

For God so loved the world

MEETING AIM

To reflect on the fact that Jesus came to save the world and repair our relationship with God.

BIBLE PASSAGE

John 3:1-21

BACKGROUND

Perhaps the most famous Bible verse of all comes in the middle of a discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the religious leaders. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, partly because the dark would hide him from the sight of others, but also (as elsewhere in John) because darkness symbolises spiritual blindness.

There is so much to unpack in this passage; this service will focus on this most famous of verses (verse 16). You might wish to explore the passage more fully in other services or small groups to complement this service.

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WELCOME ACTIVITIES

OPTION ONE: Order of love

You will need: pictures of things that people love (eg chocolate, rollercoasters, musicians, family)

Show the pictures of the things that people might love (you could print them out and show them, or put them on a PowerPoint presentation). Ask the congregation to order them from the ones they love the most to the least. You could do this all together or in small groups. Get some feedback about the choices made.

OPTION TWO: Guilty or innocent

Ask the congregation to think of something silly they have done wrong over the past week. Put a willing volunteer 'on trial'. Encourage people to come up with light-hearted reasons to exonerate or condemn (don't let it get personal!). Decide whether the person is guilty or innocent, and then come up with a comedy punishment if they are guilty! Ask if it is fair for us to judge people.

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BIBLE STORY

You will need: the ability to darken your meeting space; volunteer to be Nicodemus; first-century costume (optional); a baby doll; a jug of water; a picture of a cloud; a toy snake; a calendar; a lantern or torch

Invite your Nicodemus to the front (they can be dressed in a first-century costume if you have one). Introduce him to the congregation, pointing out that he was one of the religious leaders. He had studied the scriptures and was one of the most knowledgeable people when it came to God and his relationship with his people.

Darken your meeting space if you can, then say that Nicodemus wanted to talk to Jesus, but didn't want any of the other religious leaders to see, so he went at night. Comment too that the writer John often uses darkness to talk about things that are hidden, a life that is lived away from God and not being able to see the good news about Jesus. Then tell this story:

Nicodemus sneaked through Jerusalem to find Jesus. He came at night and found Jesus. He had lots of questions to ask Jesus, but he didn't really seem to understand Jesus' answers. Jesus talked to him about being born again. *Give Nicodemus the doll.* He told Nicodemus all about being baptised with water and the Spirit. *Give Nicodemus the jug of water.* He told Nicodemus about heavenly things, about a snake in the desert, about eternal life and about darkness and light. *During this sentence, hand Nicodemus the picture of a cloud, the toy snake, the calendar and lantern. He should be struggling to hold onto everything.*

Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus was talking about, he couldn't keep everything in his head. But Jesus had something amazing to say in the middle of all these things. He told Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." *As you say this, take all the items off Nicodemus.*

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SMALL GROUPS

You will need: copies of the questions below; Bibles

Break into small groups – made up of one or two families, or different mixed-age groups – and give each group a copy of these questions and a Bible:

- What's your favourite part of the Bible passage?
- How do you think Nicodemus felt as he listened to Jesus?

- Read John 3:16-17 again. What do these verses make you think?
- How does it feel to be loved so much by God?

Give the groups time to chat about these questions, referring to the Bible passage if they need to.

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REVIEW

You will need: roving mic (if needed);

Get some feedback on questions two and three from 'Small groups', using a microphone to hear people's contributions if your meeting space is large.

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RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

Set these three activities up in different parts of your meeting space. Explain what each one is and encourage people to go to the one that will help them process what they have discovered most effectively.

OPTION 1: Discussion

Assign some volunteers to help guide a discussion about the story and what it might mean for the congregation today. You could read the whole of the passage and discuss everything Jesus talks about.

OPTION 2: Bible art

You will need: art materials; paper or card
Encourage people to illustrate all or part of John 3:16-17 using images, patterns or things that represent how they want to respond. Invite them to listen to God as they work, being open to what he is saying to them today.

OPTION 3: Telling others

Hold a discussion around how you might tell others about how much God loves them. What do people in your parish or community need to hear about God's love? How can you most effectively get that message out there? Make plans for an evangelistic / outreach event which you can host in the coming weeks.

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CLOSING

Bring everyone back together and ask if anyone would like to share what they did, thought about or discussed during the response time. Thank everyone for taking part and say an appropriate blessing to close the service.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

Louis and the last-chance saloon

"Ah mate, I can't believe your mum lets you get away with it!"

