

"Fed by the Lord is an indispensable guide for parents, caregivers, and educators seeking to ground sacramental preparation in the heart of Scripture. Combining rich exegesis with sensitively calibrated teaching guides, this much-needed book forms parents for the vital but often intimidating task of inviting children into eucharistic encounter with the God who nourishes and sustains us. In so doing, it beckons children and parents alike to look with new eyes at the holy work of sharing a meal. I look forward to using it with my own children as they prepare for First Communion."

— Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University

Fed by the Lord

*At-Home Scriptural Formation
to Prepare Children for
First Communion*

Leonard J. DeLorenzo



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design and mosaic by John Vineyard.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeLorenzo, Leonard J., author.
Title: Fed by the Lord : at-home scriptural formation to prepare children for first communion / Leonard J. DeLorenzo.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2023] | Summary: “Fed by the Lord provides at-home scriptural formation for children preparing for First Communion. Written for the adults who guide them, this resource focuses on nourishing relationships between children and parents as well as the Lord who feeds them through twelve stories of God feeding his people”—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022046793 (print) | LCCN 2022046794 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814668627 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780814668634 (epub) | ISBN 9780814668634 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: First communion—Catholic Church—Study and teaching.
Classification: LCC BX2237 .D45 2023 (print) | LCC BX2237 (ebook) | DDC 264/.02036—dc23/eng/20230109
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022046793>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022046794>

*To Tim O'Malley,
who teaches and lives by eucharistic charity*

“The eyes of all look hopefully to you;
you give them their food in due season.
You open wide your hand
and satisfy the desire of every living thing.”

(Ps 145:15-16, New American Bible, Revised Edition)

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Introduction

My son Josiah wrote this book with me. On Sunday afternoons for several months during his year of preparation to receive First Communion, we sat at a table in our home and read Scripture together. We started in the Old Testament, selecting six episodes where the Lord feeds his people. We then moved to the gospels, with six more episodes where Jesus brings this divine giving to its completion with the gift of his Body and Blood for his disciples.

With each episode, Josiah and I started in prayer, then we read the passage together. We went back over it so I could ask him questions and he could ask me questions. We would point out the important or surprising things in each episode, and by the later episodes we were making connections to the ones that came before. After our reading and conversation, Josiah would illustrate the episode, then tell me about what he drew and why.

As father and son, we prayed together, studied together, wondered and laughed together. He learned from me a lot that he did not know about how God has acted throughout salvation history, and I learned from him how to stumble over the Word of God with child-like curiosity.

After twelve Sundays focusing on these twelve episodes, with twelve prayerful and fun conversations together, and with twelve of his own drawings giving shape and color to these biblical scenes, we had created the basis of this book. Of course, much more than a book was being created during this time. Most of all, paying attention to these particular actions throughout Scripture created one firm, clear, and beautiful memory for Josiah: the Lord feeds his people. Even more, when Josiah stepped forward to receive his First Communion on

May 16, 2020, he rejoiced at the wonder that now he himself was being fed by the Lord.

Investing in You, Who Invest in Your Child

This book comes from the desire to equip and empower parents and mentors to provide their children with a biblically rich preparation for First Communion. Young people do not need more programs; what they need is more meaningful connections. This simple but substantive approach fosters two crucial connections for young people:

- First, they connect with their parents or other mentors who spend time with them in a focused way to read and learn, pray and talk.
- Second, young people connect with the Word of God—Jesus Christ—who reveals himself to us in Scripture and comes to us personally in the Eucharist.

With these connections in mind, my goal is to help nourish and support you, the adult reader of this book. I want to nourish you by giving you the opportunity to further develop your own biblical imagination, and I want to support you as you guide your child or student toward an intimate encounter with the Lord. Everything presented here is meant to foster relationship: between you and the Lord, you and your child, your child and the Lord who feeds us.

