

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

Worship is a natural setting for learning about blessing and letting go. A funeral service is an opportunity to discover ways of letting go. Each benediction is a discovery of blessing. A time of greeting or passing the peace can be an opportunity to give and receive blessing. The activities in "Worship, Music, Arts, and Story" are designed to introduce the concepts of blessing and letting go within the context of worship. Some ideas reinforce practices that are common in worship. Others invite a new behavior or practice. Worship requires planning. Some of the suggested activities can be used in a worship planning group or leadership team, as well as in congregational worship. Using an activity multiple times can provide a rich experience for worship leaders.

About this Exploration

The concepts of blessing and letting go are not new to us. We see them in the natural world, and we experience them in our lives all the time. How we choose to relate to them, however, makes all the difference. In this Exploration we will discover how others learned to let go, thereby opening space for something new to emerge in their lives, as well as how they were able to find the blessing in both the challenges and the joys of life. As we explore this faith practice, we will consider the implications of blessing and letting go within our communities, churches, and the world. We may discover the freedom available to us when we are able to both embrace and release in a world of constant transition.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Samuel 16:1-23
Ephesians 3:14-20

Leader Preparation

Much of worship is focused on the process of blessing and letting go. Sometimes this is obvious. A benediction is a blessing, and a funeral is a rite of letting go. Sometimes the connections are more subtle. A call to worship is an invitation to let go of our everyday lives and turn our attention to God's blessings. A hymn of praise mirrors God's blessings and offers thanks for the ways in which we are blessed. The reading of scripture is both an acknowledgment of our past and an invitation to consider the relevance of ancient words for present situations. Worship planners are invited to think of every part of worship as an act of blessing and letting go. Even a ceremony welcoming new members into the church can have a time of letting go of previous congregations or old beliefs, as well as a time of blessing. Because worshipers bring their own thoughts, emotions, and life experiences to worship, a worship element that is a blessing to one may bring tears of sadness to another. In worship we seek to achieve a balance of blessing and letting go. Discovery is an opportunity to recognize, identify, and name elements in worship that can be experienced both as blessing and as letting go.

Prayer: O God of all times of my life, you are with me in the times of letting go and the times of recognizing the blessing. Sometimes I recognize your presence even in the moments when I wonder why you seem so distant. Open my heart that I might perceive

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Down by the Riverside (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The traditional Gospel song "Down by the Riverside" lends itself to adaptation of the lyrics. If you are not familiar with the song, you can listen to it online here: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1r6go_rosetta-tharpe-down-by-the-riversid_music. Find someone who is familiar with the song and comfortable with the lyrics:

Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside,
 Down by the riverside, down by the riverside.
 Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside,
 Ain't gonna study war no more.

I ain't gonna study war no more,
 I ain't gonna study war no more,
 Ain't gonna study war no more.
 I ain't gonna study war no more,
 I ain't gonna study war no more,
 Ain't gonna study war no more.

Make sure that the song leader is comfortable with the new lyrics proposed in the activity description. Plan to use this activity early in the worship service.

Supplies:

- song: "Down by the Riverside," African American spiritual (tune: Study War No More), <http://ingeb.org/spiritua/downbyth.html>

Teach worshipers the refrain with these new words:

I'm gonna bless and then let go,
 I'm gonna bless and then let go,
 Gonna bless and then let go.
 I'm gonna bless and then let go
 I'm gonna bless and then let go
 Gonna bless and then let go.

Invite worshipers to name things that they plan to let go of as they prepare to worship together. Give examples, such as "busy schedules," "worries," or "rushing around." For each suggestion offered by worshipers, sing another verse of the song:

Gonna lay down our busy schedules, down by the riverside,
 Down by the riverside, down by the riverside.
 Gonna lay down our busy schedules, down by the riverside,
 Gonna bless and then let go.

After several repetitions of the song, offer a prayer thanking God for this time of worship as an opportunity to let go of some of the burdens of everyday living.



your blessing in the midst of letting go. Free me from our slavery to the way things used to be, so that I might embrace the future to which you are calling me. Keep me ever mindful of your people and the gifts they bring to worship each week. In Christ I pray, Amen.

2 Explore Connections

Leader preparation: This activity is suitable for a worship planning group or church staff, but is not designed to be experienced within the context of worship. In the Bible and in life there is an ebb and flow between times of blessing and times of letting go. Letting go does not always feel like a blessing. Blessings can be given and received. One can choose to give or withhold a blessing. Letting go sometimes is forced upon one without warning and against one's wishes. This activity explores the experiences with blessing and letting go that participants bring to the group and examines the relationships between blessing and letting go.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- recent newspapers

Divide the whiteboard or newsprint into two sections. Label one "Blessing" and the other "Letting Go." Distribute newspapers. Invite participants to find one or more stories that show an example of blessing or letting go. Participants might also use mobile devices to scan Internet news sites, if they prefer. Give examples such as a story about grief or a death, the loss of a home, loss of a business, or other occasions of letting go. Examples of blessing might include the birth of a child, the opening of a business, a banquet, or some other celebration. After allowing time for participants to find their examples, invite them to tell the group about what they have found. Make brief notes in the appropriate column to remind participants of the stories as they report. After receiving the reports from all participants, return to the list. Select one item from the "Blessing" list and ask: *What may have been lost or let go of in order for the person to receive (or give) this blessing?* Use a different color of marker to record responses. Next select an item from "Letting Go" and ask: *What blessings might come from this experience?* Continue discussing the items as time permits.

Invite discussion of this activity and what participants have discovered about blessing and letting go from the stories selected.



3 Tell the Story of David's Anointing

Leader preparation: The story in 1 Samuel 16:1–23, of the anointing of David and the beginning of his service to Saul lends itself to a narrative storyteller. There are several ways to tell the story. Decide whether you will present the story as a solo actor or working with others. Assign roles and find simple costumes to help establish the characters of the actors. Be sure to provide time for practicing the story.

Think through the elements of blessing and letting go in the story. The anointing of David is surely a blessing to David. By the end of the story, however, David's presence becomes a blessing to Saul, who has had to let go of his ideas about one of his sons becoming his successor. Releasing one's vision of the future is far from easy. Accepting a blessing in such circumstances can be challenging.

Supplies:

- costumes for storytellers
- simple props, if desired
- "Storytelling Litany," Attachment: Activity 3

In worship, a dramatic telling of the scriptures can play a variety of roles. It can be the presentation of the scripture itself. It is also effective to have the text read



and then follow-up with the storyteller's interpretation. Storytellers can make their presentation during the children's moments, knowing that the entire congregation is paying special attention. An effective telling of the story can take the place of the sermon in some worship services.

A single storyteller can assume the role of a narrator and begin by saying: "Samuel had a problem. He had to tell the king that his sons were not chosen by God to replace him as the leader of the people." A repeating phrase—such as "Many were let go before God chose one to bless"—helps to get through the lists of brothers who were brought before Samuel and not anointed.

A team of storytellers can concentrate on the dialogue between God and Samuel. One storyteller could be a narrator. Others could speak the parts of God and Samuel. A script can be prepared that follows the biblical text closely, but uses familiar language, repeating themes and other storytelling techniques can add to the dramatic quality of the presentation.

Use the attachment "Storytelling Litany" to tell the story in worship.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Family Names (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The prayer in Ephesians 3:14–21 begins with the image of God the Creator as the source of the name for every family. Every family brings its name to worship as a sacred trust. It can be a powerful experience to hear one's name mentioned in the context of worship. By simply inviting families to share their names in the context of a prayer, the liturgy affirms all who participate and reminds them that their names are a form of blessing.

Supplies:

- Bible

Before the service, tell several worshipers that there will be a time in the worship when they will be asked to state their names. Ask them to be prepared to state their family names as an example to other worshipers. Use the worship bulletin or an announcement to notify people that there will be an invitation to speak their family names during the worship service. When the time comes for reading the Epistle, have the reader read Ephesians 3:14 and 15 and then pause. During the pause, members will call out their family names. Some may need a little encouragement, but this can be done with gestures or by pointing. Don't worry if more than one person speaks at the same time. Allow enough time for everyone who chooses to do so to say his or her name. After the names are spoken, continue reading Ephesians 3:16–20.

5 Prayer Based on Ephesians 3:14–20

Leader preparation: Use Ephesians 3:14–20 as an inspiration for a pastoral prayer. You can print the prayer provided below or write one of your own. Just as Paul prayed for the churches that he served and to which he wrote, pastoral leaders pray for their congregations. A pastoral prayer is an opportunity to engage the congregation in praying not only for itself, but also for a wider community. Adapting the words of a portion of the Epistle for use as a prayer can help the



congregation to connect with the scripture and with the legacy and blessing of faith that is transmitted through the generations in the words of Ephesians.

Supplies: None

The pastoral prayer can be led by a single liturgist, but it is also effective to have multiple readers who can speak and be heard from different places in the sanctuary. If you choose to use multiple readers, distribute copies of the entire prayer to each reader and have a brief conversation about how to determine how much silence to allow for quiet prayer between the sentences of the prayer. Another option for the use of a prayer is to print it in the bulletin and have the prayer sentences read by portions of the congregation, perhaps alternating between the left and right sides of the sanctuary.

Pastoral Prayer Based on Ephesians 3:14–21

Gracious God, we come before you in humility, offering our thanks and praise. As we remember that every family in heaven and on earth receives its name from you, we pray for our families.

(Allow time for quiet prayers.)

Loving God, you have rooted and grounded us in love, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts in faith. Help us to discover new ways to show our love for one another.

(Allow time for quiet prayers.)

O God, how wide is your love! Help us to comprehend, with the saints, the breadth and length and height and depth of your great love in Christ.

(Allow time for quiet prayers.)

God, we know that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. Help us to move beyond our thoughts about you to an awareness of your presence, that we may be filled with all the fullness you offer.

(Allow time for quiet prayers.)

Now, unto you who by the power at work in us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to you be glory in the church to all generations, forever and ever.

(Allow time for quiet prayers.)

We pray in the name of Jesus, with the prayer of Jesus.

(Pray the Prayer of Our Savior or Lord's Prayer together.)



6 Recall Jesus' Baptism and Your Own

Leader preparation: Baptism is a sacrament of both blessing and letting go. When we think of baptism, it is easy to see the blessing part of the sacrament. When we look more closely, we recognize that there is also a process of letting go. A child or youth is not a possession but, rather, a trust from God. Even as we welcome people into the family of our faith through baptism, we also acknowledge that we do not hold exclusive claim to our faith; it is the faith of our children



and grandchildren as well. God's words at Jesus' baptism contain both a blessing and a letting go. "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased" is a powerful blessing. "Listen to him" is a reminder that people have freedom and choice and that the decisions of many people affect the understanding of Jesus' ministry.

