

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

At the heart of the worshipping life of any congregation is the constant beat of scripture. We hear scripture preached. Yet the Bible in worship is more than a sermon. We pray, we sing, we are declared forgiven, and we make commitments formed by scripture. In worship, when we share bread at communion or pass through the waters of baptism, we enter ancient stories. Yet scripture is no longer old, but new as God acts afresh. For many, these various experiences in worship will be the first and primary place of discovering scripture.

Because worship may be that first and primary way of scripture discovery, our call is to carefully and prayerfully offer language and opportunities that invite people of all ages to be oriented to this Holy Word—to go deeper, to ask questions, and to discover a new biblically inspired vision of God's world of justice and love. Through scripture in worship, we discover God. To explore more about worship as a scriptural event and primary setting for discovering scripture, see *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* by F. Russell Mittman (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

This Discovery Exploration includes nine suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The activities under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with the Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The three suggestions listed under Discerning and Deciding include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three activity suggestions, for Sending and Serving, point to

the closing time in worship and will offer worship ideas for blessing others and for calling the congregation to acts of God's justice and compassion. It will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

Scripture tells the story of God's relationship with human beings. It is a gift of God for the people of God. Scripture is accessible to all—those who have been reading the Bible for years and those opening it for the first time. Wherever we are on life's journey, the Bible can connect with our experience. We encounter scripture as an ancient text, but one that is living, breathing, and alive to contemporary pilgrims. It comforts and challenges, heals and holds accountable. Scripture expands worldviews and limits selfishness, offers forgiveness and embraces those who are on the margins. As we engage with scripture, we discover God and we discover a new world through ancient words. We join with others, the great diversity of God's people, to ask questions, connect with the text, pray, and discern together God's continuing word for us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Proverbs 2:1–8
John 21:1–20

Leader Preparation

The prayerful care we bring to our personal preparation and Bible engagement is usually evident in worship—not only in what we say in a sermon or prayer, but also in how we speak, how we pray. Suggestions are offered in all the Explorations about encountering scripture for Worship, Music, Art, and Story. Most often they are suggested in both the Leader Preparation section and in the first suggestion listed for Exploring and Engaging. You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann's book of prayers *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar's engagement with scripture while teaching Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture. If you guide a worship planning group, you might begin your time with this prayer by Barbara Day Miller:

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 At the Sound of the Bell: Call to Prayer and the Word

Leader preparation: Preparing for sermons and worship is a prayerful process. Sometimes, however, frustrations arise and ideas do not come. We can become overwhelmed with our process with numbers of commentaries and online resources. We can shut down. Sometimes it seems the word isn't coming, and we're lost from the Spirit.

Supplies:

- timer with a bell sound
- (optional) "Mindfulness Bell" at <http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/bell/index.html>

Prayer often leads us back to the discovery of God's Word. As an ongoing prayer practice while engaging scripture, set regular intervals for silence and prayer. Set a kitchen timer for every thirty minutes. When it rings, reset it, close your eyes, breathe, and be aware of God's presence. Express your longings, hopes, or frustrations at that moment, or simply rest in silence. What fresh word from God arises out of the silence? Another helpful resource is an online Mindfulness Bell at <http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/bell/index.html>. Use it instead of a kitchen timer. It has a wonderful tone that can call you back into a prayerful engagement.



2 Tending to the Word: A Pattern for Worship Planning in Community

Leader preparation: Proverbs 2:1–2 calls on God's people to "treasure up" God's way, to make our ears "attentive to wisdom," and to incline our hearts "to understanding." Such careful attention and tending to God's wisdom is at the heart of worship. Rather than some isolated experience by a preacher or sole worship planner, engaging scripture and planning worship are enriched when shared in community. Draw together a small group to prayerfully discover the links between God's word and worship. When worship has been shaped by such communal discernment, the wider community is often invited into the Word in new and vital ways. The Word comes alive.



*O God, you spoke your Word and the world
was created,
send us your Spirit in this hour, that
through the reading of your Word
and through our conversation and study,
our listening and speaking, our wondering
and discerning,
we might hear you speak a new word to us
and to your people in this place;
through Christ who is the Word, who is the
Truth, who is our Life. Amen.*

[From Barbara Day Miller's *Encounters with the Holy: A Conversational Model for Worship Planning* (Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 39]. Used by permission.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- candle
- matches or lighter
- bell
- "Tending the Word," Attachment: Activity 2
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Recruit people for a worship planning group who are most directly involved in worship, such as a music director, lay leaders or deacons, and preachers. But also invite others who have a passion for prayer, worship, and engaging the Bible with others. Consider inviting artists or those with media skills who think in images as much as words—and invite activists who link worship with the work of God's justice. If possible, keep the group size between four and eight members so all might be engaged in the process.

If you have an extended time together as a retreat, it is great to plan several Sundays at a time. Often however, you may be lucky to get together for just an hour or two. The following process is suggested for looking at one Sunday. Like many congregations, you may plan worship and sermons based on readings suggested in the Revised Common Lectionary. If so, let the suggested scriptures lead you into your study and worship planning. Other congregations begin worship planning with a theme and choose their own scripture references. If that is the case, be careful not to freeze or force the full meaning of a text into your theme. Allow yourself and the planning group to be open to how God may move you in fresh ways—new images, questions, and themes that draw from your tending to the Word. This process assumes that scripture is essential to any worship planning and prayerfully builds from there. This suggested process may aid a worship planning group to be attentive to God's word.

Step 1. Set a prayerful context. Light a candle. Sound a bell. Begin in silence. Be aware of God's presence. Offer your own prayer or the prayer by Barbara Day Miller found above in the Leader Preparation. You might end the prayer with words such as, "God, as we engage scripture and plan worship, may our prayer continue. Amen." Prayer is not only for beginning and ending the planning time. Even in the midst of planning, take periodic times for silence.

Step 2. Prayerfully engage scripture and identify questions, images, and themes. Take time to explore the Bible passage. There are a variety of methods for engaging a passage of scripture. You will find such methods in each of the six Explorations with this Faith Practice of engaging scripture. (The methods will be found in Activity 4 in each Exploration. For example, see the Three-Step-Wonder method in Activity 4 of this Exploration.) Out of engaging the Bible, ask and pray, "What are all the questions, images, and themes that emerge from our prayer and study of scripture?" After briefly exploring the variety of responses, ask, "At this time, in the midst of the life of our congregation and the concerns of our world, what image, question, or theme does God seem to be calling us toward?" Then identify one theme, question, or image that will be the center of worship.

Step 3. Brainstorm and suggest an approach to worship and possible elements. Begin your brainstorming by considering the overall experience of worship before naming individual components: What might be the flow and feel of the liturgy for the day? What ritual acts might the day include as Holy Communion/Eucharist, baptisms, or receiving new members? Then prayerfully complete together the chart in the attachment, which identifies specific components/elements of worship and needed follow-up. Make a list of necessary contacts to be made or follow-up to be tended to.

Step 4. Return to prayer and silence. Spend time in silence and prayer. Thank God for God’s presence in the planning. Do lingering concerns or new discoveries emerge? Following the prayer, take a moment, one more time, to check in with one another and to show signs of God’s love and peace to one another.

③ The Illuminated Bible: Prayers of Illumination

Leader preparation: Discoveries happen when we hear things we haven’t heard before, see things we have not seen. When things are illuminated and light shines, we discover things anew. “Illumination” is a word that describes how God’s Word can shine on our world. Yet God’s people have also attempted to do some illuminating themselves. We offer prayers of illumination, calling on God to shine through scripture that is read and sermons spoken.

Supplies:

- None

Here are two traditional prayers of illumination and one contemporary prayer to be used before the reading of scripture in worship or preaching of a sermon. Include one of these in your worship, or write one on your own or together with a worship planning group.

*God, source of all light,
by your Word give light to our lives. Amen*

(ANCIENT COLLECT, SOURCE UNKNOWN)

*Gracious God,
we do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from your mouth.
Make us hungry for this your Word,
that it may nourish us today
in the ways of eternal life.
Through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.*

(SOURCE UNKNOWN)

*God, Living Word,
take these words on these pages;
take the words that come out of our mouths;
take all these words and make them into your Word.
No longer words from an ancient book,
no longer words only uttered by us.
God, speak, shine! Spirit, come.
Call us to your Word and Way.
Amen.*

(SIDNEY D. FOWLER)

Find other ways that the Bible is illuminated in Activity 5 of the Scripture Exploration and Activity 5 in the Tradition Exploration.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

④ Three-Step-Wonder: A Way to Engage John 21:1–14

Leader preparation: Jesus' Easter appearance along the Sea of Galilee is full of surprises waiting to be discovered. Imagine yourself fishing all night without catching a single fish. Imagine finally recognizing the resurrected Jesus. Imagine Jesus calling you to breakfast. Imagine and wonder. Whether preparing a sermon, working with a worship planning group, or engaging in your own personal devotional reading, there are a variety of ways to discover what God is saying through scripture. The following approach values discovery, imagination, question, and prayer. "I wonder . . ." is an important phrase in this approach. You may be familiar with an approach to children's faith formation called "Godly Play." In that worshipful approach to engaging the Bible, children imaginatively participate in the telling of a Bible story and then are invited to wonder about their experience of the passage. Rather than dogmatically telling children what the passage means, the process is open and invites children into a prayerful, playful, and awe-filled way of Bible discovery. (For more information about Godly Play for children, go online to <http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/newsite/Main.php>.)

