

Hanging Out with Sally Lloyd-Jones

Communicating Jesus as Redeemer

BY SAM LUCE



Sam: This is the Christmas issue for *K!* and one of the reasons I love your writing so much is that you focus on Jesus as the Redeemer. How can we as children's workers amplify the redemptive work of Jesus during the Christmas season?

Sally: One thing I think is important is to find ways to tap into the issues that children themselves face in their everyday lives at school and on the playground. Then, connect that to why Christmas is such good news—for them, today, in their lives.

It might be beneficial to use the Old Testament stories as a way to prepare kids, by focusing on the ways in which Jesus would be the answer to all the challenges and issues God's people faced. "I'm not strong enough." (David and Goliath), "I'm not brave enough." (Daniel), "I'm not pretty enough." (Leah). Put the focus back on the One who is Enough and show how Jesus came to rescue us, right now, wherever we are. He is our Rescuer! In setting the stage this way, by the time Christmas Day comes, it's a day of true celebration.

The opportunity to write for children is both a tremendous joy and a serious responsibility. One of the authors who has greatly blessed and enriched the lives of children is Sally Lloyd-Jones. Her books point kids to Jesus—the Savior and Redeemer. You may know her from *Tiny Bear's Bible*, the *Jesus Storybook Bible*, or *My Merry Christmas* (which guides children through the holiday customs and symbols to discover how each tradition points to the One at the heart of Christmas, the greatest gift of all: Jesus). So, I caught up with Sally and had the privilege of picking her brain with some questions.

Sam: As a children's author, what is the one aspect of Christmas you wish the church addressed more?

Sally: I think the mystery, the awe and the wonder of the Story sometimes gets lost. I wish we could find ways to break through the familiarity, to glimpse this incredible story that angels never tire of. I think that's the challenge for all of us at Christmas.

Sam: I know that I have told the story of Christmas to kids so many times I often get in a rut. What would you suggest to keep a fresh perspective?

Sally: Tying the Christmas story more clearly to the great story of redemption is one way to keep it fresh and get children to see it differently.

I love the idea of building up to the nativity over several weeks or months. In that time, you prepare children with a sense of expectation and longing by mirroring the expectation and longing of God's people through the centuries for the promised Rescuer.

Another way is to decorate the Christmas tree together, to use the symbols to tell the story and start a conversation.

Sam: What is a Christmas tradition that your family practices?

Sally: I have nieces and nephews and one of the things we do is put the crèche figures all around the room. Each day leading up to Christmas we move them so that by Christmas morning they have traveled across sofas, chairs and shelves and have arrived; they're all gathered around the manger. And that's when you add the baby. It's a way to build expectation for the day the baby is born.

Sam: I love the Jesus Storybook Bible. In it, you explain deep theological truths in a way that does not water them down but distills them in a simple and more powerful way, in a way where kids are enlightened and not patronized. How are you able to do that so well?

Speak to them on the same level as you would an adult, using simple language to say extraordinary things.

Sally: Jesus, of course, has the highest view of children. And, children are our teachers in many ways, maybe as much as, if not more than, we are theirs. It is paramount to treat children with that kind of dignity and respect.

Another thing is to have an actual child of the right age in mind as you write. It keeps you honest. You can't get away with jargon. If you have the child sitting there and you're telling her jargon, she'll soon lose interest and glaze over.

Finding the right words will take more work on your part. You will have to think through the issues yourself and be clear. How will you describe sin? The fall? You will have to be ruthless with yourself in avoiding jargon.

This is obvious, but the other thing is to be vigilant against dumbing it down. Tell children the whole truth in words they can understand. Even if they can't grasp everything, this will ignite their passion, and spark their imagination. Speak to them on the same level as you would an adult, using simple language to say extraordinary things. They are like adults, just smaller, and they understand much more than we give them credit for. Children respond to great truths and heroic stories. They love to stand on tiptoes to understand, and we don't need bells and whistles to keep their attention. A simple story well told is powerful! If you need proof, just watch the look on a child's face when you say those magical words "Once Upon A Time." We are made for stories!

Sam: To be a great leader and a great kids' pastor, I believe you have to be a good storyteller. As a professional storyteller, what advice would you give someone to grow in their ability to tell stories well?

Sally: Storytelling is performance as much as anything. And, a crucial part of any performance is obviously rehearsal. I find trying your story out on real live children is crucial; it will show you what does and doesn't work. I think it's a bit like being a stand-up comic. It should sound natural, but it needs to be something you've written, learned, refined and rehearsed.

It's important to involve the children in the story. When I read stories to children I make eye contact with them and react with them as if I am reading the story for the first time, just like they are. This keeps it playful and draws the children in as you all react together.

Sam: A lot of people like to write or want to write. How do you know you have what it takes to be an author?

Sally: Someone said if you can be anything else, be that; don't be a writer. Writing is an honor, a privilege, a great joy and it's hard, hard work. I encourage anyone who wants to ►



Writing is revising and revising and revising until it's the best you can make it. There are no shortcuts unfortunately in this business. Believe me, if there were, I'd have taken them!

Sam: What are some things you do to stay creative and not get stuck?

Sally: Annie Dillard once said to graduating creative writing students not to get themselves in a position where they were only writing or they would fall into a depression. That's key. Never get to the point where all you are doing is writing. You need to be living. And have time to be "idle", where you leave space to just meander in your mind. You never know where ideas come from or when, but you need to be available when they come. Living in New York City is a great way to stay creative for me. Also riding my bike. Meeting friends. Talking to fellow writers. Going to movies. Writing in cafes on my laptop. Exploring new neighborhoods. Oh, and I find coffee very helpful too!

Sam: What is the one thing you would love to tell every children's pastor or parent?

Sally: I wouldn't want to presume to tell them anything, except to express my gratitude for the job they do every Sunday.

But if I had to say something, it would probably be what I tell myself all the time— Hans Hoffman said, "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak." I have that taped to my wall. It's something I aspire to in my own writing. ■

write a book to go for it. As a writer, you'll have to work hard at your craft like anyone else.

Who would imagine they could build a good table without training as a carpenter? Or perform a violin concerto without having trained as a violinist? Yet, I think a lot of people approach writing a bit like this—especially children's books. Some, I fear, have too low a view of children. Children are the most discerning and honest readers—the best readers in the world actually. Why would they not deserve the very best?

This idea that you can write a book without working at the craft is unfortunate, because it's a sure way to fail. If you approach it like that, you won't be putting your best foot forward. Part of going for your dream is doing your homework first. Knowing everything you can about the business. Being as prepared as you can possibly be. And most important of all: writing the best book you can write.

Don't worry about agents and which publisher. First, write the best book you can write. For a children's writer, this means testing it out on children. They'll let you know if the story is not working, because they'll lose interest! It's also important to read it aloud to yourself. Have someone else read it to you. (I think this is true of all writing actually, but particularly true for children's books.)

Sam Luce has been the children's pastor at Redeemer Church in Utica, NY for the past 13 years. He is passionate about empowering the local church to effectively communicate the gospel to kids and minister to families. When not working, he loves spending time with his beautiful wife and three kids.