Supplies:

- artwork: "The Baptism of Jesus" by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- branch from evergreen tree or shrub

Display "The Baptism of Jesus" in a prominent location. At the entryway to the worship space is one place where it may be seen by all. Depending on the size of your sanctuary, one or more copies of the artwork may be displayed in the worship area. Invite people to sit with the image for a moment without commenting on it. Ask them to note details that might not be apparent to a casual viewer. After they have had time to look at the picture, read or tell the story of Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:12–14; Mark 1:8–10; Luke 3:20–22).

Ask worshipers to turn to their neighbors and discuss the following questions:

- What words and actions of blessing does this artwork bring to your mind?
- What must be let go of in order to appreciate this image?

After people have had an opportunity to discuss, offer a simple prayer of blessing: *God thank you for the stories and images we have received of Jesus' baptism. As we think of his baptism, may we be reminded of our own baptism and feel the power of your blessing once again. Amen.*

It can be powerful to combine such a prayer with a baptismal remembrance ceremony. Dipping an evergreen branch into the baptismal water and then waving the branch above the heads of the worshipers, sprinkling them, is one way to remind people of the waters of baptism.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Passing the Peace as a Benediction (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In a formal liturgy, the passing of the peace takes place after the confession and assurance of pardon and before the offering. It is a reminder to reconcile with neighbors before making an offering to God. In many congregations, however, it has become a generalized time of greeting friends and other worshipers. Sometimes the meaning of a repeated action can be deepened simply by shifting its location in the liturgy.

Supplies: None

Move the passing of the peace to the end of the service in place of a benediction. The liturgist might want to comment on the change of location at the point where the peace is usually shared. Remind worshipers that it has not been forgotten, nor has it been left out of the worship service, simply moved to a new location. At the time for the benediction, tell worshipers that the peace of Christ is indeed a blessing, and it is one that is meant to be shared. In place of the usual grasping of hands or sharing of hugs that is common in some congregations, suggest that



worshippers make the sign of the cross for one another. If this is a new practice, it might help to have someone demonstrate. Using two fingers, gesture from top to bottom to indicate the upright of a cross and then from left to right to indicate the cross piece. Invite worshippers to offer a blessing to one another by sharing the peace of Christ.

8 Anointing with Oil

Leader preparation: Anointing with oil is an ancient tradition for healing and a sign of blessing in many churches. Before planning to invite people to anointing, be sure to review your church's book of worship or other guides for leaders of worship with regard to services of healing or anointing. It is traditional to use olive oil for anointing, but baby oil is also commonly used. A small bowl or other vessel can be used to hold the oil. The officiant dips a thumb into the oil and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the worshiper. Those who prefer may receive the oil on the back of the hand.

Supplies:

- olive oil or baby oil in a small bowl

If your congregation is not familiar with anointing, provide some information to help calm any misgivings or apprehension. Remind them that in the New Testament, touch plays a central role in healing. There are many stories of Jesus touching those who need healing. In James 5, prayer, anointing, confession, and forgiveness are all named as parts of healing. In Samuel, David is anointed with oil to mark him as God's choice to become the next king. After a prayer of blessing for the oil, invite those who choose to do so to come forward to receive the oil and a brief prayer of blessing. Use the words of your faith tradition for these elements. A traditional prayer usually includes the phrase "as I anoint you, so may God grant you the blessing of the Spirit." Arrange for soft music to be played as participants come forward to receive the anointing and blessing.

9 Sing "Shalom Chaverim"

Leader preparation: The song "Shalom Chaverim" can be a meaningful response at many different points in worship. The English translation of the traditional Israeli chant is: "May peace be with you. May peace be with you, peace! Peace! Till we meet again, Till we meet again, peace! Peace!" The word "shalom" is, however, much more complex. It means peace in a political sense, but it also means health and well-being, calm and the absence of excessive stress. The song, similarly, can seem simple at first, with some of its meanings revealed only after repetition. Elsewhere in these resources, there are activities that use this song as a blessing song in other parts of worship. Plan to use the song other ways in worship in the weeks to come.

Supplies:

- song: "Shalom Chaverim," traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom),
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnnc>
<http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>

Have a song leader or choir teach the song to the congregation. It is very short and can be repeated in several different ways.



- Sing the song as a simple three-part round. Three areas of the congregation can be designated and led to sing at the appropriate times. It can also be sung with other divisions of the congregation: men, women, children; choir, left, right, and so forth.
- Have a cantor sing the song the first time. Repeat the song in unison. Then allow worshipers to add harmony as the song builds. Close with a unison verse and a solo verse, as in the style of Taizé.
- Use instruments to play the melody, followed by a leader or choir singing, followed by the congregation.
- Use your imagination and enjoy!

Following the Church Year

Advent

Discover the time of preparation for the birth as an opportunity to clean house. There are some things that will need to be disposed of to make room for the new child. This is true of our spiritual lives, as well as our physical homes. As we prepare to receive the blessing of the Christ child, what do we need to release in order to be ready?

Christmas

Discover that recognizing the real Christ involves letting go of some of the images and fantasies we have held. Just as there were many in the time before Jesus' birth who imagined the Messiah coming as a military leader or a supernatural phenomenon, we too have formed images of Christ that are no longer meaningful in our current situation. Accepting the Christ Child involves letting go of some images we have known.

Epiphany

Discover how the visit to Simeon and Anna and the visit of the Magi contain elements not only of blessing but also of letting go. Just as Joseph and Mary discover that their child is sent to entire world, we recognize that we cannot keep Christ to ourselves.

Lent

1 Samuel 6:1–23 does not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, but 1 Samuel 6:1–13 is a reading for Year A, Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Easter

Discover how the resurrection turns everything upside-down. What we thought would be a time of grief and letting go is turned into the blessing of a joyful celebration. Death is not the end.

Pentecost

Ephesians 3:14–21 is a reading for Year B, Proper 12 in the Revised Common Lectionary



Attachment: Activity 3

Storytelling Litany

Samuel Anoints David 1 Samuel 16:1-23

Leader: The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem.

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."



Attachment: Activity 3 (Continued)

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Leader: Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Response: **Many were let go before God chose one to bless.**

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

Scripture lies at the heart of worship. The activities of this Exploration are designed to invite worshipers into a deeper dialogue with scripture through music, arts, and story. Reading and telling the stories of scripture can be meaningful. When those experiences are reinforced with drama, music, and the visual arts, worship can engage all of the senses. We learn and engage, in part, through careful repetition. Practicing worship, music, arts, and story can be deeply meaningful for congregations. Several of the activities for this Exploration can be repeated in different settings with different groups. Use them for devotions for boards and committees, as activities for fellowship groups, and as elements in congregational worship.

About this Exploration

The practice of blessing and letting go is integral to human existence, for to be alive is to experience change. The biblical narrative is, in large measure, the story of God's people and their history of leaving behind and journeying toward. Just as the Hebrew people are about to enter a new land, they must say goodbye to Moses and embrace a new leader. The end of one chapter often means the start of something new and completely different. We negotiate these times of transition by grieving the losses, letting go, and moving onto new adventures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to let go of old understandings and embrace a way of life based on love and grace. As we grapple with the scriptures, we recognize that to live is to let go, to live fully is to bless and be blessed.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Matthew 5:34–38

Leader Preparation

Begin by taking a quiet moment to read each of the Bible Focus Passages to yourself. After you read each passage, pause and take several deep breaths. Then read the passage again, this time out loud. Again pause for a few deep breaths. Finally set your Bible aside and tell yourself the story that you have just read. The best preparation for leading the Scripture Exploration is to become familiar with the scriptures. This does not mean that you have to fully understand or even be “at ease” with the passages. Sometimes the meanings of scripture are deep within the texts and do not emerge upon the first visit. Make time to become familiar with these scriptures.

Prayer: God, I give you thanks for the ways the words of scripture have become a light in my life. Sometimes I wrestle with the words. Sometimes I am uncomfortable with the ideas. I do not claim to have full understanding, but am grateful for the ways in which the words of scripture call me into deeper relationship with you. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Remembering Heroes of Faith (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Deuteronomy 34:1–12 does more than report the death of Moses. It celebrates his life as a blessing to the people and recognizes his leadership. Every congregation has its own heroes of faith. Some of them are biblical characters whose stories connect in special ways with the life of the congregation. Others are people who have led the congregation in the past. Still others are known only to some of the people in the congregation. Before asking others to recall heroes of faith, consider your own heroes. Make a list of those who have deeply influenced you and provided leadership for your life of faith. Think of ways in which you might tell their stories.

Supplies:

- Bible

Invite participants to think of the heroes of their faith. After time for reflection, ask them to call out the names of people who have shaped their faith and their understanding of God. You can start the discussion by offering the name of one or more of your heroes of faith. After participants have been given an opportunity to speak names, invite each to turn to one or two persons close to close by and tell a brief story about one person whom he or she named. After a few minutes, remind participants that time is limited and everyone should have an opportunity to tell a story.

After several more minutes of conversation, read Deuteronomy 34:1–12. After reading the passage, point out that the Israelites allowed for a time of mourning for Moses and reflecting on how he was a blessing for the people. Invite participants to return to their pairs or small groups to talk about how their mourning was turned to blessing in the story of the persons they named as faith heroes. In some cases, a participant may have named a living hero of faith, so not everyone will have a story of mourning to contribute. Conclude by offering a prayer of thanks for the blessing of the lives of the heroes of faith.

2 Dying as Letting Go and Blessing

Leader preparation: Look online for a few pictures of Mt. Nebo in Jordan. You can do a quick Internet search and find many suitable images. (Be careful to specify Jordan. There is a Mt. Nebo in Utah and another in Arkansas. Neither of these look like the elevated ridge in Jordan!) Also look online for a Mosaic Cross from Mt. Nebo showing a snake on the cross.

Supplies:

- photos of Mt. Nebo
- photo of a cross (or an actual cross) that depicts a snake and a staff
- Bible or copy of Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Show several photos of Mt. Nebo, said to be the place of Moses’ death. Remind participants that while the Bible says that no one knows the place of Moses’ burial, Deuteronomy does describe the place. Tell them that from Mt. Nebo one can see a panorama of the Holy Land, from the River Jordan to Jericho. On a clear day, one can see all the way to Jerusalem. Show them the Mosaic Cross with the snake



and staff on the attachment, and invite conversation about how the combined symbols of Moses and Jesus have become associated with Mt. Nebo.

Remind the group that Moses died without having entered the Promised Land; the blessing that he had anticipated for more than four decades was not to be a blessing to him, but to those who followed after him. Have a volunteer read Deuteronomy 34:1–12 slowly. Invite participants to listen for words of blessing for Moses. After listening, ask participants to share the blessings they heard. Note that the blessing Moses received was not the one he anticipated. He did not receive the Promised Land but, rather, the blessing of leading God’s people. After discussing blessing, ask participants to think about Moses letting go of his dream of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Ask: *Do you think God chose to let go of this dream as well? Why or why not?* Then summarize by asking: *What does this story teach you about blessing and letting go?*

③ Out of the Box

Leader preparation: Matthew 5:43–48 contains a series of challenges to conventional wisdom: “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .” Extending Jesus’ ideas to contemporary wisdom can provide an opportunity to look at how our faith challenges contemporary assumptions. Think in advance of a few phrases that will be common to participants, such as “bigger is better” or “Children are the future.” Insert those phrases into the formula that Jesus used: “You have heard that it was said that bigger is better. But I say to you there is great value in small size.”