Supplies:

- Bible
- Bible commentaries
- (optional) "Resurrection Breakfast" <http://complicatedoctopus.com/2007/10/18/resurrection-breakfast/>

Adults as well as children can enter into a prayerful and imaginative approach to scripture. Adults can wonder and discover meaning. The following three movements encourage you to engage your own imaginations, to listen to the imagination and insights of others, and to discover what God may be saying to you today. You can follow these movements alone or with a group. It is a wonderful process to share with others, as in a worship planning group.

Step 1: Praying, Imagining, Listening, and Wondering about an Initial Reading

Take time to imaginatively read the passage about the appearance of the resurrected Jesus found in John 21:1–14. Begin with your eyes closed and in silence. Invite God into your imagining the Bible story. Then slowly read the text aloud. Often throughout your reading, pause, close your eyes and imagine what is happening in the passage. For example, see the disciples, the boat, the sea. Imagine the net empty and then the net full. After such pauses, continue your reading. When you have completed the passage, close your eyes and begin to wonder. Complete the phrase: "O God, I wonder about . . ." Perhaps you will wonder about details of the story, motives of disciples, or possible meanings. For example, you might pray, "O God, I wonder why Peter is back to fishing again. I wonder what that means," or "I wonder why Peter jumped naked into the sea." After you have wondered, rest a minute in silence and then continue.

Step 2: Praying, Imagining, Listening, and Wondering about the Insights and Wonder of Others

When our wonder meets the wonder and insights of others, our imagination expands, and we can discover deeper meaning. Listen and experience the wonder of others about John 21:1–14. Discover the insights and wonder of Bible commentators, musicians, poets, and visual artists. How does the wonder of those who are different from you—particularly those most vulnerable in society—reshape your wonder? Gather commentaries and other resources around you. For example, in her commentary on John 21:1–14, Gail R. O'Day links this last

miracle in the gospel of John with the very first miracle in the gospel. By the seaside, Christ's presence provides an abundance of fish after a night with no fish. Earlier in John 2:1–11, at a wedding in Cana, Christ's presence provides an abundance of wine after a wedding party had run out. O'Day says, "In both stories the miracle is the vehicle for an epiphany. Jesus' first and last revelatory acts in the Gospel narrative are thus both miracles of abundance in Galilee." [Gail R. O'Day, "John," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 856.]

O'Day also connects the passage with another time when Jesus is along the Galilean sea. In John 6:1–14, on a day at the beach, Jesus takes a boy's meager lunch of a few fish and a bit of bread and then abundantly feeds a crowd—with bread and fish left over. It seems that where Christ is, people are fed. Abundance abounds. From O'Day's insights about this passage, enter into silence and think about what O'Day said. What does it lead you to wonder? Pray: *O God, after hearing these insights about this passage, I wonder . . .* Open yourself to others besides commentators. What artists and poets do you want to listen to? For example, the artist Kristin Serafini speaks of her process as she painted the "Resurrection Breakfast" (go to <http://complicatedoctopus.com/2007/10/18/resurrection-breakfast/>). Her process was one of wonder, discovery, and discernment. Spend time with the image. Listen to her insights and wonder. Then close your eyes and pray, *After viewing this painting and listening to Serafini, O God, I wonder . . .* How does Serafini's wonder reshape yours?

Step 3: Praying, Imagining, Listening, and Wondering about the Experience with the Reading

Hold all you have wondered in prayer. What are those initial "wonders" that you had as you heard the passage for the first time? What were the wonders you heard from others? Now, in what ways have some of those wonders been answered, or what fresh wonders emerged? What do you want to say to God? Begin with one or two of the following prayer phrases: "O God, I wonder what you may be calling me to do, to be, to consider." or "O God, I wonder what you may calling from our congregation." Conclude with a time of thanking God for God's presence as you wondered. Rest in prayerful silence.

5 Words of Assurance: Discovering God's Forgiveness through Scripture

Leader preparation: One of the more powerful moments of hearing scripture in worship often follows confessions that we offer as individuals and as a congregation. We discover that God speaks through scripture by offering words of assurance—words of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of a fresh start to live lives of God's justice and compassion.

Supplies:

- None

Often passages of scripture that are used in sermons are the very words to be used in offering Words of Assurance. Below are samples of Words of Assurance drawn from scripture. If you use the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) scripture readings for Sundays, those Sundays are noted after the scripture reference. These words of assurance conclude with the sharing, the passing of God's peace. Following the words of assurance, the congregation is asked to introduce themselves to one another, shake hands, or embrace, and to say words such as "May the peace of God be yours." The scriptural words of compassion lead to the discovery of compassion among the people of God.

Psalm 85

(Second Sunday of Advent, Year B)

One: Dear ones, God tenderly speaks.
Your salvation is at hand.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

You are forgiven, restored. Live faithfully.
And may the peace of God be with you.

All: And also with you.

Isaiah 60:1

(Epiphany, Years A, B, C)

One: “Arise, shine, for your light is come.” Your sins are forgiven.
Shine! Live justly in hope and love.

May the peace of God be with you

All: And also with you.

2 Peter 1:19

(Last Sunday after Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday, Year A)

One: “The day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

Rise in hope. Your sins are forgiven. Live as people of compassion, hope, and
justice.

The peace of God be with you.

All: And also with you.

John 3:16

(Lent 2, Year A, and Trinity Sunday, Year B)

One: “God so love the world.” God so loved the world giving God’s only Child
so that everyone who believes will have new life, life eternal.

Children of the Living God, you are forgiven. Your life is new.

The peace of God be with you.

All: And also with you.

Revelation 21:5

(All Saints Day, Year B; Easter 5, Year C; and New Years, Years ABC)

One: People of hope, hear God’s good news: “I am making all things new.”

You are a new people. Alleluia! Grow into the image of Christ.

Be people of compassion and justice.

And may God’s peace be with you.

All: And also with you.

Romans 8:31

(Proper 12, Year A)

One: “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against
us?”

God does not withhold from us, but gives us new life in Christ. God is for us!

We are a forgiven people. Live new lives of faith.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

Romans 8:35

(Proper 12, Year A)

One: Do not forget to let God’s word sink deeply into your heart.

“Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” You are forgiven. Live life anew as God’s people—bear one another up, do justice, be channels of hope, love God and all people.

The peace of God be with you.

All: And also with you.

Romans 14:13

(Proper 19, Year A)

One: “May the God of hope fill you with such peace and joy in your faith that you may be filled with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Rejoice, beloved friends!

As a forgiven people, be hope to others. The peace of God be with you.

All: And also with you.

⑥ “More Light, More Truth”—Singing a Response to the Word

Leader preparation: An often quoted saying in the United Church of Christ comes from the congregation’s forbearers, the Pilgrims. The quote usually goes something like this: “There is still more light and truth breaking through.” The phrase inspires an openness to what God may be saying in the world today. The original quotation was from John Robinson, who was pastor to the Pilgrims in Leyden, Holland, in 1620. Robinson offered the words on the eve of the Pilgrims’ departure to the New World. Although he would not make the journey with them, his words inspired them to be open to God’s continuing revelation. Robinson’s exact quotation was about scripture: “I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light to break forth out of His holy word.” The phrase calls on us to listen to God’s word—in our time—and discover God’s word and way for us. See Sidney Fowler’s *What Matters to You Matters to Us: Engaging Six Vital Themes of Our Faith* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008), 68–69.

Supplies:

- song: “More Light, More Truth” <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/pdfs/More-Light-Music.pdf>

Following the reading of scripture or sermon, often worshipping congregations rush to take up the offering or list any announcements. Instead of rushing on, we could stop, pray, listen for “more light and truth breaking through” even in the words just spoken. Following the sermon, try this: Allow for a brief time of silence and then sing this contemporary version of Robinson’s quotation by Christopher Grundy: <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/pdfs/More-Light-Music.pdf>.

Sending & Serving Activities

**7 Blessing the Children**

Leader preparation: Blessing is a vital part of worship. By blessing, we call upon God to make holy people, things, and places. Especially blessed, according to scripture, are children. Check out the story of Jesus blessing the children found in Mark 10:13–16 (which is the gospel reading for Proper 22, Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary.) Parallel passages are also found in Matthew 19:13–15 and Luke 18:15–17. How might you bring blessing of children into worship?

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- (optional) hymn: “Jesus Loves Me” or “Little Children Welcome”

For a children’s moment or sermon, show the artwork “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde to the gathered children. Ask them: *Who does Jesus seem to be paying attention to in the painting?* Then ask the children to point to a child that they like in the picture or a child they would like to be. While pointing to the child in the painting that each child identifies with, say something like this to the children: *Imagine your face where this child’s face is. Imagine Jesus blessing you, loving you. Close your eyes and imagine you are in the painting. Jesus loves you. Jesus blesses you and all children.* Allow a brief moment of silence. Conclude with a prayer such as: *Thank you, Jesus, for blessing us. Thank you for blessing all the world’s children.* As children go back to their seats, a musician might play a child’s hymn such as “Jesus Loves Me” or “Little Children Welcome.”