"Yeah, if I did half the things you did, my dad would kill me!"

Louis laughed. "Yeah, she is a bit of a pushover." He knew that wasn't really true. His mum had always been honest and fair. She'd punished him just as his mates' parents had punished them. It's just that she'd always treated him like an adult and let him make his own choices.

Louis, Femi and Chloe were queuing to get into Manchesterford Rovers' home game against local rivals Athleticco. The £20-note his mum had given him to go towards new school shoes had instead gone on a ticket for the match.

"How are you going to get those new shoes?" asked Femi.

"Surely your mum will notice if you're still wearing those knackered old boots next week."

"Don't fret it mate," said Louis. "She won't mind, she never does."

"I can't believe you," Chloe said, giving Louis a playful punch.

"Last week, I was five minutes late from dance class and my dad blew his top. I thought he was going to have a heart attack."

The three friends pushed their way through the turnstile and into the ground. It was a freezing February afternoon and Femi treated them all to hot chocolate. They made their way to their seats, their hands wrapped around their drinks. Suddenly, Louis' phone pinged. It was his mum.

"Have you gone to the game?" the message read.

"No Y U think that?" he typed back.

"I'm watching the local news. They've got a reporter at Manchesterford Stadium and you're in the background. I can see you looking at your phone. Did you spend that £20 on the match?"

"Mum, I'm sorry. I'll be home straight after the game. I'll buy the shoes out of my own money. Honest."

"OK, make sure you're back by 5.30, you need to go to your Auntie Jean's and help her shampoo her dog. Don't be late, this is your last chance."

"No problem."

The game was amazing. It swung this way and that and finally Rovers won 3-2. As they were leaving, Chloe said: "Want to come to mine? My dad said I could have people around tonight."

"Great!"

"Sure!"

Half an hour later, when Louis was halfway through a game of FIFA, his phone pinged again. It was his mum again.

"WHERE ARE YOU?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What words would you use to describe Louis?
- Do you think Louis's mum did the right thing in letting him off so many times? Why?
- How easy is it to make the right decisions? Is it easier in some cases than in others? Why?
- Is this really the 'last chance' for Louis? What might his mum do next?

This story is based on Luke 13:6-9. Read this passage to the group and compare Jesus' story and words to this one. Discuss what Jesus might have been saying through his parable, encouraging the group to think about it in a new way.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

Social media

I have a simple rule I enforce with myself when online: if at any time while considering posting something (a Facebook post, Tweet, Instagram picture, comment, message or email), I have that fleeting thought: "Hm, should I really post this?" then I absolutely don't. I will of course weigh it up on its merits, appropriateness or likelihood of offending someone. However, even if I think it might be fine to post after all, if the thought that it might not be OK has crossed my mind I always follow my own rule and don't post it. I consider not posting something to be a small sacrifice compared to the trouble I might cause if I go ahead and publish it to the world. That inner voice seems more often right than wrong!

This month consider chatting with your mentee about their approach to social media. Key important areas to discuss with your mentee:

- The extent you find validation or value from others based on 'likes' or 'follows'.
- How honest and accurate is your online profile – how much does it create a false idea of what your life is like? (And what impact might that have on people who follow you?)
- The quality and health of your interactions and conversations with others.
- What you watch, read and look at and the benefits or harm that does to you.
- Your ability and habits around fact-checking, discernment and susceptibility to fake news or manipulation.
- Your understanding around pressures that come from comparing yourself to what you see on others' feeds and profiles.
- The ways you go online, your device habits and the length of time you spend doing so each week.
- The dangers from predators, scammers and criminals.

Having discussed far and wide, allow the conversation to focus where the mentee's enthusiasm or interest is greatest, as this will be where they have most motivation to act. Ask them to choose a word that sums up what that motivation is for positive change, eg health, kindness or fun. Now turn this into an acronym by asking them to come up with a word for every letter in that word to act as a reminder for their values and how they want to behave regarding the internet and their use of devices or social media. The idea is that this is an easy to remember word that they can recall often before they post on social media or when they are browsing etc. It should be aspirational but achievable.

This is something that needs to be followed up in subsequent sessions. Text them the acronym this week so that if they forget what it is, they have it right there in their messages to refer to.