Supplies:

- small pieces of paper, pens or pencils
- cardboard box with lid, such as a shoe box

Invite people to think of sayings or ideas that might be considered conventional wisdom in your community. Give a few examples to get them thinking. Invite them to write each example on a separate piece of paper and deposit the papers in the box. Read Matthew 5:43–48, and point out that Jesus challenged his followers to think outside the box. He took conventional wisdom and turned it around. Sometimes unexpected blessings can come from the process of letting go of conventional assumptions or understandings.

Ask what it might mean to think outside the box in regard to the wisdom that has been collected in your box. Take out a slip of paper and read it aloud in this format: “You have heard it was said . . . [insert text from paper]. But I say to you . . . [give an example of another way to think about that topic].” If you find it challenging to think of a new way to think of a particular bit of wisdom, consult with participants. Ask them how they might finish the sentence. As each bit of wisdom has been shared and examined, place the paper outside the box. Continue drawing papers and responding as time permits. Close your time together with a prayer thanking God for challenging conventional wisdom and giving new ways to think about our lives.



Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Pray for Enemies (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 5:43–48 carefully. Think of people you identify as “friends” and “enemies.” Be specific, thinking of names and situations. Pause to pray for those who persecute you. Read the passage a second time, and reflect on its meaning for your life.

Supplies:

- Bible

Plan to read Matthew 5:43–48 in worship, before the time of prayers. Use the text as a pastoral prayer as follows:

Gracious God, we have read that Jesus said, “You shall love your neighbor.” Hear our prayers for our neighbors. *(Allow silence for personal prayer.)*

Jesus also said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Hear our prayers for our enemies. *(Allow silence for personal prayer.)*

Grant us the grace to become your children, O God. Endow us with the wisdom and strength to let go of our fears and prejudices. May we know the light of your love and the gentle rain of your blessings. In Christ we pray. Amen.

⑤ Letting Go of Animosity

Leader preparation: Jesus invites disciples to reconcile with enemies. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). In order to do so, we must let go of animosity. A formal offering can provide an opportunity for people to reflect and release. In preparation for leading worship, go through the exercise yourself. Use as many pieces of paper as necessary to record the animosities that you are ready to release. Offer them to God with a prayer of dedication.

Supplies:

- Bible
- small pieces of paper and pencils or pens for each worshiper
- offering plates
- music for the offertory and a doxology for bringing gifts forward

Before the offering, read Matthew 5:43–48. You might also want to read Matthew 5:23–24. Then distribute slips of paper and pencils or pens to worshipers. Invite them to think about any animosities or enmities that are dividing them from others. Ask worshipers to write words that describe or remind them of these things, along with their prayer for what they want to let go of in these situations. Soft music can be played during this reflection time. Depending on time constraints, pass the offering plates just to receive the slips of paper, or invite worshipers to place the slips of paper along with their gifts in the offering plates. Receive the offering and sing a doxology. Pray a prayer of dedication that offers the angers and animosities to God, in belief that these can be released and removed from the hearts and minds of worshipers through the power of the Holy Spirit.



6 Eulogy for Moses

Leader preparation: Sermons and homilies provide a bridge between the sacred texts and present circumstances. Sometimes the bridge can be built from the ancient end, by discerning the circumstances of the day and the meanings when the scriptures were first used. Other times, the bridge can be constructed by applying circumstances and customs from the present to the ancient texts. Modern funeral customs probably were not part of Israel's mourning for Moses, but using modern customs to consider Moses can be one way to invite the congregation into the sense of blessing and letting go that was required of the people at that time.

Supplies:

- Bible
- commentaries and books about the life of Moses

Imagine that you have been asked to write the eulogy for Moses at the end of his life. Clearly his accomplishments are far too great for a single meditation. You will have to choose some and not speak of others. Deuteronomy 34:10–12 gives a brief overview of Moses' life and provides an excellent opening for such a eulogy. Write this eulogy as if you have been asked to speak at Moses' funeral. Deliver the eulogy in the context of worship, as if your congregation were the people of Israel gathered in mourning. Invite the congregation to join in the process by imagining that they are the people of Israel. Near the end of the eulogy, remind people that there is a great future that lies ahead. They are about to enter the Promised Land. This will require work and sacrifice from them. Use the example of Moses' life as an inspiration for people to move into the future.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Reverse Recessional (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider how Jesus invited disciples to think of familiar topics in new ways in Matthew 5:43–48. Sometimes we become stuck not only in our thinking but also in our behavior. Just looking at something from a new perspective or behaving in a manner different than usual can give a fresh perspective. Letting go of things that are familiar can provide an opportunity to experience new blessings.

Take a good look at your worship space. Consider how people enter and exit the room. Usually they come in and go out through the same door. Think about how your congregation might exit the room from a different door than usual. Give special consideration to any barriers that might be challenging to those who use canes, crutches, wheelchairs, or walkers. If you plan to use music for the recessional, choose a song that people can sing or hum without the need to carry a hymnal.

Supplies: None

Announce to your congregation that you are having a reverse recessional this week. Jesus has challenged his followers to think of things in new ways and to have a fresh perspective on their lives and behaviors. To give a fresh perspective, your congregation will be exiting the room in an unusual manner. Be sure that people understand the instructions before they start to walk from the room. You may want to have leaders who put out the candles and others who carry certain



items, such as the Bible or processional cross, to lead the people out in a new way. Pronounce a benediction that invites people to go forth with a fresh perspective on the conventional. Sing a familiar recessional hymn or song as you leave the room.

8 God's Word into the World

Leader preparation: When we think of people bringing their own Bibles to worship, we often think of some of the more fundamentalist congregations. Bibles do, however, play an important role in the homes of the members of your congregation. Think of some of the special Bibles that members of your congregation have shown to you. Perhaps they have a Bible that has been in the family for multiple generations, or a Bible in a different language spoken by some family members.

Supplies:

- Bibles belonging to members of the congregation
- (optional) quotation from a farewell sermon by John Robinson, <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/RobinsonFarewellSermon.htm>

The benediction is a blessing, literally “good words” to send the congregation forth into the world to serve God. Oftentimes a benediction will be preceded with a charge to the congregation, a challenge to live out one’s faith. These charges and benedictions are based on the Bible readings for this Exploration.

In advance, invite members of the congregation to bring Bibles that have special meaning for them. Before worship, you may want to place these family Bibles in a display that allows the Bibles to be viewed and discussed. At the beginning of worship, ask worshipers to bring the Bibles with them into the worship space. During the service have a special prayer of thanksgiving for God’s Word as conveyed through the many Bibles that people have brought to worship. Acknowledge that “God has yet more truth and light to break forth from the holy word.” You might want to use a famous quotation from John Robinson, noting that it came from a farewell sermon.

Include a prayer of blessing for the Bibles and for the people who are holding them. Arrange for a special recessional where individuals take their Bibles out into the community, so that the blessings of truth and light that are yet to come can be given as a gift to the community that your congregation serves.

9 Reverse Handshake Time

Leader preparation: Most hymnals have a section of hymns designated for the close of worship. For example, in *The New Century Hymnal* these hymns are numbers 75–82. Take time to look at your hymnal and consider which hymns of parting might be most meaningful for your congregation. Ask yourself: If we were to have special worship to say farewell to a member, what hymn would I choose for the closing hymn? If possible, engage the worship planning team in an exercise of choosing one or more favorite hymns of parting.

Supplies:

- Bible
- hymnal(s) your congregation uses

Read Deuteronomy 34:1–12, and ask people to consider what song Moses might have chosen for his last hymn with the people of Israel. After people have had an opportunity to consider that question, invite them to think of what hymn would be a good parting song if they were moving away from the congregation. You



may want to direct the attention of worshipers to the section of your hymnal that contains hymns for the close or worship or parting hymns. Be prepared to suggest a few parting hymns, such as “A Parting Hymn We Sing,” “We Limit Not the Truth of God,” “Lord Dismiss Us with Your Blessing,” or “God Be with You.” Feel free to add any hymns you choose. If time permits, you can have a mini hymn festival, singing a verse or two of several beloved hymns. Sing all of the verses of one hymn as a closing for your time together.

Following the Church Year

Advent

The stories of preparation for the birth of Jesus are familiar, yet they have been “put away” for a year. Just as there is fresh discovery in unpacking stored decorations, unpacking stories that have been less read can be an opportunity to see fresh meaning in familiar old tales.

Christmas

Families often take out older Bibles for display and to read the Christmas story as part of their Christmas traditions. You can encourage and support this practice by bringing special attention to the Bibles in the homes of your members during this season.

Epiphany

Matthew 5:43–48 is read as part of the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany in Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Lent

Remembering Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem can be a time to remember also the stories of the faith. Celebrating Jesus’ last supper with his disciples can be a time to recall other heroes of our faith.

Easter

The celebration of resurrection is an appropriate time to celebrate how the old stories of our people continue to live on in new generations. During Easter, invite people to consider new meanings for conventional wisdom.

Pentecost

Deuteronomy 34:1–12 is part of the Lesson for the Season after Pentecost, Proper 25, in Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

Disciples are called not only to follow Jesus but also to imitate his behavior. Jesus continually found opportunities to pray in the midst of a very busy life. In times of letting go and times of blessing, prayer was central to Jesus' relationship with God. Worship, music, arts, and story offer opportunities to explore prayer in many different dimensions, both as an individual practice and as communal activity. The activities in this Exploration invite participants to examine discipleship while participating in congregational worship. Some activities are also suitable for small groups within the congregation for devotions and worship planning.

About this Exploration

As followers of Christ, we are on a journey of discovery. In both blessing and letting go, we look to Jesus as our example and trust God for guidance. Jesus shows us how to love and forgive, just as we are forgiven. As Jesus' disciples we are called to let go of our own understandings and open ourselves to new paths filled with compassion, kindness, and thankfulness. God's Spirit dwells with us on this difficult and rewarding adventure, as individuals and as the body of Christ. We are encouraged to discard our own agendas and allow the peace of Christ to inform our thoughts, so we can live in harmony. Christ's message fills our lives so we might bless others through loving, grace-filled words and actions.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Proverbs 3:5–9
Colossians 3:12–17

Leader Preparation

Thoughts of discipleship often recall the first disciples. Each of the disciples had to make unique sacrifices to follow Jesus. They were asked to leave home, security, vocation, and family. To be a disciple of Jesus is to let go of some aspects of the life we have been living. Discipleship is a process of letting go of more than just material objects and old relationships. It is also a process of letting go of anxieties and worries. Recalling those first disciples, however, we also acknowledge that discipleship involves great blessing, though not always in the form that was initially anticipated by those disciples.