8 A Scriptural Call to Service—Sung and Embodied

Leader preparation: Often when we sing hymns at church, we become musical storytellers. So many hymns retell and sing the stories of the Bible. For example, the old standard “I Come to the Garden Alone” (“In the Garden”) retells the surprising Easter encounter of Mary Magdalene with the resurrected Jesus found in John 20:14–18. The enchanting Spanish-language hymn “Tú has venido a la orilla” (“You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore”), retells the story of the call of the fishers found in Matthew 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20, and Luke 5:1–11.

Supplies:

- Bible
- hymn: “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love”
<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/j/j015.html>
- (optional) basin, water, towels

A particularly powerful musical retelling of scripture is the hymn “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love.” Listen to the melody at <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/j/j015.html>. The hymn is based on the account of Jesus’ washing the feet of the disciples in John 13:1–20. The verses were written by the missionary Tom Colvin, expressing his gratitude for the servant hearts of his congregation in northern Ghana and to dedicate a new congregation. He set the words to a folk melody that he discovered among the people. Sing this hymn before or after a sermon preached about, or to conclude worship based on, Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. You might even conclude a Maundy Thursday service during Holy Week with the song. On that day, John 13:1–20 is the gospel reading recommended by the lectionary.

A powerful addition to just singing the hymn is to have someone wash the feet of another at the front of your worship space during the singing. While one person sits in a chair, another with a basin of water and a cloth slowly washes the feet of the seated person. Many congregations are not comfortable with traditional foot washing where everyone is invited to wash one another's feet—even if it is a powerful rite of Christian servanthood. However, people may be able to participate in a way they hadn't imagined as they sing "Jesu" and watch a foot washing. Scripture comes alive in song and invites us into servanthood to our neighbors.



9 Psalm 19—Getting Out, Looking Up!

Leader preparation: Worship is not just about hanging around inside a sanctuary of mortar and glass. Worship is also about getting out in God's good creation—praising God while breathing in the air, noticing creatures and creation, looking up into the night heavens. For many in our churches and those who visit us, it is just such engagement with God in creation where they feel the claim of God upon their lives. That very human engagement with creation is also at the heart of many scriptures—especially in the creation psalms of the Hebrew Scripture. Get outside at night, look up, and become a psalmist.

Supplies:

- artwork: "No Traveller's Borne" by Jess, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401

With members of your family, with a group from the church, or alone, step out some night and look at the sky. In city or countryside, what do you see? Speak what you see as a prayer. Say, "God, I see . . ." and then name what is before you—city lights, black sky, the grey of clouds, sparkling stars. Perhaps after telling God all you see, you will finally become silent. Take a moment and wonder, "God, what do I discover about you as I look into the heavens?" Then listen.

When you return to a place where there is light or with the aid of a flashlight, read Psalm 19. ("The heavens are telling the glory of the God . . .") How does the psalmist express some of your own discoveries about God in viewing the night sky? How did the psalmist's encounter with creation touch other aspects of the psalmist's life? What was your prayer after looking at the night sky? What was the psalmist's prayer?

Enrich your prayer and viewing of the night sky by viewing the painting "No-Traveller's Borne" by Jess. The artist Jess, who lived between 1923 and 2004, was a scientist for whom creation mattered. He originally worked on the Manhattan Project where the atomic bomb was created. Out of a keen awareness of the threat to creation, he left his field of science and entered fully into the life of an artist. In 1968, he painted "No-Traveller's Borne." Notice that the image is not of a specific planet or any real space; rather it is a generic imaginative universe. Threatened by what might happen to all creation, he imagined a new universe. He increasingly became committed to caring for creation and the rights of all people. His meditation on creation made a difference in his world and what he did with his life. Look at the painting. Ask a question similar to what you asked in viewing the night sky: *O God, what do I discover about you as I look into this image of the heavens?* Out of the outdoor worship experience, your contemplation of Psalm 19, and your viewing Jess' take on creation, express your own prayer to God. Like the viewing of the heavens by the psalmist and Jess, what difference can it make in your own life? Conclude praying with words such as these: *O God of the heavens and earth, keep us looking up, listening for you. Your heavens do tell us of your glory. Thank you, Creating God. Amen.*

Following the Church Year

In worship, we most powerfully move through the church year. At each step along that journey, scripture, the holy texts of the season, leads the way. Many congregations are guided along that journey through the use of a lectionary. The lectionary recommends Bible readings for each Sunday. The most used lectionary by many congregations is the Revised Common Lectionary. Learn more about it and see the listing of readings at <http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/index.html> or <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>. In this Faith Practice online resource for worship, scripture references included in the Revised Common Lectionary are noted.

For more information about the connections between scripture, worship, and the themes of the church year, link to the resource sheet “Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship,” Attachment: Activity Supplement, at the end of this Worship, Music, Art, and Story setting, [scripture-worship-discovery-activitiesupplement.pdf](#).

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

Vital worship is a holy meeting of the living presence of God and the honest longings and hopes of our lives, the world's life. Spirit meets and transforms humanity. The wonderful Bible passage about incarnation, the Word-made-flesh, in John 1:14 points to Christianity's claim that the living Christ is present in humanity and in creation. The fullness and best of scripture is embodied in Christ, who lives today in our world and in the body of Christ, the church.

When this body of Christ gathers for worship, we can experience the embodiment of Christ, the Living Word. We also honor the embodied lives of those who gather and those for whom we pray and are called to care. Engaging scripture in worship—through sermon, testimony, prayers, music, and even silence—can invite us to practice paying attention to the presence of God and to the embodied lives of people today. We can both be questioned by and question scripture. We can both be challenged by and challenge scripture. We can be made into a new people—people of the Word made flesh.

This Scripture Exploration includes nine different suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The suggested activities under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with the Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your own personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The three suggestions listed under Discerning and Deciding include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three activities, for Sending and Serving,

point to the closing time in worship and will offer worship ideas for blessing others and for calling the congregation to acts of God’s justice and compassion. They will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

The Gospel of John gives us an image of God as creative Word living among us. God is not remote or far off; God is present in the world with us. The divine lover, “the Word become flesh,” is intimately involved in our human experience. Encounter with scripture invites us into dialogue with God, who dwells with us. Such encounters may heal or challenge, delight or disrupt, comfort or transform. When we hear scripture as a community, we discern its life-giving word for us. We reconcile the ways it has been misused and distorted with its power to create new life.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
John 1:1-14
2 Kings 2:1-14

Leader Preparation

To assist in prayerfully preparing yourself as a worship planner and preacher, check out Activity 1 and 2. As you begin this Exploration, offer this prayer or one of your own:

*Living Word, Ever-speaking God,
 open my ears, my eyes, my mind and heart
 so your word may become
 the way of life.
 Speak, God, speak.
 Amen.*

You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann’s book of prayers, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar’s engagement with scripture while teaching the Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Guide My Feet: A Song to Pray All Week

Leader preparation: Prayer can support us as we discover God’s Word. There are many ways to pray. Praying through song is an ancient tradition found not only in Christianity, but also in other religions. Through the use of a few simple words or sounds repeated over and over, we open ourselves for an intimate encounter with God. We make it possible to receive whatever it is that God desires for us: new insights, encouragement, perhaps serenity, perhaps courage. Through all of history, people have sung prayers. Sometimes they are called mantras. Many people are familiar with the prayer songs of Taize or songwriter Stephen Iverson.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Guide My Feet”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-WVlppNBls>
- (optional) for more background: for a civil rights era recording see
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXBAbMBmt24>

The chants of those who were enslaved and songs of the Civil Rights movement in the United States are reminders of how people have prayed with song during times of trial. Even in ordinary times, such songs can serve as powerful prayer. One of these, “Guide My Feet,” was a prayer of hope and courage in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Kwami Ture (Stokely Carmichael) speaks in his biography of the ways the song was sung and used in the movement: “‘Guide my feet, Lord, while I run this race, for I don’t want to run this race in vain’ while the police and the Klan were driving by the church flashing their headlights. Often sung at the end of a prayer, it began with a leader singing ‘Guide my feet . . .’ and the people joining in ‘while I run this race.’ The occasion, the times, could determine the words. The next time around the leader might sing ‘Hold my hand . . .’ or ‘Hear my prayer . . .’” A child suggested the words “Wheel with me . . .” acknowledging that some race in wheelchairs. This song can be a prayer for everyone, every day, in each person’s faith journey.

Here is a suggestion to use “Guide My Feet” as a prayer song. You might use it for your daily prayer for a week or more. You might use it as a preparation for scripture study or sermon and worship preparation.

To prepare yourself for this prayer-song, find a version of it. For a performance by First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn Choir at NYU, 2009, link to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-WVlppNBls>.

Once you have learned the song, begin singing it to yourself. Begin by using the traditional verses you have found. Experience the various verses in any order,

starting with “Guide my feet, while I run this race;” or “Hold my hand while I run this race, or “Lord, guide my feet.” There are many versions, but they all end with “for I don’t want to run this race in vain.”