JOEL TOOMBS

has an MA in Christian mentoring and wrote the *Mentoring and Young People Grove* booklet. He is a volunteer youth worker.



Team games

Last month, we looked at up-front games where volunteers competed in a challenge in front of the rest of the children or young people. This month, it's team games! You can use these as part of ongoing competitions (for example at a holiday club or residential) or just for fun.

TOPPLE THE TOWER

You will need: matchboxes or other small boxes; catapults; ping-pong balls; chalk or masking tape

Split the group into smaller teams and mark out a circle on the floor for each team. They should be about three metres apart. Give each team the same number of matchboxes and challenge them to build a tower with them inside their circle. Then give the teams catapults and ping-pong balls. The teams have to fire ping-pong balls at the other teams' towers in an attempt to knock them down, but they have to stay inside their own circle. They are not allowed to block incoming balls.

The winner is the team whose tower is the last one standing. If the game is going on for longer than it needs to, call a halt and declare the highest tower the winner.

SQUEEZE

You will need: table; cup of water; coins

Place the table in the middle of your space and put the cup of water in the middle of the table. Line the teams up fanned around the table; each team should hold hands along the line. A leader with a coin stands at the opposite end to the table, one leader per team.

The leaders toss their coin. If it's heads, then the team does nothing. If it's tails, the player nearest the leader squeezes the hand of the next player and so on. The squeeze travels down the line until it reaches the player next to the table. They grab the cup and throw the water over one of the other teams!

Refill the cup and play again. You might want to rotate the players in each team, so it's not always the same player standing next to the table (and so getting wet!). You might want to keep track of which team wins each round to come up with a final score.

SNOWBALL FIGHT

You will need: newspaper; chalk or masking tape; stopwatch

Before the session, screw up the sheets of newspaper to make small snowballs. Divide your playing space into two using the chalk or masking tape.

Divide the children or young people into two teams and sit them down on the floor, either side of the line. Spread out the newspaper snowballs equally on each side. Challenge the teams to throw all the snowballs onto the other side of the line. Play for a minute; at the end of the time, count up how many snowballs are on each side. Declare the side with the fewest snowballs on their side the winner. Make sure you recycle the newspaper after the game.

BEAN-BAG NOUGHTS AND CROSSES

You will need: eight bean bags in two different colours (four of each); chalk or masking tape

Mark out a large noughts and crosses board on the floor at one side of your space. Split the children or young people into two teams and line them up at the other side of your space. Give each team four bean bags of the same colour. At the signal to start, the first person races to the board and places one of their bean bags in a square, then runs back to their team. The next player runs up and either places a new bean bag onto the board or moves a bean bag already on the board to a new square.

Play continues this way until one team gets three in a row. They are the winners. Play the best of three if the group is keen.

FEETIONARY

You will need: large sheets of paper or white boards; thick marker pens or whiteboard markers; list of famous people, places and things

Split the group into teams and give each one a white board or some large sheets of paper, together with some pens. Ask all the players to take their shoes and socks off.

Ask the first players from each team to come to you. Show them the top name on your list of famous people, places and things. They have to go and draw that for their team to guess, but using their feet!

Once the team has guessed that person, place or thing, the second player comes to you to be shown the next name on the list. Keep going until one team has made its way through the list.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

The man born blind

The story of Jesus healing the man who was born blind in John 9 contains themes such as truth, healing, sight, and the miraculous works of God. These crafts will help children to explore some of these themes creatively.

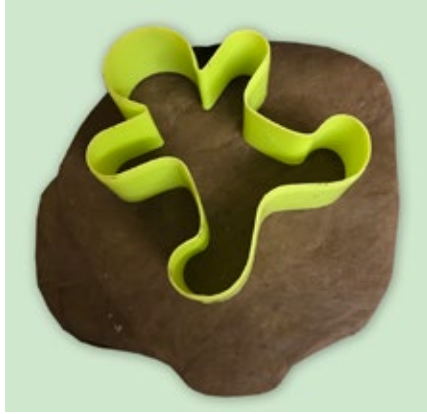


OPENING EYES

You will need: white cupcake cases; felt-tip pens; a large container of water

Opening of eyes in the story happens on many levels. The blind man sees physically and spiritually, and the Pharisees and other questioning people have their understanding challenged by Jesus. This craft allows 'eyes' to physically open and gives a chance for children to think about who in the story sees and doesn't see.