Prayer: God, who calls all Christians to be disciples of Jesus, help me to be realistic about both the blessing that you offer and the things that I need to let go in order to be a faithful disciple. May I accept both the costs and the joys of discipleship as I commit my life to you, in Christ. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Greeting of Shalom (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: “Shalom aleichem” (hear pronunciation at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/cgi-bin/audio.pl?shalom02.wav=shalom+aleichem>) is often used as a greeting in Hebrew. There are many instances of Jesus’ using a similar greeting throughout the gospels. The phrase can also be used as words of parting. Think of the places in the Gospels where Jesus greets people with “Peace be with you.” Use a concordance if you would like to expand the number of instances you can recall. Imagine what might be different if the greetings with which you begin worship began with “Shalom” rather than “Hello!” or “Good morning.” Pray for the peace of the people who will be joining you in worship.

Supplies:

- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnC>, <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>

Arrange for greeters at the door to your worship space to greet those who come with the words “Shalom!” or “Shalom aleichem.” Provide the greeters with information about the meaning of these words and a couple of places in the Bible where Jesus uses this greeting. If your worship service has a time of greeting after the people have come into the sanctuary, use “Shalom!” as a greeting again. You may want to provide worshipers with a brief explanation by either printing it in the worship bulletin or giving a verbal commentary. Sing the song “Shalom Chaverim” as a gathering song for worship.

2 In Jesus’ Name

Leader preparation: The phrase “in Jesus’ name” or “in the name of Jesus” is often used at the end of a prayer without much consideration of what it might mean to say or do something in Jesus’ name. Colossians 3:12–17 challenges disciples to consider every word and every behavior: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 17). Language is only one way to do or say something in the name of Jesus, but our language influences our understanding. Together with your worship team, plan an entire worship service where each thing that is said or done is done expressly in the name of Jesus. In liturgy the use of Jesus’ name can lead participants to look beyond the personalities of worship leaders to a larger connection with God in Christ. The invocation of Jesus’ name is in itself a blessing. Pray that your worship team might experience this blessing in Jesus’ name.

Supplies: None

Plan well in advance so that the entire congregation understands that you have designated a special Sunday as “in the name of Jesus.” Use Colossians 3:17 in publicity for the special day. Train those who greet at the doors to the sanctuary to be sure to greet each person in the name of Jesus. Challenge the choir and other musicians to pray that their music might be offered and received in the name of Jesus. Write the phrase into prayers and other elements of liturgy so that is present in each part of the worship service. At each invitation (to prayer, to offering, to sing), invite people in the name of Jesus. At first it may seem awkward to use the phrase so many times, but it will become easier with practice. Send worshipers into the community at the close of worship with this challenge: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”



After the service, meet with the worship team to discuss the experience. Listen carefully to comments from the congregation.

③ Dress as Chosen Ones

Leader preparation: Robes, stoles, and other worship vestments are often worn without much explanation given to the worshipping congregation. A public service of vesting can be an opportunity to invite the congregation to grow in understanding the deeper meaning of such apparel. Read Colossians 3:12–17. Think of the special garments that are worn for worship leadership in your congregation and which might demonstrate compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Arrange for an assistant to help worship leaders with their vestments. Prepare simple stoles for each member of the congregation. These can be as simple as a piece of wide ribbon, strip of felt, or crepe paper streamer or more complex.

Supplies:

- robe, stole, and other vestments worn by worship leaders
- 3' lengths of wide ribbon, strips of felt, or crepe paper streamer (one for each worshipper)

Read Colossians 3:12–17 to the congregation. Have a worship assistant place the robe or other vestments on the worship leader with a brief explanation to the congregation of the symbolic meaning of each piece. Say a prayer for each item. Leave the stole to the end. Remind the congregation that the stole is worn as a reminder of the towel that Jesus wore when washing the feet of the disciples (John 13) and as a sign of calling clergy to humility.

Tell the congregation that not only are clergy called to discipleship, but all members of the congregation are similarly called. Distribute stoles to the congregation. Ask them to “vest” one another with the stoles by saying this simple prayer: *May this stole be a sign of blessing and a reminder of God’s call to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.* Demonstrate the process by placing the stole on the worship leader and by having the worship leader place a stole around the neck of the assistant.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Passing Forgiveness (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Times of confession and assurance of pardon can be deeply meaningful aspects of communal worship, but they can also be times when worshipers are simply reading the words of the liturgy without making a connection to the events of their own lives. Passing forgiveness in the manner of passing the peace is one way of focusing attention on the power of forgiveness offered as well as received. This activity may take the place of the passing of the peace in your usual order of worship. It is traditional to pass the peace before the offering, but congregations place that act in different places within the liturgy. Passing forgiveness should be done following the formal confession and assurance of pardon. Consider carefully how you will instruct your congregation to receive forgiveness and then to pass it on. The exchange can be made without the need for people to touch one another, or with a simple laying on of hands on the shoulder or the forehead. If your congregation uses a printed bulletin, include Colossians 3:13 after the formal assurance of pardon.

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Have the worship leader remind the congregation that forgiveness comes from God and that disciples are called to pass forgiveness on to others: “As we have been forgiven, we must also forgive.” Read Colossians 3:12–17 to provide the context for the passing of forgiveness. Remind worshipers that forgiveness is a blessing received from God, a blessing that is to be passed on. In order to pass on that blessing, individuals need to let go of resentment and anger. The act of passing on the blessing of forgiveness can be a key to letting go. It might be helpful to have a couple of volunteers demonstrate the process to the congregation before inviting them to join. One person approaches another with the words “As I have been forgiven, so I forgive.” That person passes the forgiveness on to the next, and so on, until each person in the congregation has received and given forgiveness. Sing a Gloria, doxology, or another song of praise after the time of forgiveness.

5 Offering First Fruits

Leader Preparation: The offering of first fruits (Proverbs 3:9) has a different meaning in an agrarian community than it does in an urban setting. Even in agricultural communities in contemporary times, people usually make offerings of money, not produce. Food offerings are usually of canned goods or nonperishable commodities. These items are essential for food banks and others working to end hunger in your community. Those who depend on community pantries for food, however, rarely get to eat fresh fruit and vegetables. Contact shelters or other institutions that feed people in your community, and arrange for a time when your congregation might bring in supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables. Fresh produce needs to be handled gently, so be sure to have plans in place to deliver the produce while it is very fresh, so that it can be used to its best advantage by the recipients. The act of giving is a way of opening lives to receiving blessing.

Supplies:

- fresh fruits and vegetables

Set a specific date and arrange to receive an offering of fresh fruit and vegetables to be taken to a specific shelter or institution that feeds hungry people. Ask people to volunteer time to prepare publicity and to deliver the produce, as well as to make donations of fresh foods. Feature Proverbs 3:9 prominently in all posters, articles, e-mail announcements, and other publicity for the event.

On the day that your congregation receives the donations, have people bring their produce forward during worship and place them on or near the communion table as a visible display of their offerings. A sermon focusing on Proverbs 3:5–9 would be appropriate for this service. Because this section of scripture does not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, it may be new and unfamiliar to regular worshipers. Each time a new scripture is read in worship is an opportunity for ongoing learning for all.

**6 Offering Honor to God**

Leader preparation: The scriptures are filled with words about offerings to God. The act of offering in many churches, though, is often focused on institutional maintenance. Attention is directed toward money and the church’s need of money to continue to operate. A biblical view of stewardship, however, speaks of offering as a way of being in relationship with God. Letting go of a sense of being owners of time, talent, and treasure and opening to the understanding that all these things are gifts of God entrusted to people can offer a blessing of a deeper



understanding of human nature and a closer connection with God. As you prepare to lead worship, reflect on the offerings that you make. Chances are that gifts of time, talent, energy, and enthusiasm are high among the ways you honor God. Pray that you may continue to honor God with your substance.

Supplies:

- “An Offering Response,” Attachment: Activity 6

Use the litany on the attachment as a prayer of dedication for the morning’s offering. Before printing the litany, consider the traditions of your congregation using the word “Lord” as a translation for the Hebrew YHWH. The NRSV uses “Lord,” and many congregations are comfortable with that translation, but your congregation may choose to substitute “God” or “Creator” for “Lord.” The litany can be used either by handing out a printer version or by projecting just the response (Proverbs 3:9). Assign a leader to read the “One” part as indicated. These readings are simply Proverbs 3:5–8 with a pause after each verse for the response (v. 9) to be read.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Honor God with Substance (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The practice of blessing and letting go often is formalized in the benediction of a worship service. The process of giving and receiving blessing, however, is often complex. Sometimes it takes more than the few sentences of benediction for the congregation to connect with the blessing. As you prepare for worship this week, consider Proverbs 3:9: “Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.” Ask yourself what it might mean to honor God with your substance.

Supplies: None

Remind the congregation of Proverbs 3:9, which instructs faithful people to “Honor the Lord with your substance.” Tell worshipers that the benediction for today’s service of worship does not consist of words but, rather, of the substance of each member of the congregation. Ask them to consider how they might honor God with their substance and be a blessing to others in the week to come. Commission people to go forth as a living blessing to others. May the lives of each member of your congregation become the blessing that they are used to hearing.

8 A Visual Benediction

Leader preparation: Much of worship is based on spoken language—filled with words. There are many other ways to worship. At times, silence can be more meaningful than words. Sometimes an encounter with music or art can bring a biblical truth into focus. In preparation for leading worship, spend time looking at the artwork “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona. Imagine yourself to be in the role of one of the figures. Think about how you would feel. Then imagine yourself to be the other figure. Give thanks to God for the talent of the artist and the power of the art to inspire.

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>

Choose a place at the exit of the sanctuary to display “Forgiveness.” If your sanctuary has multiple exits, you can either use multiple copies of the artwork or give the congregation instructions that indicate a single exit for the benediction. Tell worshipers that today’s benediction will be a blessing not in the form of words but, rather, an opportunity to view a work of art and reflect on its meaning as a blessing. Depending on the comfort level of your congregation, people can be asked to pass by the artwork in single file quietly or to exit in small groups. Some congregations will be more comfortable with soft music playing as worshipers leave the sanctuary. Give instructions that are appropriate for your congregation.

9 Ministry of Presence

Leader preparation: Make a list of persons in your community who are in need of the prayerful support and presence of others. Your congregation may already have a prayer chain or list. Persons who might be on such a list include those who are homebound or who live in institutions. Be sure to include all who have experienced a significant loss within the past year. Losses include not only the death of a loved one, but also children going away to college, loss of jobs, a major move, major changes in health, and more. If possible, engage other worship planners and members of your congregation in making up the list. Write the name of each person on this list on a separate slip of paper. If your list has fewer people than the number who will be attending worship, make duplicate sets of slips so everyone who attends worship will be able to draw a slip. Place the slips in a basket.