Now you are ready. Close your eyes. Begin singing to yourself (either aloud or in your mind). Pause between verses if you wish. Feel free to let other words emerge from your heart, perhaps in response to the tasks ahead. For example, you might feel like singing “Give me courage, while I run this race” or “Keep me focused” You’ll find this song might well up in your heart through the day, through the week, and take many forms. You can sing it anywhere, anytime, by yourself or with others. Let it be your prayer of preparation.



② So You Are a Scripture Reader

Leader preparation: In worship, the one who reads scripture literally embodies it. How we read scripture matters and may deeply touch those who hear it. The care and prayer we take in preparing to read scripture is evident to those who worship.

Supplies:

- “So You Are Scripture Reader,” Attachment: Activity 2
- “Soaking in Scripture: Memorization and Public Reading,” at http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/scripture_memory.php

When scripture is prayerfully read, familiar passages become new, and passages never heard before surprise us with God’s word for today. For those who are readers, those who live with a passage through a week, scripture reading isn’t simply an obligation, but rather a meaningful spiritual practice. How does your congregation prepare and train those who are scripture readers on Sunday? The Attachment is a draft of guidelines for reading from the Bible in worship. Please adapt it to your own congregation’s practice and tradition.

For more information about reading scripture in worship, link to Joan Huyser-Honig’s article “Soaking in Scripture: Memorization and Public Reading,” at http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/scripture_memory.php. See also Clayton J. Schmit’s *Public Reading of Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), at <http://www.abingdonpress.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=9780687045372>.

③ Get the Word Out! Laity Looking Toward Sunday

Leader preparation: Clergy often live with a scripture text for an entire week before preaching about it on a given Sunday. Laity can take that weekly journey as well.

Supplies:

- The Revised Common Lectionary, <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>
- “Painted Prayerbook: Word & Image & Faith,” <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

If you live with a scripture text for an entire week, when Sunday rolls around, the scripture is fully alive in your heart and mind. Both clergy and laity have prayed and considered the Word. Here are some ways to get the Word out for your entire congregation to prepare for Sunday:

- Post the upcoming readings on your website and in newsletters and worship bulletins.
- Invite a few diverse members of the church to lunch for conversation about the passages for the next Sunday.
- If you use the Revised Common Lectionary to select Bible readings for the upcoming Sunday, invite laity to read the passages and prayers and view art online at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>.
- If you use the Revised Common Lectionary, invite laity to view Jan Richardson's "Painted Prayerbook: Word & Image & Faith" during the week. It offers a fresh devotion and creative images. See <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>.
- In church meetings during the week before Sunday, draw upon next Sunday's sermon/worship Bible passages for reflection, testimony, and prayers.
- Post next week's Bible passage in a prominent place in the foyer of worship space or fellowship hall. Invite people to stick notes with any comments, questions, or connections they might have. Invite children and youth to post their own notes, doodles, or graffiti.
- Print up "scripture cards" that include the scripture text for the coming week, a prayer, and perhaps question. People can pick up the cards following worship and then keep the card before them throughout the following week.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4. Verse by Verse

Leader preparation: This is an approach for several people to hear scripture in an interactive way that will allow for imagination to work and for insights to be shared. Although the focus for this session is John 1:1–14, this method can work with other scriptures.

Supplies:

- Bibles (preferably different translations)
- candle with matches or lighter
- meditative music

Prepare a circle of chairs with a place in the center for a candle to be lighted. Have enough copies of the scripture for all. Decide beforehand where to divide the verses. Prepare a piece of meditative music to be played in the background. It should be long enough to provide time for reflection and not "run out." Here are examples: The music of Chinese composer Zhang Ying (<http://www.zhangyingmusic.com>), Indian flute music by V. K. Raman as heard on "Music for Deep Meditation" (<http://www.innersplendor.com/classical-indian-flute.html>), or "Light that Dispels Darkness" or "Inner Awakening" (samples at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/mfdm6>).

Have participants sit in a circle and give them the directions for the exercise. Tell them that after the candle has been lighted and the music begins, they will begin reading the scripture around the circle, each person taking a phrase, and the next person waiting a few seconds (the length of a slow breath) before she or he reads the next line. Tell them to remain silent after the reading, and reflect. When this is completed, ask the readers to share a word, an image, an idea, an emotion that they felt during the reading.

It may be useful (an alternate way) to do two readings, the first without pauses, and then give directions (as above) to do it again with the breath pauses and sharing reactions. This method is intended to help participants to go deeper into the experience through two hearings.

For your use, here is a version of John 1:1–14 from *The New Testament and Psalms, An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
The Word was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through the Word,
and without the Word not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in the Word was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the deepest night,
and the night did not overcome it.
There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
He came as a witness to testify to the light,
so that all might believe through him.
John was not the light, but came to testify to the light.
The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
The Word was in the world,
and the world came into being through the Word;
yet the world did not know the Word.
The Word came to what was made,
and the Word's own people did not accept the Word.
But to all who received the Word, who believed in the name of the Word,
power was given to become children of God,
who were born, not of blood
or of the will of the flesh or of human will,
but of God.
And the Word became flesh
and lived among us,
and we have seen the Word's glory,
the glory as of a parent's only child,
full of grace and truth.

This exercise can be used by a planning group that is considering how to use the scriptures in worship or as an actual worship experience. It can also be a way of deepening an engagement with the scripture and be the starting point for discussion. Here are a couple of questions to get started: Did reading the scripture this way feel different from simply reading it by yourself or hearing one person read? If so, how? Did the version (translation) give you a different perspective on the reading?

5 The Illuminated Bible: Pictures

Leader preparation: Prayers of illumination were offered in Activity 3 of the Discovery Exploration. There it is explained that “illumination” is a word that describes how God’s Word can shine on our world. For centuries, people have responded to God’s words and light by doing some of their own illuminating. People of faith have embellished the written text of the Bible with pictures and paintings, making the words shine in gold with vibrant color images. Consider inviting people of all ages to illuminate Bible verses that they treasure or that are used in Sunday’s worship.

Supplies:

- paper
- markers, crayons, colored pencils

A beautiful contemporary version of an illuminated Bible is the wonderful Saint John’s Bible. View it online at <http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/Explore.aspx?VID=3&ID=4>. But also invite people of all ages to engage in “illuminating” the words of scripture. Invite children or youth to illuminate a central verse from the scripture to be used in Sunday worship. Create a giant page from the Bible and invite them to illustrate it. Post the illuminated page in the foyer of the worship space on the wall or on an easel. You could also invite a fabric artist in your congregation to create a large banner version of an illuminated scripture to hang in the worship space. Notice the illuminated Bible project online at <http://www.illuminatedbible.com/creation.htm>.

6 Passing the Mantle: A Celebration of Baptism and Baptismal Renewal

Leader preparation: The story of the prophet Elijah conveying the blessing, the mantle, of ministry to the younger Elisha is a splendid scripture that can undergird services that include baptisms (infant, child, youth, or adult), confirmation, baptismal renewal, church membership, or church leadership dedication. This passage, 2 Kings 2:1–2, is also a powerful passage to be used on Sundays during a time of pastoral change. For example, the Pastoral Search Committee of Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria, Virginia, built a service around this passage as they shared how God had moved among them as they discerned the next called pastor for their congregation.

Supplies:

- Bible

The passage is also used in the Revised Common Lectionary on the fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8), Year C. If your congregation follows the lectionary, consider that as a day when the congregation renews its baptism—its calling to pick up the mantle of ministry.

Here are selected ideas for worship based on the passage.

A Call to Worship

One: Enter this holy place with joy!
 Here, from generation to generation,
 God has given hope to one after another.
 Today, God blesses and transforms one more time.
All: Amazing God,
 Pour out your Spirit once again in the waters of baptism,
 in words of faith, in songs of joy, and in prayers of hope.
One: God, bless us and transform us one more time.

All: God of the past and future, call us to a new day.
 You invite us to be people in our time and place.
 Let us pass your mantle of ministry from one to another.
 God, bless us and transform us one more time.
 Let us worship the living God!

Prayer of Confession and Words of Assurance

(To be prayed in unison.)

O God, you hold all the world’s children in your arms.
 We face you and them.
 Before such love, such light,
 uncover any neglect, doubt, violence, fear, or sin.
 Reveal all the places of despair and brokenness
 in our personal and church life, in our national and global life.
 Tender and Just God, forgive us and lift us up in your love.
(Silent confession)

Assurance

One: Dear friends, “God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever,
 and God’s faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 100:5).
 Children of the Living God, you are forgiven. Live new lives of God’s love and
 justice. And the peace of God be with you.
All: And also with you.

Introduction to Baptism or Statement of Purpose

*(May be used as the introduction for the sacrament. Additional words and prayers for baptism may be found in *Chalice Worship*, pp. 26–32; *The New Century Hymnal*, p. 31; *Celebrate God’s Presence: A Book of Service for The United Church of Canada*, p. 326; or your denomination’s book of worship.)*

From the first day we were born, God gave us life and breathed God’s spirit into each of us. At baptism, like the water that pours over us, God pours out God’s spirit and love again. We join our lives to Jesus Christ—going down in the waters and coming up in new life. Touched by water, we become sisters and brothers to all those who are baptized. Today, God places the mantle of ministry and discipleship upon us. Together, young and old with all kinds of people, we are united in Jesus Christ and join in the work of God’s realm of love and justice. Who is to be baptized into Christ this day? *(Name the candidate for baptism, and continue with the baptismal liturgy of your tradition.)*

Passing the Mantle—A Sign of Baptismal Renewal

Many congregations follow baptism with a time when others who have been baptized recall their own baptism. They often touch water—recalling God’s act and call in their own lives. Confirmation, church membership, and dedication of church leadership are also moments of baptismal renewal. As another sign of baptismal renewal for these rites, you might place a “mantle” on each person with the words, “Take on the mantle of God. Live life full of faith!” The mantle might be a stole-like cloth or even a brightly colored strip of crepe paper.