This formation allows young people preparing for First Communion to recognize and wonder at how God feeds his people. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, God is feeding us in the most personal and intimate way. It is important that young people know that. It is even more important that they trust in this most wondrous gift. We must help every young person who receives the Eucharist to believe in their mind but especially in their heart that *this is God, feeding me*.¹

¹ According to one recent study, the majority of Catholics do not believe the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ. Renewed belief in the Lord's presence can begin from the direct and personal trust that when you receive the Eucharist, the Lord is feeding you. See Gregory A. Smith, "Just One-Third of U.S. Catholics Agree with Their Church That Eucharist Is Body, Blood of Christ," *Pew Research Center*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>.

By spending time with the twelve episodes of this biblical journey, we see that it is characteristic of God to feed his people. In other words, this is just what God does: God feeds. This is no distant or remote god; rather, this is the God who draws near and cares for us. He gives us what we need. Since what we need above all is him, he gives us himself as our daily bread. To know God is to know him as the one who gives life, who nourishes us, who cares for us. This is who God is. By studying together the actions of God in Scripture, we prepare our children to make a remarkable act of faith: to believe that *when I receive the Eucharist, I am being fed by God*. That one, simple belief opens them to being changed, just as it should open us to being changed over and over again.

One of the surest ways to incite wonder and love for the Lord in our children is for us to rekindle wonder and love for the Lord in ourselves. We have a responsibility to instruct our children—to model and share our faith with them. For many of us, this begins as a daunting and uncertain task: we might question our own faith, or feel awkward in our wording or mannerisms in sharing faith, or recognize our own lack of knowledge when it comes to Scripture or the particularities of Catholic doctrine. I had all this in mind as I prepared this book for you, especially because I felt all those things myself when it was time for me to begin forming my children to reverence our eucharistic Lord and welcome him in the Blessed Sacrament. That is why this book is first of all an investment in you, to nourish and guide you, so that you may nourish and guide your children with greater confidence and joy.

Growing Accustomed to the Ways of God

St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin in the fourth century, famously wrote that “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Why is that? Because Christ is the one through whom, with whom, and in whom all things are created. He is God’s saving action. He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He is God-with-us. To know him for who he is, as he is, means growing in knowledge of how God creates, how God speaks and acts, and how God reveals himself through history and especially to the people of Israel. To know him who fulfills the Law, we need to learn about the Law; to know him who completes prophecy, we must study what is prophesied. Without becoming more and more immersed in Scripture throughout our lives,

who Jesus really is may become fuzzy and vague, even to the point that we create the Lord in our own image of what we *think* God is or should be, rather than letting God be God and allowing our hearts and minds to be transformed by him. If ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ, then familiarity with Scripture forms us for intimacy with Christ as he is.

The twelve biblical episodes in this approach to sacramental preparation guide us—and then the children we form—to become more familiar with God’s actions and thus with God’s “character,” if you will. We will ponder even those episodes that are familiar to us with fresh eyes, noticing details that might have eluded us previously, slowly allowing connections to emerge, and moving beyond first impressions. Six of these episodes come from the Old Testament, where Jesus Christ is not named explicitly:

- The Human Being and the Garden (Gen 2:4-9, 15-17)
- The Forbidden Fruit (Gen 3:1-10)
- The Passover (Exod 12:1-20)
- The Manna (Exod 16:1-35)
- The Prophet’s Strength (1 Kgs 19:1-21)
- The Abundant Bread (2 Kgs 4:42-44)

These Old Testament episodes ultimately reveal ways in which Christ is anticipated and prefigured, though we will not fully see that until we turn our attention to the six gospel episodes that come later. In these gospel episodes, Jesus Christ is front and center:

- Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30-44)
- Jesus Turns Water to Wine at Cana (John 2:1-11)
- Jesus is the Bread of Life (John 6:25-38, 41-42, 48-58)
- Jesus Institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper (Luke 22:1-2, 14-20)
- Jesus Redeems the Two Bound for Emmaus (Luke 24:13-37)
- Jesus Renews his Disciples on the Seashore (John 21:1-14)