Supplies:

- slips of paper (prepared as described)
- basket

At the conclusion of your service, remind worshipers how the writer of Colossians urges disciples to “bear with one another” (Colossians 3:13). Point out that sometimes the most powerful ministry is a ministry of presence. Taking time to be with another person can be deeply meaningful and also an act of blessing. Give some examples of how people can engage in a ministry of presence, such as the following:

- Set aside regular time to pray for the person each day.
- Send a card or a note of support.
- Make a visit to the home of the person to listen and talk.
- Call the person on the telephone.
- Offer to run an errand or do a chore.
- Use your imagination. How might you make your presence a blessing to this person?

Pass the basket and have each worshiper draw one name. Commission worshipers to go forth to a ministry of presence in the week to come.



Following the Church Year

Advent

Offering first fruits and honor to God is one way to anticipate the gift of the Christ Child.

Christmas

Colossians 3:12–17 is read as the Epistle for the 1st Sunday after Christmas Day in Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Epiphany

This season of light invites celebration of the gifts of light: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Lent

Lent is a season of discerning the difference between appearance and substance. It is also an opportunity to adopt a new discipline. Proverbs 3:5–9 can be a powerful Lenten text.

Easter

The resurrection renews the sense disciples have that they have been chosen for both words and deeds of discipleship. It is an excellent season for commissioning a ministry of presence in your community.

Pentecost

Colossians 3:12–17 reminds disciples of their call to one body. This call includes many Pentecost themes, including thanksgiving. The text also has a short list of gifts of the Spirit, in verse 12.



Attachment: Activity 3

An Offering Response

based on Proverbs 3:5–9

One: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

Many: **Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.**

One: In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Many: **Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.**

One: Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

Many: **Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.**

One: It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Many: **Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.**

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Worship is born of tradition. Many of the actions of worship carry with them traditions that may have been forgotten. People participate in worship without always knowing the story of how the order of worship came to be or why certain elements are included in worship. Teaching about traditions can increase appreciation for worship and deepen the meaning drawn from worship. The activities in this Exploration are designed to invite participants to explore traditions of blessing and letting go, as well as find new expressions in worship, music, art, and story that are appropriate for their particular setting. Traditions of blessing and letting go are not confined to funerals and services of parting only. They are a part of every worship service. To celebrate the resurrection of Jesus is to acknowledge the reality of his death. To worship God in the present is to remember times past.

About this Exploration

As Christians, we are supported in the process of blessing and letting go by rituals that have grown out of the traditions of the church over the centuries, by the pastoral concern expressed by our faith communities in worship and other areas of our common life, and by the many acts of kindness and mercy extended to us in the name of Christ. As new occasions for blessing and letting go arise, we, as faith communities, develop new responses that may become part of our ongoing traditions. Although our behavior may be rooted in and shaped by our traditions, these traditions are not static. They are constantly modified and expanded as we move on in life. This Exploration provides resources for participants as they discern ways in which looking back on our shared tradition propels us forward into the future.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 148
Acts 10:1–48

Leader Preparation

Traditions can be powerful and inspiring, but they also can be misinterpreted and become barriers to be overcome in a life of faith. Traditions of blessing and letting go are filled with deep emotion. Helping people see new meaning in ancient words can be a powerful experience of building faith. The story of Peter's vision in Acts 10:1–48 is one example of ancient traditions having become a barrier to genuine faith. Only after his vision does Peter gain a new appreciation for God's presence in the old ways of eating and acting. Read this story as a preparation for your role as leader and teacher.

Prayer: God of all generations, help me to gain perspective on the traditions of faith. Challenge me to look beneath the surface as I examine ways of blessing and letting go. Empower me with the reminder that mine is not the first generation to have known loss and is not the last generation to experience your blessing. Bless the time I spend with other church members today, and be with us each week as we deepen our practice of blessing and letting go. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Changing Roles (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: At the beginning of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the family sings the song "Tradition." It describes the unique roles of each member of the family. Often roles are established by tradition. Changing roles can give a unique perspective and offer the opportunity to sort out which parts of tradition should be embraced and which parts should be discarded. Think through the various roles played by people in your worship service. Who leads music? Who greets worshipers at the door? Who reads the scriptures? Who pronounces the benediction? Choose two or more of the roles that can be exchanged in an upcoming service. Arrange with the person(s) involved to switch roles for all or part of the worship service.

Supplies: None

Plan in advance to exchange two or more traditional worship roles among the people who usually perform them. Do not advertise the change in advance. When worship is completed, discuss the experience with your congregation. This kind of discussion can happen informally during fellowship hour or formally in a worship team meeting. Questions to consider include:

- Why is a particular role given to a specific person? Are there special skills or abilities involved, or is it just a case of "we've always done it that way before"?
- What traditions in worship are most meaningful?
- What traditions are most puzzling?
- Which traditions are hardest to let go?
- In what ways might departing from tradition bring a fresh blessing to worship?

Continue the conversation by inviting participants to express their ideas about which traditions they want to continue and which they would like to consider changing.



2 Prayer to the Directions

Leader preparation: There are many variations of prayers offered to the four compass directions by members of Native American tribes of the upper plains in North America. It is common to pray facing each of the four directions of the compass (north, south, east, and west). Some prayers add a prayer facing down for the earth and up for the sky. A quick Internet search will reveal more information about Native American prayers to the four directions. Prepare for this activity by learning more about prayers to the directions. Prayers offered to or from the directions of the compass are rooted in many other traditions as well. Psalm 148 recalls a prayer urging all of creation to praise God.

Supplies:

- artwork: "Sisters in the Wind," by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- Bible



Display “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard. Invite worshipers to look at the picture. Arrange for a storyteller to tell worshipers a bit about the tradition of prayers to the four directions. Invite participants to look at artwork and imagine the story of the two girls pictured there. After people have had time to reflect and share, invite worshipers to pray Psalm 148 to the directions as follows:

- Look up toward the sky: read verses 1–4.
- Look down at the earth: read verses 5–6.
- Look to the north: read verses 7–8.
- Look to the west: read verses 9–10.
- Look to the south: read verses 11–12.
- Look to the east: read verses 13–14.

③ Blessing and Letting Go Hymn Festival

Leader Preparation: This activity is suitable for worship planners, musicians, and worship committees. Music gains special meaning when it is identified with a specific event. Funeral hymns assist people in letting go of that which they have lost and in recalling the blessings they have received. Songs sung at funeral services can invoke passionate responses when used in other contexts. Think of the hymns and songs that you traditionally hear at funerals. Chances are, some are meaningful to you and others are less so. Make a personal list of funeral hymns that are meaningful to you. Do some research about those hymns. Consider other ways to use the hymns in worship.

Supplies:

- several hymnals
- hymnal companion or computer with Internet access

Begin by taking a poll of favorite funeral hymns. This can be a personal list, a poll of members of a worship or music committee, or a poll of the congregation. Tabulate the results to discover which hymns are named most often. Use a hymnal companion or the Internet to do some research about each hymn: Where and when was it first used? What other ways has the hymn been used in the life of the church? Has the song ever had popularity outside of the church? What circumstances influenced the lyricist and composer?

Choose a number of hymns, and prepare commentary for a festival of hymns of blessing and letting go. This festival could be as simple as the first verses of three or four hymns sung before worship or an entire worship service composed of hymns and commentary on the hymns.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Sing the Psalm (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In some traditions a psalm is sung as a worship response to the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). Singing psalms with a cantor is a comfortable tradition for some congregations and an unfamiliar practice to others. Many modern hymnals have musical settings for the psalms. If you are comfortable leading the psalm or have another person who is comfortable singing the psalm, arrange to use the psalter as a response in worship. If you and your congregation are not familiar with the singing of psalms, you can use the psalter arrangement for a responsive reading of the psalm.

**Supplies:**

- hymnals with psalter for Psalm 148
- “Psalm 148,” Attachment: Activity 4
- (optional) musical accompaniment and cantor

If your congregation is not familiar with singing psalms as a response to the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, you may want to provide an introduction explaining this tradition. Instructions on how to sing a psalm might also be appreciated. The tradition is to have the cantor sing the response through once. Then the congregation sings the response with the cantor. Following that, the cantor sings the verses and the congregation joins in the response as indicated. If you choose to read the psalm, you can either use the same format or omit the first reading of the response.

5 Getting into the Story

Leader preparation: Narrative stories lend themselves to dramatic presentations. Such presentations can be as simple as readers’ theater and as complex as a dramatic presentation by actors in costume with sets and lighting. Acts 10 is a good story for an amateur drama group, because it has an indefinite number of characters. Cornelius and Peter are the main characters, but “other believers” and “those sent by Cornelius” can be portrayed by a varying numbers of actors, depending on how many people want to participate. Read Acts 10:1–48 several times to become familiar with the story. Recruit a team of actors who are willing to spend at least an hour working with the text and an additional time to present the text in worship.

Supplies:

- copies of Acts 10:1–48, one for each actor
- (optional) costumes

Distribute copies of the text and assign characters. Tell participants that there will be opportunities to switch roles. You will need someone to be Cornelius, someone to read the part of the angel, someone to be narrator, and someone to be Peter. Remaining group members can be “other believers,” “those sent by Cornelius,” and “members of Cornelius’s household.” Not every actor needs a speaking part. Have participants read the text at least three times, switching roles for each reading. Discuss what action the words bring to mind. If you have enough participants, divide into two groups, assigning both groups the task of creating and presenting a play from the scripture. After allowing time for the groups to prepare, have each group present the play to the other group. Discuss the experience, and plan a single presentation to the congregation for worship. If the group chooses, actors can wear costumes and make simple props for the presentation.



6 Expand Thinking about Blessing

Leader preparation: There are moments when the vision of the church is expanded. In Acts 10, the notion of the church as being a group composed only of Jews is replaced with a wider vision. The ministry of St. Francis was another time in the history of the church when the notion of giving a blessing was enlarged. It is common for us to think of blessing just those we like or with whom we are comfortable. The gospel challenge is for a much wider sense of blessing. In preparation for this activity, do a little research on St. Francis, and become prepared to tell part of his story. A good resource is a long article about St. Francis in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>. Shorter articles appear in Wikipedia and many other places.

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds,” by Giotto di Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&origid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>

Display the artwork so that all participants can see it clearly. When people have assembled, tell them the title of the painting and the name of the artist. Ask them to spend time looking at it while you tell the story of St. Francis. Give an overview of the life and ministry of St. Francis in the style of a storyteller. If you are not comfortable in the role of storyteller, recruit another member of the congregation to tell the story of Francis. After the story has been shared, invite participants to reflect on the experience. It may be helpful to ask a few questions to aid with reflection:

- What does it mean for St. Francis to preach to or bless the birds?
- Who and which creatures are participants in God’s blessing?
- Whom and which creatures are you called to bless in the name of God?