Hymn suggestions for this Sunday

- “This Is a Day of New Beginnings”
- “Great Work Has God Begun in You”
- “I Come with Joy”
- “Standing at the Future’s Threshold”
- “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me”
- “We Will Take What You Offer”
- “Send Me”

Sending & Serving Activities

**7 Go and Do Justice: Singing Micah 6:8**

Leader preparation: The familiarity of Micah 6:8 is probably due to its appropriateness to many people in many times and places. Micah might well have been speaking to our times as many wonder what to do in the midst of visible injustices in their communities and in the world. In just such a time, Micah posed the question of how God wants us to behave.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Every Step of the Way,” Attachment: Activity 7
- song: “What Does the Lord Require of You?” <http://www.strathdeemusic.com/music.htm>

To paraphrase in modern English: “God has told you, O humankind, what is good, and asks only that you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” To follow this mantra can provide the direction many need today. To sing it in worship is a way of sending people out with hope and confidence that they are following God’s way. It is surprising that there aren’t more songs that have been written to this compelling text. Here are two, however, that can be utilized in a service of worship.

Christopher Grundy made Micah 6:8 into a prayer that can be sung, “Every Step of the Way.” The song can easily be taught to the congregation to sing at the end of a service, or it could be sung by a soloist or singing group. An accompaniment version of the song is available at https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1372420892?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=26881&store_id=1401.

Another song that some in the congregation might already know is another wonderful choice for a sending song after a blessing or benediction. “What Does the Lord Require of You?” by Jim Strathdee can be found in his songbook *Sunshine in the Morning* and on the CD by the same name. This song is written to be sung as a round, and once the worshiping community learns the easy parts, it can be sung at the close of worship. It does not take highly skilled singers to lead it. One way of teaching it is to have three singers sing the whole song together, teach each part of the song to the gathered community, and then each singer bring in part of the group at the right moment, singing their own part. For an example of a church using the song, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmjrORKgwU8&feature=related>.

8 Carry the Light: An Idea for Closing Worship

Leader preparation: Light is a central image in scripture. John 1:6–9 says John the Baptist is the announcer of the one who was the true Light. We get a picture of God as the Word who sends Light so that the Word can be seen or revealed. As this introduction to the Book of John (called the Prologue) continues, we hear that John is not the light, but tells people that Jesus will come to be the Light of the world. We hear about light throughout scripture, and Jesus himself (Matthew 5:14) tells people, “You are the light of the world.”

Supplies:

- Bible

It is no wonder that songs, pictures, and poems are filled with images of light. We ask God to send light, we ask Jesus to be our light, we pray for enlightenment. We use lights in worship to symbolize the presence of God—candles are lit at the beginning of worship; we have candle-lighting at Christmas to welcome the Christ Child; some churches light a Paschal candle at Easter to symbolize the light of Christ that continues to light the world; candles are given to newly baptized to symbolize the light of Christ in them. Songs that have images of light are many. “This Little Light of Mine” and Jim Strathdee’s “You Are the Light of the World” are but two examples of hundreds. The Prologue to John’s gospel reminds us that it was Jesus who was the light, and just like John, we are reflections of the true light. The light in us is the light of Christ. And Jesus has asked us to share that light with the whole world. Here is an idea for worship planners:

Step 1: Examine these questions and ideas: As you look at your worship design, consider what feelings are created by bringing the light into the church. In many churches a person (an acolyte) comes in at the beginning of the worship service and lights candles. Sometime at the end of the service, the candles are extinguished. What would happen if the lights were somehow carried out of worship? What might that symbolize? How might that happen? Where would it end up? Might you be able to use a different kind of candle, like a votive to take out? Be creative. There are certainly many ways to try this.

Step 2: Think about what music and prayers might work around this theme in worship. Here are suggestions that could be used for a sending song at the end of worship. In the worship planning group, examine the words and then try them out in preparation for worship.

- “Let It Shine” and “Carry the Light” For an accompaniment version of “Let it Shine,” link to https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/2039325877?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=29521&store_id=1401. For an accompaniment version of “Carry the Light,” link to https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/2039325877?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=29441&store_id=1401.
- “Arise, Your Light Is Come” (This is not only an Epiphany hymn, but it can symbolize the sharing of God’s light all the time.)
- “I Am the Light of the World” (In a similar way, although there is mention of Christmas, this need not be thought of as just for Christmas.)

There are many other possibilities for songs. Look at the song resources available in your church or online.

This sending prayer could be said before the singing of one of these sending songs and the carrying out of the light.

One: O God of Light, we are but reflections of your brilliance.
Many: Help us to reflect your Wisdom for the world.
One: O God of Light, you have illumined your Word for our lives.
Many: Help us to share the Word with others.
One: O God of Light, we need your light to find our way,
Many: Lead us in the ways you want us to go. Amen.



9 Journey to Bethlehem: A Christmas Eve Candlelight Service of Lessons, Carols, and Communion

Leader preparation: The Festival of Lessons and Carols is a popular Christmas Eve liturgy that interweaves Bible readings with carols. Scripture is at the heart of the service. The origins of the service are British and Anglican dating back to 1880. It was made especially made popular by Kings College in Cambridge beginning in 1918. For more information link to <http://americanpublicmedia.publicradio.org/programs/festival/>.

Supplies:

- Festival of Lessons and Carols <http://americanpublicmedia.publicradio.org/programs/festival/>
- “Rethinking the Festival of Lessons and Carols” <http://www.dioceseof-newark.org/vox20197.html>
- “Journey to Bethlehem: A Candlelight Service of Lessons, Carols, and Communion,” Attachment: Activity 9

Currently, attention has been brought to how Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) in the service is inappropriately used to directly point to Jesus—ignoring the Jewish context of the readings. See John S. Spong’s article “Rethinking the Festival of Lessons and Carols.” The link is a version of the service that combines several popular aspects of Christmas Eve services: lighting the Christ Candle, lessons and carols, Holy Communion, and candle lighting. It does not emphasize the Hebrew Scripture readings.

The service begins in dim lights with a manger/crèche at the front of the worship space. As the service begins, the congregation prays the call to worship as a child comes forward to light the Christ candle. Later, other children are invited to place straw in the manger. At the conclusion of the service, there is the option for the entire congregation to light candles. (For safety reasons, you may choose to select a few to come up front and light candles during the singing of “Joy to the World.”) The service may also begin with using “Light of the World.” An accompaniment version of the song is available at https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/955032462?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=28541&store_id=1401. To hear the melody for “Light of the World,” link to www.ucc.org/music-arts/sing-prayer-and-praise/listen-to-music-from-sing.html. See the attachment for a version of “A Candlelight Service of Lessons, Carols, and Communion” that you may adapt for use in your congregation.

Following the Church Year

For more information on the themes and texts of the church year, read Sidney D. Fowler’s article “Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship” under “Following the Church Year” in the Discovery Exploration. The activities in this Scripture Exploration link with several days in the Church Year and readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Draw upon them as you plan worship and preaching:

- Christmas Eve, Years A, B, and C: See Activity 9, “Journey to Bethlehem: A Christmas Eve Candlelight Service of Lessons, Carols, and Communion”
- Christmas Day, Years A, B, and C: See Activity 4, “Verse by Verse,” and Activity 8, “Carry the Light: An Idea for Closing Worship,” based on John 1:1–14.

- Epiphany 4, Year A: See Activity 7, “Go and Do Justice: Singing Micah 6:8.”
- Epiphany 5, Year A: See Activity 8, “Carry the Light: An Idea for Closing Worship” based on Matthew 5:14
- Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8), Year C: See Activity 6, “Passing the Mantle: A Celebration of Baptism and Baptismal Renewal,” based on 2 Kings 2:1–2.

Attachment: Activity 2

So You Are Scripture Reader

We are grateful that you are willing to serve as Scripture Reader for this coming Sunday. We believe it is an especially important ministry to our congregation. In the gospel of John, we discover that in Jesus the "Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). God has called you, on this Sunday, to embody and speak that living Word once again. You are a prayerful presence in worship. We believe God called you and will be with you as read scripture.

Sometimes, there are words in the scripture readings that are unfamiliar to you. If you don't know how to pronounce the word, check online at <http://netministries.org/Bbasics/BBwords.htm>. You can "hear" how to say most of those tough Bible words.

For further information or questions, please contact _____. (include name of pastor, chair of deacons, or other contact person, as well as their phone number and email address.) The following suggestions describe the common tasks for reading scripture.

Prayerfully prepare for Sunday.

- Early on in the week before you read, find out the assigned Bible reading or readings for Sunday. **Begin becoming familiar** with the stories and passages. How do you personally connect with the scriptures? What might God be saying to your congregation through these passages? In prayer, ask God to be with you as prepare to read and actually read. Be silent and know God is with you.