Fold the top and bottom of the cupcake case into the middle so that the case is more or less divided into thirds, with the top third covering the bottom third. Open out again and, in the centre, draw an eye. On the top and bottom thirds, draw eyelashes on the inside and outside. Fold the case into thirds, as before and place face up in a container of water. Watch as the eye slowly opens!

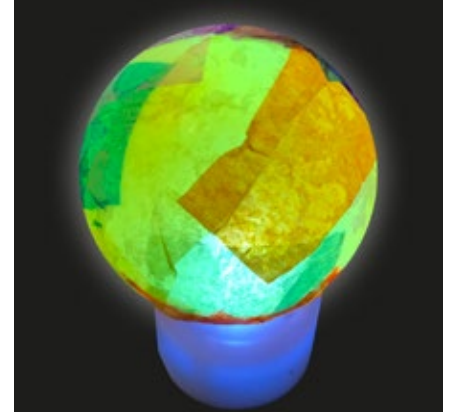


MUD PLAYDOUGH

You will need: two cups plain flour; half cup salt; two tablespoons oil, one heaped tablespoon cocoa powder, one and a half cups hot water; a large bowl; people cookie cutters; play knives; rolling pins

A favourite part of this story is always when Jesus spits on the ground to make mud and then puts it on the man's eyes. Mud playdough is slightly less messy, but always a versatile craft tool!

Mix all the dry ingredients, then slowly add the liquid until the dough combines. Let the dough cool and then knead it. It will be quite sticky, so knead it until all of the stickiness is gone and add extra flour if needed. When ready to use, let children play with the 'mud' dough to explore the story. Spend the creative time chatting to them about their thoughts on what they have heard.



ILLUMINATIONS

You will need: hollow plastic balls of the kind used in a ball pool (ping-pong balls would also work); tissue paper; PVA glue or decoupage glue; paintbrushes; scissors; battery-operated tea lights

Jesus tells the disciples that he is the light of the world and brings that light by doing the work of his father. This craft illuminates something that looks opaque on the surface, showing the power of light to break through darkness.

Cut a small X in the bottom of a ball-pool ball and make sure that it will fit over the top of the 'flame' of a battery operated tea light. Next glue cut-up pieces of tissue paper on to the ball, covering it completely. Locate the X you cut at the beginning (which may now be slightly covered by tissue paper) and place the ball on top of the tea-light flame. Light the tea light to illuminate the colours.



HOMEMADE SCRATCH ART

You will need: patterned paper or card; holographic or shiny card; sticky-back plastic; paint; washing-up liquid; paintbrushes, skewers or cocktail sticks

This craft will help children to think about seeing colour emerging from darkness, just as the blind man cleans the mud from his eyes and begins to see for the first time. Scratch art cards are fairly cheap, but there's something special about making your own!

Make a mixture of two thirds paint and one third washing-up liquid. Cut patterned paper to the desired size and cover with sticky-back plastic. You could also use any kind of drawing that children have made. If you are using shiny or holographic card, there is no need to cover with plastic. Paint the liquid mixture over the surface and leave to dry. This covering is likely to be patchy! When dry, cover the paper with a second coat of paint and leave to dry again. Use skewers or cocktail sticks to scratch away the paint and reveal the colour below.



I LOST MY BODY (12)

CLIP: 00:50:33 – 00:56:28

SYNOPSIS

In a Parisian laboratory, a severed hand escapes and sets out to reconnect with its body. During a hair-raising escapade across the city, the hand fends off pigeons and rats to reunite with pizza delivery boy Naoufel. Its memories of Naoufel and his love for librarian Gabrielle may provide answers about what caused the hand's separation, and a poetic backdrop for a possible reunion between the three. The film is based on Guillaume Laurant's novel *Happy Hand*.

A severed hand trying to find its way back to its owner doesn't exactly scream 'family-friendly' and it is worth noting that this short film deals with some mature issues. Covering a whole host of existential topics, this is a deep and mature story about destiny and the constant struggle to achieve our dreams and find our place in the world. Despite the trauma and tragedy of Naoufel's life, we are left with the view that sometimes we can flourish if we take a leap into the void, to realise that dreams are within reach, as long as we fight for them.