Close your time together with a simple prayer such as this: *God, who blesses all of the living things in creation, help us to feel your blessing today. Empower us to go forth from this time and place eager to share your blessing with all we meet. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Blessing in Four Directions (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Worship leaders often give blessings. Most have several benedictions memorized and ready for any occasion. Table graces come easily to them. In preparation for this activity, think about the other people in your group. How comfortable are they with being asked to pray in public or give a blessing? Such an activity can be threatening to some. Having very clear instructions can reduce anxiety and give permission for full participation. This activity also requires a bit of thinking about your worship space. The seating arrangement may present challenges for turning around. Be aware also of challenges and barriers faced by those with special needs, especially those who use walkers or wheelchairs.

Supplies:

- (optional) computer with projection capability

Print in the bulletin or project the following blessing: “You are blessed by God. Go forth to share that blessing with others.” After making sure that participants are familiar with the blessing, inform them that the blessing will involve a bit of chaos. When worshipers are given instructions to greet someone in front of them, for example, each worshiper will be greeted by someone behind at the same time. Each worshiper needs to be ready both to give and to receive blessing.

Invite worshipers to turn to someone in front of them and give the blessing, then turn to someone behind them and give the blessing. Next, have them give the blessing to someone on their right side and, finally, give the blessing to someone on their left.



8 Benediction Traditions

Leader preparation: Consider the way that the benediction is delivered in your congregation. Does the leader always stand at the front or at the back of the worship space? Is there a particular hand gesture that accompanies the pronouncing of the blessing? Is the congregation standing or seated? Consider some simple hand gestures for the benediction that are used in congregations: crossing the index and middle finger of one hand in the sign of a cross; moving the hand up and down then left and right in the sign of the cross; holding up one hand only; holding up both hands; spreading the fingers to make spaces between them (four spaces for the four letters of YHWH is traditional in some circles).

Supplies: None

Just prior to the pronouncing of the benediction, explain your congregation's traditions of blessing. Tell the congregation why the one pronouncing the benediction stands where she or he does. Explain the meaning of the hand symbols used. Invite members of the congregation to imitate the gestures as a sign of blessing for one another. After explaining the traditions, pronounce the blessing first in a new way for your congregation, then repeat in the way that reflects your congregation's tradition. Explain that the blessing always comes from God. The traditions of delivering the blessing vary from place to place, but the source is always the same.

9 Extinguishing Candles

Leader preparation: Many congregations have traditions about the lighting of candles. Except for a tenebrae service, however, the extinguishing of candles typically is not done with special ceremony. Think about the candles in your sanctuary. How and when are they extinguished? Plan to make the extinguishing of candles a formal part of your liturgy for a single service, a season (such as Advent, when there are extra candles), or as a change to your congregation's worship practice. Discuss the changes with your worship team and make a plan to introduce and explain the new practice to the congregation.

Supplies:

- candle snuffer

Extinguish the candles used in worship with special ceremony. As you do so, remind participants that the close of each worship service involves a sense of letting go. The light is extinguished as a reminder of the many different losses that are a part of human life. Blessing and letting go are part of every worship service because they are a part of living. Options for extinguishing candles include:

- Rekindling the lighting taper from the candle before snuffing it and carrying the light from the room, just as it is carried in at the beginning of worship when candles are lit
- Speaking a prayer of thanksgiving for the light: "God, as we extinguish this flame we pray that the love it symbolizes will continue to burn deep within our community"
- Speaking the names of those who are grieving or naming losses that have occurred in the community as the candles are extinguished
- Using a candle snuffer and slowly lifting it from the candle, allowing the smoke to rise and dissipate and saying: *The light of God was in one place, and now the light of God goes to all places.*



After trying one or more of these ideas in worship with your congregation, discuss the practice with the worship team. Consider how the extinguishing of candles can become an important part of symbolizing the blessing and letting go that is involved in each service of worship.

Following the Church Year

Advent

Extra candles used in worship offer the opportunity to bring attention to the lighting and extinguishing of candles.

Christmas

Psalm 148 is read on the first Sunday after Christmas in all three years in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Epiphany

Acts 10:34–43 is read during Epiphany for the Baptism of Jesus in Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Lent

Consider a traditional tenebrae service as a service of blessing and letting go. This may already be a congregational tradition or you may start a new tradition for your congregation.

Easter

Acts 10:34–43 is read for the Celebration of Easter Sunday in all three years in the Revised Common Lectionary. Acts 10:44–48 is read on the Sixth Sunday of Easter in Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary. Psalm 148 is read on the Fifth Sunday of Easter in Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Pentecost

The season after Pentecost is a good time to examine the book of Acts. An extended reading, such as Acts 10:1–48, or a dramatic presentation of this chapter fits well into worship during that time of the year.

Attachment: Activity 4

Psalm 148

Response
Unison

Antiphon: David Hurd, 1994

Praise God from the heavens, praise God in the heights!

R

¹Praise God! Praise God from the heavens;
praise God in the heights!

²Praise God, all you angels of God;
praise God, all you host of heaven!

³Praise God, you sun and moon;
praise God, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise God, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens! *R*

⁵Let them praise the name of God,
for God commanded and they were created.

⁶God established them forever and ever;
God fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise God from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command!

⁹Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰Beasts of the forest and all cattle, crawling things and flying birds! *R*

¹¹Rulers of the earth and all peoples, nobles and all leaders of the earth!

¹²Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³Let them praise the name of the Sovereign,
whose name alone is exalted, whose glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴God has raised up a horn for the people, and praise for all the faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to God. Praise be to God! *R*

From *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997)

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

Successful mission always involves a balance of reflection and action. Mission occurs when prayer precedes all else. Worship, music, arts, and story can empower powerful deeds of mission and ministry. The activities in this Exploration are designed to complement other experiences of mission in the lives of participants. Some of these activities are suitable for regular congregational worship. Others can be used for devotions at a mission project site. Singing the hymn "Go My Children, with My Blessing" before a work day at a Habitat for Humanity work site, for example, can add spirit, depth, and meaning to the project for all participants. Worship, music, arts, and story should not be confined to the sanctuary but, rather, integrated into the lives of active Christians engaged in mission. The prayers and songs that individuals use in their everyday lives also inspire mission. Using easily remembered prayers and songs can equip people with tools for their everyday engagement with the world.

About this Exploration

God's call to blessing and letting go is a call to action. Those who receive a blessing have a mission to give a blessing. Responding to God's call requires that we let go of the way things were and boldly set forth in response to the call, an active process that often involves hard work. We receive that call as individuals and also as members of the community of faith. When we let go of habits and comforts that threaten to impede our journey, and to which we cling, we are freed to go forth both as recipients and givers of blessing. In this Exploration we journey with ancestors who have been sent forth and have struggled with fear, promise, grief, and hope. Like them, we are called to lay aside material blessings so that we may open our lives to spiritual blessings in our context and mission.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 12:1–5
Romans 15:22–29

Leader Preparation

Sometimes we think of prayer and action as two different entities or different ends of a spectrum. Many faithful leaders have found, however, that prayer and action are a single entity, not separate activities. In several books, Henri Nouwen encourages believers to think of all living as a form of prayer, with God as witness and oneself with the ability to please God. The great mission movements in the history of the church have involved a balance of prayer and action. Inspired by faithful worship, deeds of outreach can carry incredible power. For each activity in this Exploration, pray before you act. Give special attention to the needs of others as you pray.

Prayer: God of all of creation, open my life to those who live with great needs today. I pray for the victims of injustice, those who lack the basic necessities of life, refugees, and those who are suffering from illness. May my prayers provide connection between the life I live and lives lived by others whom you love. May my decisions and actions reflect the great love you have shown for all your people. In Christ I pray. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



① Sharing Journeys (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Genesis 26:1–5 and Romans 15:22–29 make references to journeys undertaken by faithful people. Every congregation has travel involved each time it gathers for worship. The fact that churches have parking lots testifies to travel. Think of the journeys you have made in the past week. Perhaps you have been out of town for a meeting or traveled across town to make a hospital visit. Not all journeys have to cover long distances to be significant travels of faith. Think also of the journeys made by others in your congregation. Pray that the journeys of your congregation will be trips of faith. Recruit several members of your congregation to be among the first speakers to get the call to worship started as described below.

Supplies: None

Invite worshipers to join in an opening call to worship as follows. Ahead of time you might want to ask at least one person to be prepared to make the first response. Then others may follow the example.

Leader: Where have you come from?

(A person in the congregation calls out an address, place name, or destination.)

All: We come from many places to serve the same God.

Repeat this exchange several times. Depending on the size of the group gathered for worship, many or even all of the participants can be given an opportunity to tell the places from which they have come. The leader concludes this call to worship.

Leader: From many places we have come. Now let us worship God together.



② Reaching beyond Barriers

Leader preparation: It is helpful to know a bit of the story about “Christina’s World, 1948,” one of Andrew Wyeth’s most famous paintings. Wyeth was inspired by his neighbor Christina, who was stricken by polio, and featured her in several of his paintings. Knowing that the woman in the painting suffers from a paralyzing condition adds to the power of the painting. As you prepare for this activity, take a walking tour of your worship space and other parts of the building used weekly by those who participate in worship. As you tour, look for obstacles that might be challenges for those who use canes, crutches, walkers, or wheelchairs to assist with their mobility. Think also of barriers that might be experienced by those with less visible disabilities, such as lung or heart problems. Make a list of potential barriers and obstacles in your building.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christina’s World, 1948,” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p10041656-sa-i783641/andrew-wyeth-christinas-world-1948.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=0f6ded272c5f442f8f4b43201f2adbfc&searchstring=christina%27s+world>



Begin by placing “Christina’s World, 1984” in a prominent and visible place in your worship area. Tell the story behind it. Invite worshipers to imagine the challenge of making the way across the distance between the woman and the house without the use of legs. Ask worshipers to think not just in terms of Christina’s disability but also in terms of her ability. Ask: *What qualities and skills does she have that enable her to cover the distance?* Invite worshipers to think of ways in which your congregation might transform its space to make it more welcoming to those with special needs. Welcoming people of all abilities is a blessing to the congregation, as well as to those who are served by the changes.

After using the artwork for telling the story, place it near one of the obstacles you discovered in preparing for this activity. Move the artwork to a new location for each worship service during the next several weeks as a silent reminder of the changes your congregation intends to make to reach out in mission beyond barriers that may exist in your life together.

③ Journey to Distant Lands

Leader preparation: Think of a place you would like to visit. Imagine that you have the opportunity to do so. Ask yourself: Where would I like to stop along the way? Whom would I like to visit on my way to this destination? Read Romans 15:22–29, imagining yourself in Paul’s situation. Read it again, imagining yourself as a member of the congregation in Rome. Consider how it feels to be the one traveling and the one waiting for a visit from someone in a distant location. Display a map or globe in the worship area. If you choose, you can also display travel artworks or pictures.