Arrive early for worship.

- Meet with others involved in worship. The worship leader or pastor may the worship service and any details about the readings one more time. Those who will lead worship may share a **brief time in prayer**.

For those who include a responsive psalm as a reading for the day, invite the congregation to responsively pray and sing the psalm for the day.

- Smile and introduce yourself to the congregation. Then say something like, "Let us **listen for the Word of God today** through scripture."
- The psalms are ancient prayers of both the Hebrew and Christian communities. Ask the congregation to turn to the psalm. Depending on the practice in your congregation, invite the congregation to pray and sing the psalm responsively.

Read the other scriptures for the day.

- **Introduce each reading for the day with simple words as** "The reading from the Hebrew Scripture is from the prophet Isaiah" or "Our gospel reading this morning is from the book of Matthew." Please, do not state the reference numbers (they are usually listed in the bulletin as are the versions of the Bible that are being used.) From time to time, the pastor or preacher may have included a brief introduction to a passage. In the pre-worship meeting, double-check to see if that might be the case.
- Enjoy and authentically speak the words of scripture. Psalm 119:103 addresses God saying "How sweet is your word to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" Cherish the words—God is speaking again through these texts. Before actually reading, you might take in a prayerful breath. Take your time and look up from time to time.
- Conclude your reading by looking up at the congregation and saying the following words or one's from your own tradition: "**This is the Word of God. . . Thanks be to God!**" "**May God bless our understanding from the holy scriptures,**" "**Holy Wisdom, Holy Word,**" or, after the reading from the gospel "**This is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Praise to Christ, the Word.**"

Prepared by Sidney D. Fowler for Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria VA. 2010

Attachment: Activity 7

Every Step of the Way

$\text{♩} = 128$

F C/E Dm C B \flat Dm/A C/G Gsus G

Cmaj 9 G/B Am Am/G

Dm 7 Gsus G C G/B

Am Am/G Dm 7

Gsus G Em 7 F C \sharp dim Dm 7 Gsus

G F

Dm 7 C/E F/G C

Help me do the jus - tice to be
done to - day. Help me love kind -
ness in all I do and say.
Help me walk hum - bly with you, O God I pray
ev - 'ry step of the way,
ev - 'ry step of the way.

Based on Micah 6:8.

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Music arrangement: Christopher Grundy and Gregory Milton
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Attachment: Activity 9



Journey to Bethlehem:

A Candlelight Service of Lessons, Carols, and Communion

The Festival of Lessons and Carols is a popular Christmas Eve liturgy that interweaves Bible readings with carols. Scripture is at the heart of the service. The origins of the service are British and Anglican dating back to 1880. It was made especially popular by King's College in Cambridge beginning in 1918. For more information link to <http://americanpublicmedia.publicradio.org/programs/festival/> or <http://www.canticanova.com/articles/feedback/arte62.htm>.

Currently, attention has been brought to how Hebrew Scripture in the service is used inappropriately to point directly to Jesus—ignoring the Jewish context of the readings. See John S. Spong's article "Rethinking the Festival of Lessons and Carols" at <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox20197.html>. The following service combines several popular aspects of Christmas Eve services: lighting the Christ Candle, lessons and carols, Holy Communion, and candle lighting. It does not emphasize the Hebrew Scripture readings.

The service begins in dim lights with a manger at the front of the worship space. As the service begins, the congregation prays the call to worship as a child comes forward to light the Christ candle. Later, other children are invited to place straw in the manger. At the conclusion of the service, there is the option for the entire congregation to light candles. (For safety reasons, you may choose to select a few to come up front and light candles during the singing of "Joy to the World.")

Carol and hymn suggestions are listed from *The New Century Hymnal* (TNCH), *Chalice Hymnal* (CH), and *Voices United* (VU). The service may also begin with using "Light of the World," #147 in *Sing! Prayer and Praise*. To hear the melody line for "Light of the World," link to <http://www.ucc.org/music-arts/sing-prayer-and-praise/listen-to-music-from-sing.html>.

A DRAFT OF THE SERVICE

PREPARING AND PRAYING AT THE MANGER

PRELUDE

WORDS OF WELCOME

SONG OF WAITING

(You may use an instrumental-only version of a carol such as "What Child Is This," "Silent Night," or "Once in Royal David's City," that traditionally begins Festivals of Lessons and Carols. You may conclude this musical portion with the song "Light of the World, #147 In *Sing! Prayer and Praise*. The song will function as a sung response in the Call to Worship.)

Attachment: Activity 9 (continued)

CALL TO WORSHIP: COME TO THE MANGER, COME TO CHRIST'S LIGHT

One: This is the night. Look, the waiting is over.
 Even now, a light appears.
 You who wait in the shadows,
 you who are cold, you with little hope,
 you who are ready to sing, to dance,
 to giggle with Good News—all draw near.
 Look, the light shines!

**All: This is the night.
 Christ, kindle your light.**

(The lighting of the Christ Candle.)

One: Come to the manger!
 At this place, on this night, the hopes and fears of all the years meet.
 A child is born to us.
 All those on earth and heaven, rejoice, be glad this holy night.

**All: Christ, kindle your light.
 This is the night.**

All (singing):
(The congregation may sing the refrain of "Light of the World," #147 in Sing! Prayer and Praise.)

Light of the world in us re-veal, All that our eyes can nev-er see.
 Show us a world, joy-ful and free, Light of the world.
 Light of the world bring last-ing peace. Jus-tice and mer-cy for the weak.
 Show us the paths our lives must take, Light of the world.

PRAYERS AT THE MANGER AND PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR

What prayers do people bring this evening? Offer prayers for the people and allow silence to identify the prayers they bring to this night.)

PASSING THE PEACE OF CHRIST

(Invite the congregation to turn one another, introduce themselves, and offer words such as "May God's peace be yours.")

HEARING AND SINGING AT THE MANGER

CHILDREN PREPARE THE MANGER

(Children are invited to come forward and place straw in and around the manger.)

First Lesson	<i>God's people long for hope. "Silent Night"</i>	Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 #134, TNCH; #145, CH; #67 VU
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Second Lesson	<i>The angel Gabriel speaks to Mary of Jesus. "Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming"</i>	Luke 1:26-38 #127, TNCH; #160 CH; #8, VU
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Attachment: Activity 9 (continued)

not in the powerful and the extraordinary
but in weakness and the familiar:
in a baby; in bread and wine.

Thank you
for offering, at journey's end, a new beginning;
for setting, in the poverty of a stable,
the richest jewel of your love;
for revealing, in a particular place,
your light for all nations. . . .

Thank you
for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread,
where the empty are filled,
and the filled are emptied;
where the poor find riches,
and the rich recognize their poverty;
where all who kneel and hold out their hands
are unstintingly fed.

Thank you for Jesus—the child of hope, born for all.
So we join with angels singing, shepherds rejoicing, and
all of heaven and earth to proclaim this holy birth.

All: (All sing refrain to “Angels We Have Heard on High,” #125, TNCH; #155 CH; #38 VU)

**Glo___ri-a, in ex-cel-sis De-o,
Glo___ri-a, in ex-cel-sis De-o.**

One: Holy are you, known in Jesus, Babe of Bethlehem,
Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace,
Teacher, Savior, Friend, Living Lord.

We remember when Jesus ate with his friends,
He took bread and after blessing it, broke it, said
“Take eat this is my body given to you.
Eat this in remembrance of me.”

Then he took a cup and, giving thanks,
passed it to his friends saying:
“Drink. This is the cup of the new covenant
which is poured out for you and many.
Drink this in remembrance of me.”

Ever-present God, around this table
we are united in Jesus, our Emmanuel.
We are no longer strangers. We are sisters and brothers all.
And so we declare:

Attachment: Activity 9 (continued)

All: Christ has come! Christ is here! Christ comes again and again!

BLESSING OF BREAD AND CUP

Sharing the Bread and Cup

(While the congregation communes, the congregation may sing additional favorite Christmas carols.)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION *(in unison)*

Holy God,
for this journey to manger and table,
for your bread of hope, your cup of blessing,
for Christ born to us this night,
thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LEAVING THE MANGER—REJOICING IN THE LIGHT

LIGHTING OF CANDLES

(While music plays, the congregation remains seated in meditation and prayer as candles are lit. For safety purposes, you may also have a few selected persons to come forward and light candles. After one's candle is lit, each carefully lights a neighbor's candle—passing the light from the Christ candle. During the time, people are invited to recall the visit to the manger.)

CAROL

"Joy to the World"

#132, TNCH; #143, CH; #59, VU

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

This service was prepared by Sidney D. Fowler for Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria VA.

The poem "Scandalous God" by Kate Compston is incorporated into the Communion prayer.

Kate Compston's "Scandalous God" in *Shine On, Star of Bethlehem*, page 111–12, compiled by Geoffrey Duncan. © in this compilation Christian Aid 2001, 2002, and 2004. Used by permission.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

Through scripture in worship God evokes a life of servant leadership from us. In worship, we are formed into followers of Christ. For example, as we journey through the church year, through Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, we hear the stories of Jesus' own journey from birth, to ministry, to death, and to resurrection. We join Jesus in those stories, and they become ours. In scripture we discover who Jesus was so we might be faithful disciples. Through sermon, prayer, music, and sacraments we are invited to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). We are called to live as disciples with Christ living in us, servants to others—compassionate, forgiving, generous, healing, courageous, living in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable.