The clip that this session focuses on comes just after the midway point of the film. Naoufel has fallen in love with Gabrielle, a woman he delivered a pizza to and had a conversation with over the intercom. Naoufel has been using the knowledge from that conversation to build a friendship with her at the library. Naoufel describes his idea of fate to Gabrielle and suggests that sometimes we need to deviate and try something unexpected. Later they are up on the roof again, inside an igloo that Naoufel has built to impress Gabrielle. He reveals that they actually met for the first time when he was a pizza delivery man. Hurt, Gabrielle leaves the rooftop.

This film is in French with English subtitles as standard. On the settings you can change the audio to English to hear the English cast starring Dev Patel and Alia Shawkat.

DISCUSS

After showing the clip, break into small discussion groups and discuss the following questions:

- How do you think Naoufel feels about life?
- Do we need to have a purpose in life in order to be happy?
- Is the idea of fate compatible with a Christian outlook on life?
- Do you think that Naoufel was wrong to not tell Gabrielle about their earlier meeting and how he has been manipulating their relationship to impress her?

Then read Ecclesiastes 3:18-22 together; you may need to give some context of Ecclesiastes beforehand. Return to your smaller groups and discuss the following questions:

- Is this passage in conflict with the traditional messages found in Christianity?
- How does this passage describe our fate? Is this a positive message?
- This passage declares "everything is meaningless" – do you agree?
- What do you think the overall message of this passage is? Do you think Naoufel would like it?

I Lost My Body is now available to stream on Netflix.

TOM WADE

is the head of philosophy and theology at Haileybury and Imperial Service College.



THIS IS REAL

ARTIST: Jax Jones and Ella Henderson

SUITABLE FOR: 10 to 13s

INTRODUCTION

This high-energy track, and session, explores what it means to belong, to be 'home'. Our young people will have many different experiences of being 'home' and this session will need to be sensitive to the different backgrounds and experiences of our young people, while sharing the ultimate 'home' that God can give us all.

As you begin the session, you could either start with a discussion about what 'home' may mean to us, or what it means to belong. Or if it is more suitable, you could begin with a more creative activity – providing cardboard boxes, catalogues and a selection of craft materials and inviting the young people to create a junk-modelled 'ideal bedroom' in pairs or small groups.

Introduce the theme for the session, explaining that we will be thinking about what it means to belong.

LISTEN AND DISCUSS

Play the track, distributing copies of the lyrics if you think it would be helpful. After listening to the track, discuss the following questions:

- What lyrics stand out most to you and why?
- What does the singer mean that they "have found somewhere that I belong"?
- When or where might you most feel like that?

Help the young people to share their ideas, being open to all young people's suggestions and experiences. Explain that this song may well be about a relationship with another human being, but there are other ways we can look at these lyrics too.

Distribute Bibles and invite the young people to look at Psalm 84. (*The Message* version of this passage is a lovely piece of creative rewriting which may be more easily relatable to the young people; you may prefer to print out copies of this paraphrase instead.) Read the passage together and invite the young people to highlight words or phrases which stand out to them. Give the young people the opportunity to raise any questions or explore phrases which are more difficult to understand.

Together with the young people, discuss the following questions:

- How does this psalm mirror the song?
- What does this psalm mean to you? Can you relate to the idea that in God we can find the place we belong?
- Which line do you like the most?
- Which line challenges you the most?

Point out to the young people how different this is from the 'perfect homes' created at the start of the session. The writer of the psalm rejects all the ideas we may have come up with, claiming that one day in God's presence is worth more than all the treasures we can imagine. Can we get a hold of how big a statement that is?

As you draw the session to a close, invite the young people to take their copies of the psalm, or their favourite verse away with them. Challenge them to spend some time alone with God this week and reflect on what it means to 'belong'.