Supplies:

- globe or large world map
- Bible
- (optional) travel posters (perhaps borrowed from a travel agent) or pictures of distant locations

Engage participants in discussion about distant locations and their own experiences of travel. Invite a participant to trace the route of trip he or she has taken on the map or globe. Discuss the differences in the ways people travel today as opposed to the travel methods available for the leaders of the early church.

Invite participants to choose a location that they would like to visit. Ask: *If you were to travel to your chosen location, with whom would you visit along the way?*

Read aloud Romans 15:22–29. After the reading remind participants that the Bible contains a letter to the Romans. Have the reader repeat verse 29: “I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.” Lead a prayer, thanking God for the visits from others through which your congregation has experienced “the fullness of the blessing of Christ.”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Food for the Journey (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The children’s sermon or children’s time is one moment in worship when the entire congregation listens carefully and focuses on the actions of worship leaders. Plan a children’s time based on the journey of Abram and Sarai.



Supplies: None

Begin by reminding the group of the children's game "I'm Taking a Trip." The first person says, "I'm taking a trip and I'm going to take . . . [insert the name of something that starts with the letter A]. The second person adds something that starts with the letter B and then repeats the item that starts with letter A. The game continues through the whole alphabet. At the end, each player has to remember all of the previous items. Your group may not have time to go through the entire alphabet, but you can play a few letters to demonstrate the game.

Tell the children that God asked Abram and Sarai to take a big trip. Ask the children to imagine what Abram and Sarai might have taken with them on their trip. You might want to suggest that they took food, water, a tent, and other essential supplies to get the conversation going. After the children have suggested a number of items, remind them that God helped Abram and Sarai to turn their trip into a blessing for all of the people. Invite them to pray a prayer of thanksgiving for the trip and the blessing. Thank God that the children are heirs of the blessing of Abram and Sarai.

5 Missionary Letters

Leader Preparation: Ever since the first letters of Paul, missionaries have been writing letters to remain in contact with partners in distant locations. Check with your church's mission organization to obtain copies of letters from missionaries. An index to Missionary Blogs can be found online at Global Ministries, <http://globalministries.org/mission/mission-personnel-blogs.html>. Obtain several letters to read in worship. Plan to use these stories to engage your congregation in experiencing the many blessings of the mission of the church.

Supplies:

- copies of letters from missionaries, or printouts of missionaries' blogs

There are several different ways to use letters from missionaries in worship, including the following:

- Distribute a missionary letter to each person attending worship by passing a basket or having people come forward to select a letter that has been placed on the communion table. Invite worshipers to think of the missionary as a prayer partner and to pray for the work of that missionary each day for a week. Arrange an opportunity for people to report on this experience.
- Read Romans 15:22–29, followed by reading one or more missionary letters. Use the sermon time to compare and contrast Paul's letter to the Romans and the missionary letters you have read.
- Invite worshipers to reflect on how the Christians in Rome might have responded to their letter from Paul. Provide an opportunity for worshipers to answer letters from missionaries, sending responses by air mail or email.
- Arrange for a few volunteers to share weekly moments of mission with your congregation. This might be an activity for the mission or benevolence committee of your congregation.
- Invite youth to create a skit imagining that they are learning about the activities of missionaries through text messages or tweets.
- Be sure to mention missionaries in the public prayers of your congregation, as well as inviting personal prayers for the work of those who serve in distant locations.



6 Stories of Separation

Leader preparation: Abram and Sarai had to let go of many things as they journeyed forth in response to God's call. Perhaps there has been a time of deep separation in your life, such as going away to university or military service or moving to a distant location. Long distance moves may be common among young adults in your congregation. Think of the stories of separation that are a part of the story of your congregation. Invite two or three members of your congregation to tell their stories of separation as a reflection on Genesis 12:1–5.

Supplies: None

In place of or as a part of a sermon focused on Genesis 12:1–5, invite members of the congregation to tell stories of times when they experienced a separation from other family members. Try to arrange stories told by those who moved away and stories told by those who were left behind. Invite discussion of these considerations.

- What was let go in the separation?
- Were there things lost that were never recovered? If so, what?
- How did you keep in contact after the separation?
- In what ways has this separation been a blessing to you?

Reflect on the connections between the stories told and the experience of Abram and Sarai and their families as they headed out on a journey from which they never returned. Abram and Sarai's separation became a blessing for all future generations (Genesis 12:3), but it may have been a source of great grief for their friends and families. Share your reflections with the congregation. Remember all families who experience separation in the pastoral prayer of your congregation.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Commission with Genesis 12:1–5 (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Make sure that you are familiar with Genesis 12:1–5 and the broader narrative of Abram becoming Abraham and Sarai becoming Sarah. Decide whether you want to read the commissioning yourself or you want to print Genesis 12:1b–3 for the congregation to read together.

Supplies:

- Bible

Remind worshipers that a commissioning is a particular type of sending forth. To commission is to invite others to share in and pray for God's blessings upon a mission. To be commissioned is to be given a share in a larger mission. The mission that God gave to Abram and Sarai is one that they accepted, but it is also a mission that continues to be offered to God's faithful persons in every new generation. Invite worshipers to read (or listen to) Genesis 12:1b–3 and consider it a commissioning for the close of your worship:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.



8 Blessing Cards

Leader preparation: The process of blessing is one of giving and one of receiving. Members of your congregation often receive a blessing at the end of worship. Encourage them to extend this blessing to others. This exercise can be done with blank index cards, but it helps to print the following words at the top of each card: “As you go forth on God’s journey, I pray that you . . .” Make sure that you have at least one card for each participant in worship. Write one prayer as an example. Give some thought to the way participants will exchange cards. One easy way is to collect the cards in baskets or offering plates and then pass the baskets and plates, inviting people to select a card. The cards can also be passed to the ushers who place them near the doors so that people can take a card on the way out of the worship space. If you plan to have music playing while people write, make arrangements with your congregation’s musicians.

Supplies:

- index cards printed with “As you go forth on God’s journey, I pray that you . . .”
- pens or pencils

Invite participants to think of the week to come as an invitation to go forth as missionaries of God. Tell them you do not know the destinations of their journeys, but you are confident that God is calling them to carry the news of Christ to others. As they go forth on this journey, they have an opportunity to both give and receive a blessing. Instruct participants to write prayers of blessing on their cards that can be given to other worshipers. Allow time for them to write. Soft music can be played as people write. When they are finished, collect the cards and redistribute them. Ask participants to keep their card close by as they go through the week, so that the blessing they receive might be near them throughout the journey of the week to come.

9 Go Forth with a Hymn

Leader Preparation: There are many different ways to sing the hymn “Go My Children, with My Blessing.” Consider the suggestions in the activity description and plan with the musicians in your congregation for leadership of the hymn.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Go My Children, with My Blessing” by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>

Experience the hymn “Go My Children, with My Blessing” in one of the following ways as a closing to a time of worship.

- Sing the hymn as a round. You can do a four-part round with one group beginning every fifth measure.
- Have two parts of the congregation—left side and right side or male and female—sing the verses to each other, with one part singing each verse.
- Have the choir sing a verse to the congregation, followed by the congregation singing a verse to the choir.
- Just sing the hymn and enjoy it. Use your imagination! There are lots of other fun ways to share a hymn.



Following the Church Year

Advent

Preparing for the birth of a child is in some ways like preparing for a journey. Supplies will be needed. Changes will be demanded. There is no way to fully anticipate all that lies ahead. Advent can be a season of expectation not only about the birth of the Christ child but also about the mission to which we are called in Christ's name.

Christmas

Many congregations have special Christmas offerings or mission projects. Be sure to remember those in your congregation for whom the season brings memories of loss and for whom grief is a companion in the season.

Epiphany

The "Aha!" of recognition is the mood of this season. It is a good time of the year to contemplate God's call. Be ready for surprises!

Lent

The beginning of Lent, with the reflection of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, is a good time to think of the costs of mission and what is left behind when one goes forth to answer God's call. Lent is an excellent time to reflect on the costs of discipleship.

Easter

The joy of Easter news is one of the biggest motivations for mission to others. The first witnesses of Christ's resurrection were commissioned to "Go tell!"

Pentecost

Genesis 12:1-9 is read during the season after Pentecost on Proper 5 in the Revised Common Lectionary. Romans 15:22-29 is not a regular reading in the Revised Common Lectionary, but the season after Pentecost is a good time to reflect on the early church.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

Envisioning the future is always an experience of blessing and of letting go. There are elements of the past and present that need to be released in order to allow the future to emerge. The newness that God holds for our future is a blessing indeed. A few years ago the United Church of Christ participated in a project called "Worshiping into God's Future." The title was more than symbolic. Too often when we think of the future, we think of our "own" future. God, however, is not confined to any one part of time. The future belongs to God. The path toward the future is to worship. When we open ourselves in worship to a deeper relationship with God, we can begin to catch a glimpse of God's calling and our vocation in relationship to the future. Worship, music, arts, and story are vehicles for deepening the relationship with God from which new futures emerge. The activities in this Exploration help participants to let go of their desire to control the future in order to become more open to the blessings of God's future.

About this Exploration

Experiences of blessing and letting go teach us there will be more change, loss, and grief in the future. Letting go is an essential part of our lives. Our resurrection faith provides us a vision of blessing and being blessed in the midst of letting go. Blessing does not come easily, and the process of letting go can be a painful adventure. Genuine hope is often costly and benefits from the courage of our imagination. The practices in this Exploration open individuals and congregations to the blessings for the journey when we are willing to let go.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Jeremiah 29:1-14**Luke 2:22-38****Leader Preparation**

It is simple to understand the idea that there are things in our lives that we will need to release in order to embrace the future. Sometimes our possessions can become encumbrances. Not only possessions weigh us down, however; ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and intentions can also get in the way of the future. Blessing and letting go are skills that are required in order to move toward the future with peace and joy. Invest some time in preparation for this Exploration by thinking of the things you need to release in order to move into the future.

Prayer: God of all times, help me to say good-bye to the things that weigh me down and to release those things that prevent me from embracing your future. Instill in me a vision of your future that is stronger than the grief over things lost, so that I may add my blessing to yours as I let go of those things that impede my way. In this journey, as in all of the journeys of life, I am grateful that I am not traveling alone. Thank you for your presence. In Christ, Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities**1 Cleaning House (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: One way to open our lives to the future is to clear out clutter from the present and the past. Worship leaders often use the sanctuary and other worship areas without engaging in the hands-on process of cleaning them. Arrange for your congregation's worship leadership team to meet in the worship space for a "cleaning day." Invite them to wear work clothes and bring cleaning supplies. Have several large trash bags or containers for the things you choose to recycle or throw away. If it is not possible for your team to engage in cleaning your worship space, other possible work projects include a work day at Habitat for Humanity work site or volunteering in a community garden (see Jeremiah 29:5).

