wanted and ran away from home ended up feeling sorry and homesick. Have you ever felt homesick before? What do you do if you’re missing your family?
* The father was so excited to see his son that he threw him a big party – how does it feel to be forgiven if you make a mistake?

People of Faith

In addition to reading our weekly Bible story, I'd love for our older grade school students to learn more about people whose lives were changed by their faith in Jesus. We'll lift up a new person each Sunday, trying to connect their story to our Bible passage as much as possible!

**Jarena Lee (pronounced Ja-ree-nah)**

As we come to the end of Black History Month, we pause to remember and celebrate Jarena Lee – an incredible trailblazer who persevered against the discrimination she faced both as an African-American and as a woman.

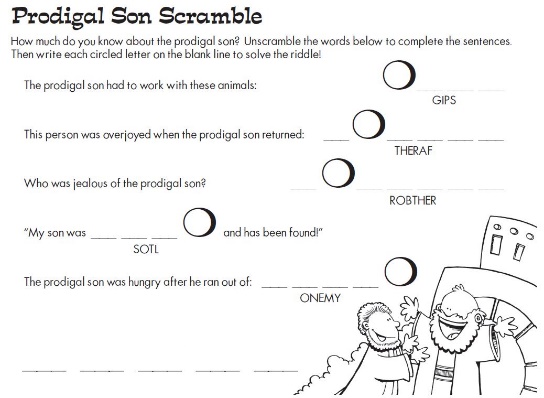
Born in 1783 in New Jersey, Lee was born into a free Black family – something that was quite rare in the late 1700’s. Despite being free, though, Lee’s family was not offered many opportunities to make money – and so at the age of 7, Lee was forced to find work as a live-in servant.

As she grew up, Lee struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts, but she eventually found hope through hearing and learning about Christ’s teachings. She decided to be baptized – and shortly thereafter began feeling compelled to preach the Gospel, despite this being forbidden for women in her time. Lee approached Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (see last week!), about preaching but Allen initially refused. In response to this, Lee allegedly said: "Did not Mary first preach the risen Savior?".

When Lee was in her mid 30’s – right around the time the Second Great Awakening was building – she finally got her opportunity. Not only did Richard Allen permit her to preach in AME churches – she also set out as a travelling minister and headed out into the developing western portion of the United States. In her autobiography, she states that in one year she “travelled two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons”!

That autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,* is believed to be the first autobiography for an African-American woman published in the United States – yet another way that Lee was able to break barriers and tear down people’s prejudices against her, all by following her deep faith in God.

Crafts / Activities

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**Prodigal Son Word Scramble**

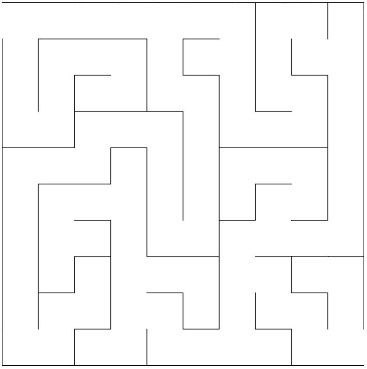
**(Ages 6+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Crayons

Instructions:

* This word scramble may be tricky for younger readers, but all of the scrambled words are used in the Spark Bible – use it whenever needed!

**Prodigal Son Maze (Easy)**

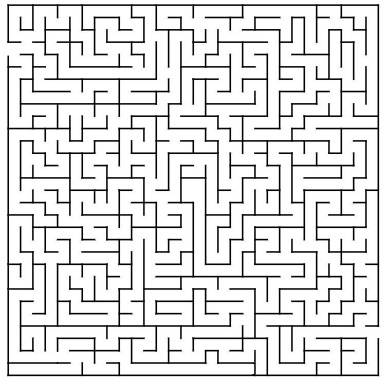
**(Ages 3+, 1-2 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Crayons

Instructions:

* This version of the maze is meant for younger students – if kids want a challenge, they can try the far more difficult version below!

**Prodigal Son Maze (Hard)**

**(Ages 6+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Crayons

Instructions:

* Anyone looking for a challenge – including adults! – should use the hard version of the maze that you can find on the website. You can have a class race if you want, or just let kids enjoy on their own time.

Biblical Background – Prodigal Son[[1]](#footnote-2)

As we spend the next few weeks on “The Prodigal Son” and “The Good Samaritan” – perhaps the two most famous parables in the Bible – you may be surprised to learn that both of these parables only appear in the Gospel of Luke! Luke isn’t the only author to have otherwise unattested parables (Matthew has several as well), but Luke’s parables tend to be more fully fleshed out narratives rather than the short sayings of Matthew’s Gospel. Indeed, chapters 14 through 18 of Luke are largely unique material… so that begs the question: did the other gospel writers really not know about the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan?

Honestly, it’s not that hard to believe in a pre-internet world! It is widely accepted in scholarly circles that the gospel writers constructed their gospels by compiling pre-existing written and oral material – Luke essentially describes this process of gathering sources at the start of his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). This material would have mostly come from Jesus’ earliest disciples sharing first-hand accounts of Jesus wherever they travelled, but as these accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry began to be written down and collected throughout different regions of the Roman Empire, it seems likely that individual authors would not have had access to all of the accounts of Jesus’ teachings that existed across the empire. Instead, the sources that the gospel writers had were what helped to shape their depiction of who Jesus was.

It is not a mystery that the gospels occasionally seem quite different from one another – you only need to read a few chapters of the Gospel of John to see that! Rather than view that as a contradiction, though, I believe having four different accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry is one of the true gifts of the Bible – we are able to read teachings and parables that might have otherwise been lost to time. We unfortunately may never know the source material behind Luke’s unique parables, but since most of them appear in a block between chapters 14 and 18, it seems plausible that they all came from a single source – so we can all be grateful that someone took the time to record them many years ago!

1. Your ability to share this info with kids will vary depending on their age – this section is mainly written for teachers and parents to learn a bit more about the background to each week's passage! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)