BECKY MAY

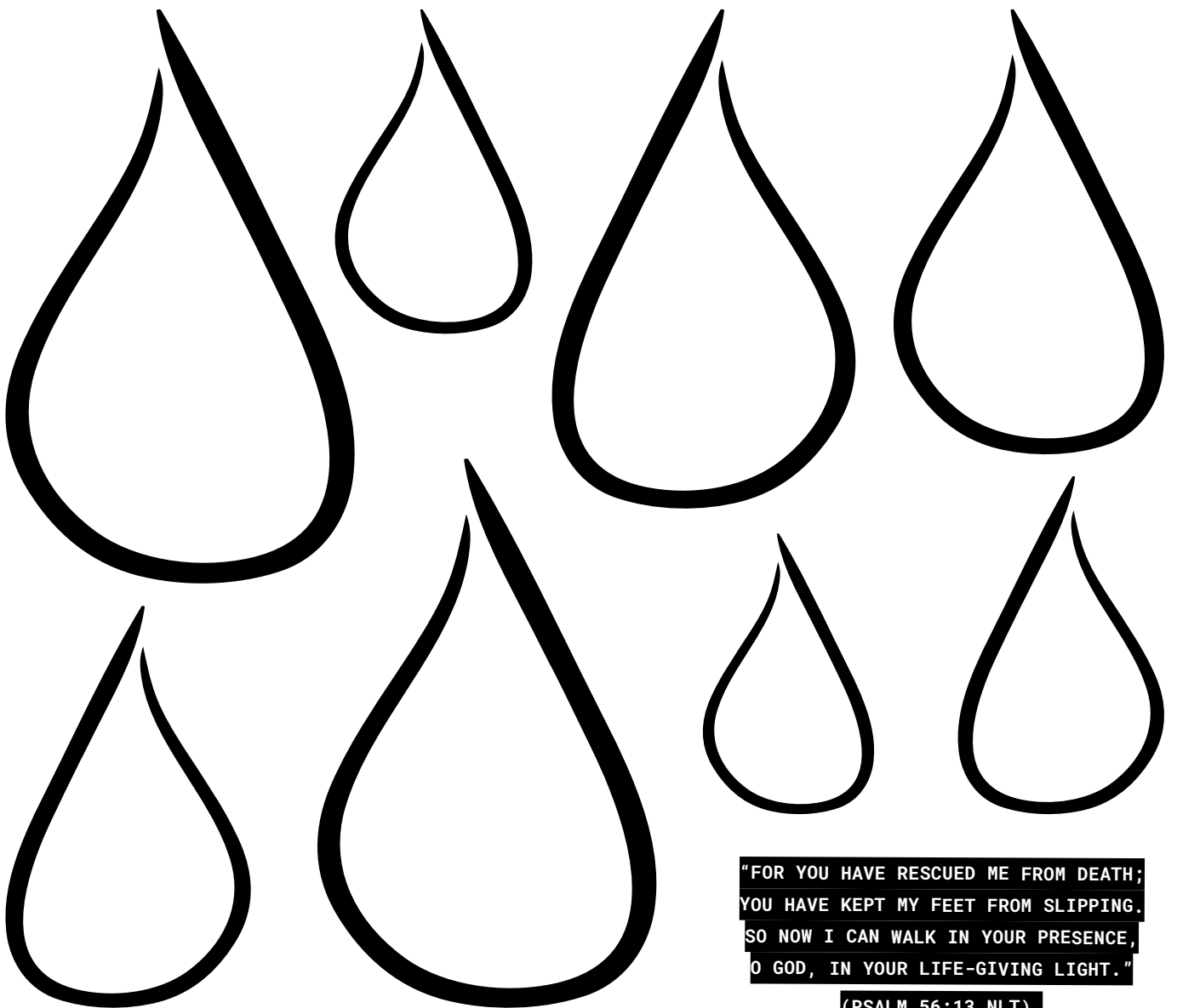
is a freelance writer and experienced children's and youth leader. She can be found at theresourcescupboard.co.uk.

EACH TEAR

Psalm 56 is a lament psalm all about the difficulties the writer of the poem was encountering. In one of the early verses it says: "When I get really afraid I come to you in trust" (Psalm 56:3 *The Message*). We too can come to God in trust when we are scared, anxious or sad. Verse 8 says:

**"YOU'VE KEPT TRACK OF MY EVERY TOSS AND TURN
THROUGH THE SLEEPLESS NIGHTS,
EACH TEAR ENTERED IN YOUR LEDGER,
EACH ACHE WRITTEN IN YOUR BOOK."**

God sees our every tear. Write in the teardrops below the things you feel sad, angry or worried about and know that God listens.



**"FOR YOU HAVE RESCUED ME FROM DEATH;
YOU HAVE KEPT MY FEET FROM SLIPPING.
SO NOW I CAN WALK IN YOUR PRESENCE,
O GOD, IN YOUR LIFE-GIVING LIGHT."
(PSALM 56:13 NLT).**