What is happening as we and our children pay attention to each of these episodes is certainly that we are learning *what* the Bible says. Beyond this, though, we are also learning *how* to read the Bible. When you develop a really close relationship with a friend over a long period of time, you end up paying attention to a lot of the things this person says and does—you learn about them through their words and actions. But your knowledge of them—your relationship with them—is not just about the accumulation of all these experiences and memories of what they say and do; even more, you become formed to *how* this person thinks, judges, values, and operates. You just “get each other.” That is an analogy for the relationship and distinction between learning *what* the Bible says and *how* to read the Bible. Over time and with devoted attention, we slowly move from learning about these different events of God to “getting” who our God is. We just “get him” like he “gets us.” Knowledge becomes understanding, and understanding opens us further to love.

How This Works

In a previous book titled *Turn to the Lord: Forming Disciples for Lifelong Conversion* (Liturgical Press, 2021), I presented a new approach to forming people for the completion of Christian initiation, principally through preparation for the sacrament of confirmation. That approach was designed for groups from parishes or schools, under the direction of parents and other mentors. The approach I am presenting in this book is similar to that other approach in that both depend on scriptural immersion, the development of meaningful relationships, and the integration of what we learn with how we live. What is different in the First Communion version is that this is more of a one-on-one approach, whereas the previous approach for confirmation is intended for and necessitates groups. Together, though, these two approaches aim at more holistic, substantive, enjoyable, and lasting forms of sacramental preparation, with each suited to the specific needs and capacities of those being formed, whether younger children as here, or teenagers, young adults, or even more mature adults in confirmation. What these two approaches also share in common is that both call for and depend on the investment of parents, mentors, and other more mature disciples to be the primary guides and educators.

In each of the chapters that follow, you will find two parts. The first part will be me writing directly to you, bringing us through the specific biblical episodes. This is for your own enrichment and nourishment. The Dominicans, as the Order of Preachers, have a saying about their religious charism: each of them is like “one beggar telling another beggar where they have found bread.” We can think of the first part of each chapter in similar terms: I’m the first beggar who has found great sustenance in each of these biblical episodes, thanks in no small part to what others have shown me in their own teaching and writing. You are the best resource and most persuasive mentor for the child you will be teaching and forming. The first part of each chapter is an investment in you.

The second part of each chapter, then, is a guide for how you might lead a session with your child. In my experience, each session takes from forty-five to sixty minutes. That includes time to pray together, slowly read the passage together, and talk and ask questions about the passage. It also includes time for your child to draw and color the scene on their own, or to engage in some other kind of creative or reflective activity. I will point out some alternative possibilities to drawing and coloring at the end of the first session, though I consider the drawing-and-coloring activity to be the best. One of the distinctive and beautiful benefits I have found in having my children draw the scenes that we study together is that later in the year we would go back to earlier scenes and my child would describe his or her drawing to me. In doing so, they would recall the biblical episodes in quite considerable detail. As necessary, I could then ask questions about the drawing with specific main points about the biblical scene in mind, and because my children were looking at something they created, they had a better chance of not only remembering but also being able to tell me about that point in their own words.

When I have followed this approach with my own children (I am now doing it for the third time), we would study one of these scenes (i.e., one “session”) each weekend. For us, this never came out to twelve straight weekends of this kind of formation. More typically, we would have three or four weekends in a row, then a weekend or two of something else, then back for a few more consecutive weekends. At the end of these twelve sessions, we also took at least one additional weekend to look at everything together (my kids’ drawings are amazingly helpful

for this), which inevitably leads us even more to learn about and marvel at how the Lord feeds us.