Supplies:

- cleaning supplies appropriate to your worship space

This activity works well at the transition from one liturgical season to another, but is appropriate at any time. Invite your congregation's worship team to share in a work day in the sanctuary to do a deep cleaning. Such tasks as washing windows, dusting, and sweeping are important, as are sorting through old banners, artworks, and other items used in worship. If your church has a sacristy (a room for keeping vestments, paraments, banners, communion vessels and other church furnishings), it would be good to clean that area as well. Begin your time together with prayer. Invite participants to envision God calling them to a new future and new ministries. Use some item that is ready to be recycled or thrown away as an example. Give thanks for its role in the story of your church, and bless it as you place it in the bin to be taken away. Invite the entire team to add prayer to their day in such a way that the process of cleaning becomes a continual blessing of the past and a preparation for God's future. A shared meal is a good way to end a work day and allow for discussion of the experience.

2 Letters to Exiles

Leader preparation: In the years of the exile, Israel struggled to maintain a sense of cohesion, even though the people were not all living in the same place. The book of Jeremiah reports of communication with the exiled community. Surprisingly, one message of the prophet was an urging to become active and seek the welfare of the communities where the exiles found themselves. The people were called to be a blessing to those whom they had identified as enemies. Read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Compile a list of members of your church who live in distant locations. This list might include college students, snowbirds, members serving in the military, and members who are traveling. Prepare envelopes addressed to those persons that can be used by members of the congregation. If time permits and information is available, prepare a brief paragraph of information to go with each envelope that tells a bit about the person who will receive the letter. Because most congregations have more active worshipers than distant members, make duplicate envelopes so there is at least one envelope for each member of the congregation.

Supplies:

- Bible
- blank cards and other letter-writing supplies
- envelopes addressed to members of your congregation who live in distant locations



After reading Jeremiah 29:1–14, distribute the cards and envelopes. One easy way to distribute is to place them in offering plates and do a reverse offering in which each person takes something out of the plate. During the time of prayers, ask worshipers to pray quietly for the person to whom the envelope is addressed. Remind worshipers to pray not only for the individuals but also for the welfare of the communities where these individuals are currently living. At the close of the service, invite members to pray for the person all week long and, within a week, to write a brief note to that person and mail it or send it via e-mail or the various social media.

③ Hymn of Promise

Leader preparation: Natalie Sleeth’s hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” is familiar and beloved in some congregations and unknown in others. This hymn is designed for unison singing, and its simple tune makes it easy to learn. If your congregation uses projection for worship, consider using a video as part of worship. If you do not know about the composer, it is easy to get some information about her and the hymn from an Internet search or from a hymnal companion for one of the hymnals that features her hymn. If your musicians are not familiar with the hymn, remind them that the tune is titled “Promise.” It is a song of hope, not a dirge.

Supplies:

- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower; video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- (optional) equipment for projecting video

Plan to sing the hymn following the reading of Jeremiah 29:1–14. Before singing the hymn, tell enough of the story of Natalie Sleeth so the congregation understands her motivation for composing the hymn. Explain that she was married to a theologian and composed a hymn for his installation as president of West Virginia Wesleyan College. She composed this particular hymn after he was diagnosed with cancer, and together they shared the journey of the illness that led to his death. At his request, it was the only song sung at his funeral. Sing the song together.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Pray Shalom (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In public worship, we often think of prayer as words that are spoken aloud. Many congregations allow time for silent or quiet prayers but after a few seconds go on to a prayer that is spoken by a worship leader. Prayer that is a simple song repeated many times can also be deeply meaningful. The communities of Taizé in France and Iona in Scotland often use simple choruses sung in a meditative fashion as forms of prayer. Elements from their worship services have spread around the world. You may be comfortable leading the singing of the simple chorus of “Shalom Chaverim.” If not, recruit a musician who can lead your congregation in singing. Practice repeating the chorus several times.

Supplies:

- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnc>
- (optional) instruments to support the singing



Unless your congregation is familiar and comfortable with singing choruses as a form of prayer, a few words of explanation and invitation will help. Invite worshipers to sing or be silent as they are comfortable. They can sing some of the time and not sing other times. Harmony is welcome, but not required. Ask them to begin by listening one time and then singing softly the first couple of times they sing. Allow the repetitions to repeat in increasing volume for a while, and then gradually decrease volume until finally pausing at the end of the singing. Determine the exact number of times to sing the chorus by the mood of the moment and the movement of the Spirit.

5 Write Necrologies

Leader preparation: For centuries churches and monastic institutions have recorded the names of kings, abbots, priests, and benefactors in special registers called necrologies. On certain special days the lists are read during worship as a memorial and as a prayer. In several of the Baltic States, when the governments became communist in the 1940s, the printing of newspaper obituaries was banned because they were deemed to be too morbid and backward for print journalism. The people adopted the practice of posting single-sheet notices in public places and started to call these necrologies, adopting the name from churches.

Writing a one-page necrology is a process of sorting. Only one page is often too short to tell the whole story. The writer must let go of some details and focus attention on qualities, aspects, and elements of the story which have lasting value.

This activity is probably best for worship committees or occasions other than formal worship services. The stories that are written, however, may be used in worship. In preparation for this activity, write a one-page necrology of your own life to date. Be serious about the discipline of using only one page. When you have completed, reflect on the things that you had to leave out. Pray a prayer of blessing for the parts of your life that have lasting meaning.

Supplies:

- your congregation's official record of funerals
- writing paper and pens or pencils
- (optional) music to play while people are writing

Invite participants to look at the list of funerals in your church's official records. Ask them to find at least one person whose story they know and invite them to share a memory or two about this individual. Give a brief explanation of necrologies. You might read the beginning of the paragraph of Leader preparation above.

Challenge each participant to write one-page necrology about him- or herself, focusing on the parts of his or her life that have lasting value. You may play soft music as participants write. When the writing is complete, invite those who are willing to do so to post their sheets on a bulletin board for others to read.

Discuss the process of writing these necrologies. Ask: *What was the hardest part of writing this page? How did you decide what things to include?* Close your time together with a prayer of thanksgiving for all of the faithful lives whose memory you honor with this activity.



6 Childhood Journeys

Leader preparation: The Gospels offer two striking images of Jesus that are often portrayed in paintings: (1) Jesus as an infant, often shown with Mary, and (2) Jesus welcoming the children. Most members of your worshipping community are familiar with both images and can tell parts of both stories. The child once welcomed by adults became an adult who welcomed children. In preparation for this activity, recruit two readers. It is helpful if one reader is male. Have readers practice reading Luke 2:22–38, with one taking the role of narrator and the other reading the song of Simeon (verses 29–32).

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children,” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- Bible

Display “Christ Among the Children” in a place where worshipers can easily see it and consider its details. Invite participants to look at the artwork and recall the biblical story that it invokes. If appropriate, ask volunteers to tell parts of that story.

After people have had an opportunity to consider the artwork, ask them to think of the experiences and events in Jesus’ life that brought him to this moment. Invite them to think of how a particular event helped Jesus to grow in faith. Have the readers read Luke 2:22–38 as people look at the artwork. Offer a prayer that thanks God for the experiences and events that have shaped each worshiper on his or her faith journey. Ask God to inspire each worshiper, so that all may extend the blessings they have received to a new generation of God’s faithful people.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Look Outward (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The act of blessing involves both giving and receiving. The benediction often involves the worship leader giving a blessing that is received by the congregation. That blessing is, in turn, given by members of the congregation to others as they live their lives in the days to come. As you prepare for worship, think of those whom you bless and their daily lives. Consider especially the ways that they are blessings to others.

Supplies: None

As you prepare for the benediction, ask worshipers to consider people who are not present who are in need of blessing. If appropriate, invite worshipers to speak the names of these persons aloud. Next, invite worshipers to rise as they are able and face in the direction of where that person is. There will be some shuffling and may be some talking as people try to discern which direction to face.

When the group has settled, invite them to receive the benediction, so that they might go forth and be a blessing to others. Pronounce the benediction. A simple benediction that can be easily be memorized by worshipers is most effective, such as: *May you experience and share God’s blessings each day of your life.*



8 Sing Simeon's Song

Leader preparation: We often think of the Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis) as a response for the close of a funeral or during the service of evening prayer. Although the song comes from a story about events that occurred when Simeon and Anna were old, there is nothing in Luke 2:22–38 to associate the song with a funeral. It is, instead, a blessing for a child. Read Luke 2:22–38, thinking of the occasion as a time of blessing. Select a musical setting of the Song of Simeon for your congregation to sing. Most hymnals have a number of settings of the song. Arrange with your congregation's musicians to lead and accompany the song.

Supplies:

- hymnals or words to a musical setting of the Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)

Sing the Song of Simeon as a closing hymn or as a benediction response for your time of worship. You may want to give a few words of commentary about the song before the congregation sings, reminding worshipers of the story of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2:22–36.

9 Bless the Children

Leader preparation: Baptisms, infant dedications, or christenings are formal occasions for invoking God's blessings on children, but children probably do not remember these events in their own lives. Inviting children to come forward to receive a blessing on a regular basis creates lasting memories. It also provides a sense of being valued and treasured by the congregation. All of us are children of God. On a regular basis, each person needs to hear these words: "You are a child of God. You are loved. You are a disciple of Christ, a member of Christ's church." Plan to close worship with an optional blessing for all children of God. If you have a large congregation, it is appropriate to have deacons, elders, or others share in the process of giving blessings.

Supplies:

- (optional) water or olive oil in a small bowl

At the close of the worship, invite all who wish to receive a special blessing to come forward. Recall the story of Simeon and Anna, or recall Jesus welcoming the children as a special invitation for children to come forward. When the children come forward, they can be blessed while standing or kneeling. A leader of the congregation gently places a hand upon the child's forehead and speaks a simple blessing such as: "You are a child of God. You are loved. You are a disciple of Christ, a member of Christ's church." If water is used, a wet thumb can be used to touch the forehead. Speaking the child's name and adding the words "remember your baptism" can be meaningful as well. If oil is used, dip a thumb in the oil and make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one being blessed. Consult your church's book of worship for additional details about blessing with oil.

Following the Church Year

Advent

As the beginning of the Christian year, Advent is a good season for sorting and cleaning the congregation's worship space.



Christmas

Luke 2:22–40 is read on the First Sunday after Christmas Day in Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary. Luke 2:22–40 is also read on the festival of the Presentation of the Lord in all three years in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Epiphany

The Epiphany season is filled with promise. Thoughts of the future are always appropriate during this season.

Lent

Lent is often a season of reflecting on our own mortality. The activity of writing necrologies can be a meaningful part of a Lenten discipline.

Easter

Baptismal remembrances and blessing of children are often incorporated into the Great Vigil of Easter, the first worship service of Easter, traditionally held after sunset on the day before Easter Sunday.

Pentecost

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7 is read in Year C on Proper 22 in the season after Pentecost in the Revised Common Lectionary.