

Wichita Friends School Worship: Presence in the Midst
(first Monday after Thanksgiving)

At Wichita Friends School we have 30 children, 3 to 8 years old. Our children come from a variety of protestant faith practices. We have developed a SPICES curriculum and try to share “what it is to be Quaker” without being doctrinal. Our weekly worship in the Fall centers on God and the Friends testimonies of Community (August-September), Integrity (October) and Peace (November-December.) During December, we read children’s Christmas stories in worship and have the Godly Play Advent/ Christmas story and play with creches in Godly Play. To transition into a Spirit-centered feeling of Christmas, we use J. Doyle Penrose’s painting, “Presence in the Midst.”

In Monday morning worship, we are seated on the front benches in Heartland Friends Meetinghouse. The framed painting is placed on a chair in our circle where all can see it. While we sing a few gathering songs, the children glance at the painting, wondering why it is there. Some remember that it is the painting from our Godly Play room in the school building. After singing, I introduce our “story.”

We have a story about this painting this morning. Let’s look at it. Miss Jenifer will hold it and walk around the room so everyone can see it up close while we talk.

This painting was painted over 100 years ago (1916.) It shows people in church. These people are Quakers who lived about 300 years ago. We can tell by the way they are dressed ...

- Long dresses and aprons of the women
- Women’s bonnets and men’s hats - even the little girls have on bonnets
- One of the men in front is leaning on a cane or walking stick ... he must be old.
- Everyone is wearing their hats and bonnets in church, which is kind of strange for us.

These people from 300 years ago are doing like we do when we are quiet in our worship. They are listening for the gentle voice of God inside them.

Paintings have names, and the name of this painting is “Presence in the Midst”. I wonder why the person who painted it called it “Presence in the Midst?” “Presents” can be gifts, can’t they? We get presents for our birthday and at Christmas. Did you know “presence” also means “here.” If you are “present,” you are right here. We are all here, so we are all present. “Presence in the Midst.” What is “midst?” (*Let children respond if they wish.*) “Midst” is an old-time sort of word that means “in the middle.”

Is something present in the middle of this painting? (*The children will respond with “Jesus” and “God.”*) Yes! I wonder why Jesus...God is in the middle of the people? (*Let children respond if they have ideas.*)

Everyone has their eyes closed except for a little girl who is leaning against her mother and a woman in the 2nd row of chairs. I wonder why the little girl opened her eyes? (*Let children respond. Suggest ideas if needed. -- waking up / wondering if it is time to leave / looking out the window at a bird*)

I wonder why the woman’s eyes are open? (*Let children respond - They will probably say, “She sees God.” Play with responses and lead to “sees/feels Jesus/God.”*)

So, Jesus is in the middle of this painting, isn’t he? What else do you see? (*Responses may be, “Jesus is standing on a bench.” “Jesus is floating.” “Jesus looks like a ghost.” Acknowledge and play with the responses.*)

Our Bible has a lot of words that Jesus said when he lived here 2,000 years ago on Earth. One of the things he said is “*When two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there also.*” (Look at the painting for a few seconds, and point to Jesus.)

(*Moving into quiet worship -- Place the painting in its original place on a chair in the circle.*) Now, we’re going to be like this painting. Let’s put our feet in front of us, like these people. Let’s put our hands in our laps. And, let’s be quiet and listen to what is inside of us or what is in our middle.

(Have a few minutes of quiet ... as long as the quiet is comfortable. Then, without talking, spread a small round lace table cloth in the middle of the floor.)

We've talked about this painting that was painted 100 years ago and has people who were alive 300 years ago and Jesus who was on earth more than 2,000 years ago. Now, let's talk about us! What special day did we just have? (*"Thanksgiving!" will be the response.*) What special day is coming next? (*Christmas!*)

Are you getting excited about Christmas? (*Children will respond.*) There is a lot to be excited about. (*Name objects as you place them around the outer portion of the table cloth. The children will probably exclaim or have comments as objects are placed.*)

- Presents and Gifts - We get presents and we give presents!
- Christmas trees
- Christmas cards
- Frosty the Snowman
- Rudolph
- Santa
- Christmas decorations

There is so much to be excited about between now and Christmas. And ... there is something special in the middle of all our excitement ... (*place Jesus in manger in the center of the tablecloth*) ... the little baby Jesus! (*Children may respond with "Jesus' birthday!"*)

Just like the man Jesus is in the middle of all the people in the painting, Baby Jesus is in the middle of everything we do for Christmas. (*Pause and look at Baby Jesus.*)

Let's sing "Away in a Manger." Then, close with a prayer.



Connie Adams, Wichita Friends School, 2017