On the weekends when we were not engaging in this particular form of preparation, we took on other intentional practices to prepare for First Communion. This is very fitting since this “fed-by-the-Lord” formation is meant to be a main piece of a young person’s preparation for receiving the sacrament, but not the exclusive means of formation. This formation should be accompanied by instruction and immersion in prayer, time spent in Eucharistic Adoration, preparation for First Reconciliation, and potentially some retreat experience with a parish community. I worked with my parish director of religious education when developing this approach, and in our case this served in place of my children attending the traditional religious education classes at our parish; however, this way of formation may very well be a supplement to the formation and education that occurs in parish- or school-based faith formation curricula. Whether or not children are enrolled in a group or class for First Communion preparation, the distinctiveness of this approach is precisely in the guidance and empowerment afforded to parents to directly engage with their children in religious formation. This type of investment in the formation of our young people should be one of the foundational and totally common parts of religious education and sacramental preparation: an investment in a relational approach to biblical catechesis.

As you prepare to immerse yourself in these wondrous mysteries of God’s care for us, I hope and pray that what I offer in the pages to follow will nourish your mind and fill your heart. To the extent that something like that happens, it will not be I who is nourishing and filling you, but indeed our Lord, the Incarnate Word, who is giving himself to you and preparing you to receive him ever more generously and gratefully. As parents and teachers, catechists and mentors, we hope for nothing less for our own children as we are called to take up our irreplaceable responsibility in passing on a living faith to them. At the end of all our hopes and labors, all our successes and even our failures, we are ultimately called to let our children walk on their own to the altar where the Lord of all comes to meet them, personally. We will have done well if, when they open their mouths to receive the Eucharist, they are ready to believe that right then and there, they themselves are being fed by the Lord.

chapter one

The Human Being and the Garden

(Gen 2:4-9, 15-17)

What takes place in the Garden of Eden is a children's story. It is simple and direct, earthy and homey, familiar and personal. This is the kind of story that adults might read to children but not one that adults read seriously for themselves. To many adults, this story seems childish.

C. S. Lewis was the author of one of the greatest works of children's literature of the twentieth century, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He wrote the first chronicle for his goddaughter, who was then a child. He knew that by the time it was published, his goddaughter would think herself too old for a children's story. In a letter to her, he said that someday she would be old enough to read this story again.¹ He meant that once adults reach a certain level of maturity, they might allow themselves to enjoy again things that they would have enjoyed as children but thereafter considered beneath them.

That is a strange cycle, if you think about it. It is as if there is a stage of immaturity in adulthood when we consider ourselves too smart, too sophisticated, too grownup to take seriously things that seemed suited to us as children. Of course, there are things you do as a child

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 110.

that you should *not* do as an adult—especially in your later years—like trying to run up a slide at full speed. That ceases to be fun when it’s the fast-track to dislocated knees.

But aren’t the best children’s stories the ones that come back to us with remarkable relevance after we’ve passed through the immaturities of our nascent adulthood? *The Giving Tree* delights, haunts, and soothes the seasoned parent reading it to her youngest child. *The Velveteen Rabbit* is like something remembered from ages past while also being something strangely new at the same time. The same could be said of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or any of Lewis’s chronicles. As Lewis himself observed: “A children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story. . . . No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty—except, of course, books of information.”²

Is the creation account in Genesis 2 like a book of information? If it were, then it would indeed be the kind of thing that you read as a child until you grasp the basics, then leave behind, only to be of interest again for the sake of reading to a child for their own good, but no longer for your own. If we as adults, however, would be willing to suspend our judgment long enough to at least entertain the possibility that this story might be something equally worth reading at age fifty as at ten, then perhaps we would find two *very* adult questions addressed in the narrative right from the start: “Who am I?” and “Where am I?”

It may just be that this is a children’s story that we never outgrow, or rather one that we grow into over and over again.

Who Am I?