This Discipleship Exploration includes nine suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The three activity suggestions under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with the Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The next three suggestions listed under Discerning and Deciding include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three activities, for Sending and Serving, point to the closing time in worship and offer worship ideas for blessing others and for calling the congregation to acts of God's justice and compassion. It will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

For the Christian, discipleship includes servant leadership, listening for God’s voice, responding to scripture, learning the practices of our faith, mentoring others, passing on the stories of our faith, and learning how to live with compassion and love. When we hear scripture, we must discern how to live into its teaching. As Christians, we believe that scripture makes a difference in our living. Encountering scripture is one way we discover how to live in Christ’s way.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Ruth 1
Acts 8:26–40

Leader Preparation

To assist in prayerfully preparing yourself as a worship planner and preacher, check out Activities 1 and 2 in each of the six Explorations in this practice of Encountering Scripture. As you begin this Discipleship Exploration, offer this prayer or one of your own:

*Faithful God,
At each step along life’s journey,
we make choices.
Even when choices seem limited,
when we feel powerless,
when we are weary,
we decide.
In our worship and work,
help us to choose you.
Keep us faithful, even as you are
faithful—
to choose you, our Way, our Truth,
our Life.
Amen.*

You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann’s book of prayers *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar’s engagement with scripture while teaching the Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Preparing for Worship: Putting on Servanthood

Leader preparation: Pastors and worship leaders often spend all week preparing for worship. When the day arrives for worship, just before the service begins, back in the office or foyer of the worship space, what holy practice do they do? Often prayer is shared. Also in the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran liturgical traditions, as priests or pastors “vest,” put on their clergy garments, many pray at each step. (For examples, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesting_prayers.) The prayerful putting on of a robe and stole is a holy and intentional reminder of the call to servanthood.

Supplies:

- (optional) vestments

Even if such a “vesting” ritual is not part of your tradition, a prayerful physical act of putting on some “garment of servanthood” sends clergy and worship leaders into worship aware of their holy calling. Many clergy wear stoles (a long thin band in the color of the day or season) that they first received at the time of their ordination. Stoles are also often linked to Bible passages about servanthood and calling. A stole becomes a “yoke” and a reminder of Matthew 11:9–30 (Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden light”). Or the stole becomes as the “towel” in the foot washing account in John 13:1–11 (“Then [Jesus] poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple’s feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”) Stoles remind us of the call to share others’ burdens and offer ourselves in Christ’s compassionate and just service.

A moment of silent prayer as a stole is put around one’s shoulders can assist one in deepening identity as a servant—whether preaching, praying, or presiding at Holy Communion or baptisms. And what about the choir? Do they put on robes? If they do, perhaps they too can prepare their hearts as they prepare their voices—offering a silent prayer as they “robe.”

If garments or stoles are not part of your tradition or are reserved for clergy, still consider what other possible physical reminders of servanthood you carry or put on as you enter worship. What about a lapel pin, a necklace, a cross? These are not intended as some kind of talisman or good luck charm such as a “rabbit’s foot,” but rather a vivid reminder of your call to discipleship. Chose such a physical symbol and let it call you to a prayer of dedication. More importantly, whether or not we put on something physical as a reminder, we are called “to put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14a) in our worship leadership, our acts of service, and our life of faith.

② Participatory Worship: Creating Worshipful Discipleship

Leader preparation: How are laity intentionally involved in worship in your congregation? For many denominations and congregations, clergy have been the up-front and center of worship for years. In some of those churches, lay participation was reserved only for the choir. Yet recently, especially in vital progressive congregations, there has been a shift. Increased participation by laity in all aspects of worship is a sign that something is going on—that God’s Spirit and Word are alive.

In Hal Taussig’s *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2006) and in Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sicking’s *From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2004), lively congregations were closely observed. Laity of all ages were fully engaged in worship. They were not passive observers, but worshipful active disciples. And they were engaged in all aspects of worship: reading scripture, planning worship, preaching from time to time, leading prayers, participating in the congregation’s passing of the peace and sharing joys and concerns, sharing and singing responses. Taussig notes a shift even in clergy’s perception of worship: “The ministers generally assume, in the last decade, that a worship service is not a good one unless it involves opportunities for everyone to make intentional and personal gestures and statements about who they are, what matters to them, and how they are connected to God” (*A New Spiritual Home*, p. 10).

Supplies:

- bulletin/order of worship

With a worship planning team or other interested laity, prayerfully examine your worship practices. Look over your order of worship and/or bulletin. Reflect using this question: O God, in what intentional ways are you calling the laity of our congregation to participate in worship? Week after week, in what actions, practices, and words are laity invited to participate? These are important embodied traditions. Are these traditions easy for new people to figure out and join in? What signals (followed or printed in a bulletin) indicate for new people what is to be said or done? What are simple ways to directly involve all people? For example, after the sermon there may be a time of silence and singing a meditative response, or laity may share joys and concerns as part of the People’s Prayer. When it comes to Holy Communion, what words and actions do laity do? Are laity regular readers of scripture and liturgy? Even simple responsive words following scripture reading can be important: “This is the Word of God.” “Thanks be to God.”

③ Reading Ruth: Taking a Stand for Love

Leader preparation: When we hear scripture read in worship, we can’t help but try to connect it with our own lives. The reading from the first chapter of Ruth tells the story of three women’s encounter with tradition and discerning how to express love and devotion to God in a tough situation. For love, Orpah returned home; yet for love, Ruth broke tradition and clung to Naomi and Naomi joined herself to Ruth. In your congregation, you may have people facing such a decision. When has someone in your congregation stood against or broken tradition for God’s call to love? Has someone participated in an act of civil disobedience for racial justice? Has someone who is gay or lesbian married the one they love, breaking the traditional practice of marriage? Has a child treated another child—who had been neglected or bullied by others—with kindness?

Supplies:

- Bible

If you chose to use Ruth 1 as a scripture for worship, or select it among the lectionary readings for Proper 26, Year B, invite whoever reads the passage to offer a brief statement about how he or she broke tradition for God’s call to love. After this testimony, suggest leading into the actual reading with words such as these: “God called me to love; God calls us to love. For God’s call and by God’s grace, it seems I broke tradition. God speaks to me in this passage from Ruth. May God speak to all of us today. Listen for the Word of God.”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 A Picture’s Worth of Bible Words: Viewing and Hearing the Story of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi

Leader preparation: Pictures can do far more than simply illustrate a Bible passage. As the old cliché goes, “Pictures are worth a thousand words.” Pictures have meaning on their own, and each of us looks at a picture and sees something different. God can speak to us through both words and images. When they are placed alongside one another, we can discover deeper meaning in both. A step-by-step approach is suggested below that you might follow in preparation for a sermon or for planning worship. The approach assumes that meaning evolves and deepens the more we know and the more we listen and watch for God.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake, <http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=1590989&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>
- Bible
- (optional) commentaries
- articles: “Ruth Resident Alien with a Face,” <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/68599.pdf>, and “Wherever You May Go,” <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/246/Wherever-You-Go-Oct-26Nov-1.aspx>

The following steps focus on praying, viewing William Blake’s painting “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab,” and reading the first chapter of the book of Ruth. The same approach will work with other passages and images. Adapt as you feel led.

Step 1: Pray and view the image for the first time. Take a moment and carefully examine the painting. What is the mood of the painting? What does it evoke from you? Why? What are other kinds of human situations that could be reflected by people taking the posture/physical form as in this painting? Summarize your insights and intuition by completing the following phrase with a series of single word answers. Several may come to your mind and heart. The words can be ones of emotion, such as “happy” or “sad,” or themes, such as themes “justice” or “compassion.” There are no correct answers. Suggest what comes to you out of your viewing. Just complete this phrase with those single words as often as you wish: This painting is about [word]. This painting is about [word]. This painting is about [word].

Step 2: Find out a bit about the image and the Bible passage. This painting is one image of twelve that the British artist and poet William Blake painted in 1795. Blake often drew upon both biblical themes and women in his paintings. The flowing gowns and color may convey the sensuousness and freedom that represented a break from what was traditional in that period. His art represents a break in traditional artistic style as much as the Bible story expresses a break in tradition as well. This is Blake's own interpretation of the time of decision of two sisters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, from Ruth 1:8–22. Both were foreign women, Moabites, who had married sons of the Hebrew woman Naomi. Upon the death of their husbands, tradition would have the women return to the homes of their own mothers. This painting is a dramatic depiction of the decisions that Ruth and Orpah made. Ruth broke the expected tradition and clung to her mother-in-law, Naomi, choosing to return to Naomi's home in Bethlehem. Orpah would return to her family's home in Moab. The painting seems to embody the verse: "Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her" (Ruth 1:14).