The question of who I am reaches far and wide, but it fundamentally begins with the question of *what* I am—me, this human being. Without any beating around the bush (that comes later in Genesis 3:8-10), this account goes straight away to the fundamental claim about what a human being is: “The LORD God formed man from the dust of the

² C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), 15, 24.

earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7).³

There are three parts to this one verse. First, there is the action of the LORD God to form and shape "man" out of the dust of the earth. Like a potter working with unformed clay, the Creator fashions a body from this earthy stuff. The relationship between the body that is formed and the stuff from which it is formed is in fact expressed in the original Hebrew of this verse, though we do not always capture that connection in English (or other languages in translation). The word "man" is the translation of the Hebrew term *'adam*, which is not yet the proper name "Adam." That term is related to the Hebrew word translated here as "earth," which is *'adamah*. The "man" is the earth creature: the one formed from the earth.⁴

Second, the LORD God breathes his own breath into the creature he has fashioned from the earth. It is difficult if not impossible to imagine a more intimate action than this. The Creator gives what is his own to his creature so that the creature may be filled with what was not his own but becomes his own by this gift. We do well to wonder at how close the LORD God is to his creature here as he breathes into him. The LORD God both holds this creature in his hands as he forms him and touches his creature with his lips as he offers his breath.

Third, the "man"—the one formed from the earth—becomes a living being. Notice that it is not the fashioning of the body that makes him a living being, nor is it the giving of breath that makes him a living being. It is only the *union* of the formed earth stuff and the donated breath that makes *'adam* a living being. This is the third and ultimate action of the Creator: to bring together and join what were otherwise separate. Here we see the union of body and soul as the living human being. The human being is never less than or other than this—to be a human being is to be a living union.

³ All biblical quotations in this chapter come from the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ In his translation of the verse, Robert Alter seeks to preserve more of the connection present in the Hebrew when rendered into English by describing the "human" as "humus from the soil" in *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 21.

As adults more than as children, we forget or we deny—or we *are* denied—what we are. It is tempting to think (or be persuaded that) “I am *not* my body”—this stuff, this baggage, these wounds and limitations and marks and history. It is tempting to think that the “real me” is separate from my body. Alternatively, it is tempting to think (or be persuaded) that what animates me and gives me life is what I choose or make for myself, or what others validate in me, or what passes as favorable in this time or that. Yet here comes this “children’s story” to state quite directly and conclusively that I—this human being—am fundamentally and inerasably the living union of body and soul: a body fashioned by the LORD God, a soul given by the LORD God. It would be easier to choose one or the other, to define myself by *just this* or *just that*. But we are challenged to hold both, and to see the gift of that union as true for ourselves and for each other.⁵

Where Am I?

War, violence, hatred, cruelty, greed, malnourishment, drought, floods, famine, wildfires, and deception upon deception upon deception. To look around our world or to see what passes through the news before it is replaced by something else creates the overwhelming impression that *this* world is anything but good. It often feels like we ought to get away from this place, separate ourselves from what happens here, and find security somewhere else, in some other way. On the individual level and the societal level, I suspect we all know that deep, piercing question: “Where am I?”

Once again, the creation account of Genesis 2 does not dally or delay, but gets right to a fundamental claim about what this world of ours really is. Immediately after the verse about the creation of the human being as the union of intentionally formed earth stuff and divine breath, we read this:

⁵ For a robust and compelling account of how this fundamental claim about the wholeness of the human being as the union of body and soul establishes the basis of a Christian response to more modern “gender paradigms,” see, for example, Abigail R. Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2022).

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad. (Gen 2:8-9)

The LORD God, who intentionally and intimately creates the human being, places his creature in a garden full of what will nourish and delight him. This is a statement about the world—*our* world—the world which the LORD God creates. We are placed in a world that is made to sustain us and provide us with our basic needs. This account suggests to us that before all the complexities of human life come into play, we are creatures who depend on what is around us, available to us, and given to us for our daily existence. *This* world that the LORD God creates and in which he has placed us was, from the very beginning, such a world.

The scholar Leon Kass, in reflecting on this passage and noticing how the very simplicities of human life are accounted for here, sees how this second creation account speaks personally to each of us who begin our lives in innocence and infancy:

Whatever else human beings are or become, they are, always and at bottom, *also* beings with an uncomplicated, innocent attachment to their own survival and ease, beings who experience and feel, immediately and without reflection, the goodness of their own aliveness. . . . From the point of view of simple necessity—for food and drink—the world is a rather generous place; were it not for the depredations of civilized man, it would be so still. For many of our simpler relatives, including primates, it remains in large measure a veritable garden; and it would still be so for us, had we never risen up from animality—or for that matter, from childhood.⁶

This is not a political statement. It is rather a statement about the goodness of creation, something we hear repeated over and over again—seven times—in the first creation account of Genesis which precedes this one. The world is good; it is created good; it is a good

⁶ Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 60.

place for us. However bad things might get, the world is still good, as God's creation.

Our first experiences of life are experiences of the goodness of the world. We do not bring ourselves into existence but are rather placed in this world, much like the Lord God placed his '*adam*' in Eden. We are given sustenance before we even know we need it. We find warmth in the womb before we know cold. Oxygen fills our lungs without gasping for it. As we grow older and become so occupied and preoccupied with all the things we lack or want or need, we tend to forget just how much we are provided for simply by being in this world.

In seeing infants or even contemplating children in the womb now, all of us may recognize or reimagine this remarkable state of existence: we begin life by receiving and, by and large, our first experience of life in this world is of a world that provides for us.⁷ When we read the creation account in Genesis 2, Leon Kass says that "we experience the original '*adam*' as a grown-up child enjoying the pleasures of a child-like existence."⁸ Maybe we are nostalgic for that, even if most of us would not choose to become an infant again. Nevertheless, do we not encounter in this image of the original '*adam*' something of what we hope for and cherish in our own children? We want to give them what they need. We guard their innocence even though we know they will change and become more complicated. This biblical account echoes back to us our own longings for our children: that they may have life and nourishment and security and peace.

The Garden of Eden is not primarily about what we have "lost"; it is, rather and more deeply, about what the world fundamentally is, as the LORD God's creation. The garden is a gift and it is filled with gifts. This is the world the LORD God creates *for us*. So that we may live well in the world, the LORD God gives us not only what we need but also instruction in how to live here well:

The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." (Gen 2:15-17)

⁷ St. Augustine offers a marvelous reflection on infancy in *The Confessions*, I.6.7, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage, 1998), 7.

⁸ Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 61.

We ought not jump ahead too quickly because we happen to *know* what happens in the next chapter. Instead, we should pause and pay close attention to this one instruction, this one commandment. Did you notice that it is overwhelmingly positive? *Everything* is given to 'adam to eat, everything but this *one* thing. Yes, indeed, that one thing is where the drama to come unfolds (and we'll get to that), but we might be so consumed with that idea from the start that we miss a really crucial thing: everything is given.

It is also important to recognize that there are two trees in the middle of the garden (see Gen 2:9). When most of us recall this narrative from memory, it is only the tree of the knowledge of good and bad that is in the middle. Isn't that funny? We make the forbidden thing the center of everything. At minimum, though, we should see that the tree of life is the first one mentioned as being in the middle of the garden, where the tree of the knowledge of good and bad also is. An array of other trees surrounds these two trees, giving nourishment and delight to the creature the LORD God has created.

Who Is God?

To look back over just these several verses from Genesis 2, we might discover not only the two very adult questions of "Who am I?" and "Where am I?" but yet another question equally profound and expansive: "Who is God?" Rather than conjure up answers on our own, let us see what we can see in the text itself:

- God is the one who gives water when the land is dry (2:5).
- God is the one who shapes and forms (2:7a).
- God is the one who gives his breath (2:7b).
- God is the one who makes us into living beings (2:7c).
- God is the one who creates a world that supports our needs (2:8-9).
- God is the one who tells us how we are to live, for our own good (2:16-17).

When, as Christians, we pray in the Lord's prayer that "Our Father . . . give us this day our daily bread," we pray that the Lord will do for

us today what the Lord has done for us from the beginning of our lives: care for us, provide for us, feed us. This “children’s story” is about all the most important things: who we are, where we are, and who God is. To forget any one of those things is to get life all wrong. Getting life right often requires us to return to the basics, becoming children again.