Look at the painting again. What shifts in meaning or mood are there for you after you know a bit more about the painting? What new words or themes would you use to complete the phrase: *This painting is about . . .*

Step 3: Hear the Bible passage. Read Ruth 1:8–22 aloud, pausing as you wish. Glance at the painting, then continue reading. What connects with you between the reading and the painting? What new insights might you have? Again complete the phrase: *This painting is about . . .*

If you wish, find out more about the story of Ruth from other commentaries and articles. For example, in Bonnie Miller-McLemore's article "Returning to the Mother's House: A Feminist Look at Orpah" in *The Christian Century* (April 17, 1991, 430), we gain a fresh perspective on God's work in Orpah: "Orpah has not chosen wrongly; she has chosen differently. The silence of God throughout allows us to ponder whether this God does not also go along with Orpah. She has encountered God and 'turned back.' God does bless Orpah: Naomi says to both daughters-in-law: 'May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have with the dead and with me'"(1:8b).

Also consider the online articles "Ruth Resident Alien with a Face" at <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/68599.pdf> or Kate Huey's "Wherever You May Go" at <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/246/Wherever-You-Go-Oct-26Nov-1.aspx>.

After considering commentary about the story, go back to the painting and say: *This painting is about . . .*

Step 4: Connect the painting and the passage with life today. Reflect on questions such as the following: When, where, and under what circumstances do people today seem to make decisions where their bodies might be positioned as are the ones in Blake's painting? Who in our world today seems to be the Naomis, the Ruths, the Orpahs? Who are the strangers, foreigners, outsiders who are making decisions to stay or go? How is God involved in those decisions? Take a moment of silence, then once again complete the phrase: *This painting is about . . .*

Step 5: Listen for God. Prayerfully reflect on these questions: What might God be saying to you and your congregation through this story and painting? What do you want to say to God because of the story and painting? What do you need to pray for or do as a result of gazing on that painting and hearing the scripture? Finally after a time of reflection and silence, conclude by praying: *O God, this painting is about . . . Thank you for opening me to your word and vision. Amen.*

Additional resources:

For a detailed analysis of artistic renderings of the book of Ruth, see Martin O’Kane’s “The Iconography of the Book of Ruth” in *Interpretation*, April 2010, 64/2, 130–45. Link to <http://www.interpretation.org/>. For additional visual images of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi, see <http://www.bible-art.info/Ruth.htm>. For more information about William Blake, link to <http://www.online-literature.com/blake/>.

For a one-session study of Ruth 1:1–18 for young adults, see Su Pak’s study “Acceptable Choices” in *Push It! Young Adults Engage the Bible*, edited by Sidney D. Fowler (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2001), 75–83. Link to http://www.amazon.com/Push-Young-Adults-Engage-Bible/dp/0829814167/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1283540342&sr=1-1.

5 Singing in a Foreign Land

Leader preparation: When people follow callings, whether they are from God or simply seeking a life goal, they can end up in foreign territory. Will they be accepted? Will they need to change their ways? Certainly out of love for her Ruth followed Naomi, her mother-in-law, to Judah, Naomi’s homeland. But what if we look at this story as more than unconditional love? What if we think of Ruth’s story in the context of needing to survive and needing to make compromises to do it? What must it be like to face possible rejection, to need to learn new ways, a new language? Naomi recognized this and tried to dissuade Ruth, but Ruth would not abandon her. If we do not lift up the difficult choice Ruth made, then we don’t have the whole story.

Supplies:

- song: “Wherever You Go” by David Haas, found in *Gather Comprehensive*, # 867, GIA Publications, 1993. Words and music by David Haas © 1993, GIA Publications, Inc. http://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=490
- song: “Wherever You Go” from Gregory Norbet Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont 1980 (Monks of the Western Priory); link to www.westonpriory.org/esales/wherever.html. Link to a performance of the work at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UskXbXU-6Nw>. Sheet music can be found at <http://www.hymnprint.net/index.cfm?go=cCatalog.showCatalogByComposer&search=N&composer=70>.
- song: “Covenant Hymn” (“Wherever you go I will follow”) by Rory Cooney © 1993 GIA, found in *Gather Comprehensive* and also at Hymnprint.net (GIA). Words by Rory Cooney, Music Gary Daigle © 1993, GIA Publications, Inc.
- song: “I’m Gonna Stick with You” by Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan on the album *Seeds of Faith*. Link to sound sample and CD information at <http://www.myspace.com/richardbruxvoortcolligan/music>. This is a great song for children of all ages.

Often the words “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die . . .” are sung at weddings to acknowledge the bond between married people. These

songs certainly work well for the occasion and are a reminder of what unconditional love looks like. But they should also be considered in the context of the story of the alienation that Ruth faced as an immigrant to a new culture and as a convert to Judaism as she followed her inner calling and love. If we want to hear the whole story, then we should also think of what Ruth gave up in order to survive.

Explore one or more of the songs listed in Supplies by singing them or listening to them. Then reflect on these questions:

- People have written songs to express the devotion of Ruth. What kind of song might express the feelings of Naomi? When had Naomi experienced a time of being an outsider?
- What other songs have come out of times when people found themselves in a foreign, perhaps unfriendly situation?
- Who today might face a life situation like Ruth's?

Try also using these as songs to accompany a reading from the Book of Ruth. The Bruxvoort-Colligan song would be excellent for telling the story to children.

6 Songs of Discipleship

Leader preparation: Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8:26–40) was called by the apostles to be a missionary and to care for those who were poor and sick. Just as he heeded God's calling, so he was a powerful force in attracting others to the faith. There are many songs about discipleship and calling that can help us to attune ourselves to listen for God's call. They portray images of following, going, and doing God's work, sharing the good news with others, and being Jesus' disciple.

Supplies:

- song: "The Summons" from the Iona Community in Scotland, <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/30338>
- song: "Thuma Mina" ("Send Me, Lord"), a Zulu song from South Africa, <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/thumamina.htm>

John Bell's "The Summons" is one good example of a song about discipleship. Consider putting together a worship service or a series of worship experiences on the subject of calling and discipleship. The following list contains songs from various cultures to experience how discipleship has been sung about around the globe. Look through the table of contents of your hymnbooks for more discipleship hymns.

- "Tú has venido a la orilla" ("You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore") from Spain, <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/lakeshore.htm>
- "Profetiza, Pueblo mío" ("You Shall Prophesy, All My People") from Mexico, <http://www.uua.org/publications/music/singingjourney/52328.shtml>
- "Send Me" by Bryan Sirchio from the United States (for an accompaniment version of the song, link to https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/2039325877?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=29641&store_id=1401)

For a fun experience, sing the old spiritual, "Children Go Where I Send Thee." It

is an African American spiritual often heard as a Christmas carol. It can be found in a variety of songbooks and hymnals, including *African-American Heritage Hymnal* #623 (GIA) and *Rise Up Singing* # 208, For more information and links, go to <http://wikipedia.org>.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Singing at Baptism

Leader preparation: The story of Philip the Evangelist and the Ethiopian court official (Acts 8:26–40) is an account of what took place in the early Christian church. Becoming a Christian consisted of embracing the story and participating in the sign of cleansing—baptism! Some came and studied with the Christian community and went through a process of catechism culminating in their baptism, often at an Easter vigil service. Others, like this unnamed Ethiopian who encountered one of the early missionaries, were caught up in the story of Jesus and baptized on the spot. Today baptism still occurs in a variety of ways. Some embrace belief spontaneously and want to be baptized; others go through a time of education, sometimes called the catechumenate. Some Christian communities baptize children; others only baptize believing adults. Some use sprinkling; some have pools. In the case of Philip and the Ethiopian, they used a river. Cold running water was thought to be the best in the early church.

Supplies:

- song: “Down to the River to Pray” There are various modern recordings of this song that a song-leader can listen to in order to lead the singing. <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/alisonkrauss/downtotherivertoprayer.html>
- song: “Wade in the Water” http://www.absolutelyrics.com/a/view/Eva-Cassidy/Wade_in_The_Water/
- song: “Take Me to the Water” This song is easy to do with one person calling out the verses or handing out song sheets. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If6i59NUfkk&feature=related>
- song: “Welcome, Child of the Promise” Ruth Duck’s wonderful baptism text is set to a contemporary, jazzy setting by Carlton Young in *Circles of Care* (Pilgrim Press, 1998).

Although baptism can be a private affair—as it seems to have been for Philip and the Ethiopian—most worshipping communities have found it to be a wonderful time to gather. Everyone celebrates a new member of the church. Some have found the beauty of affirming their baptism even when there is no new person being baptized. It is a time to celebrate life and experience the element of water—poured, splashed, sprinkled, seen, and felt. It is also a time when music can give voice to the community’s participation. Here are some baptismal songs for the congregation to learn. Some churches have found that singing the songs often, so they are memorized, or projecting the words on a screen, or at least putting the words on little song sheets will free people to move and enjoy the visual feast of faces and activity at the font. You might choose one song for gathering around the water, another at the water, and perhaps one following the actual baptism. Some churches use rain sticks and ocean drums during the singing or during the words of the liturgy to recall the image of water.

8 Worship Is Over, the Service Begins: Biblical Sending Forth

Leader preparation: The following passages invite the congregation to leave worship committed to God's biblical vision of discipleship, servanthood, justice, and compassion. Draw upon these scriptures—adapted to be used as a Benediction or Sending Forth—at the conclusion of worship.

Supplies:

- None

Frame the following passages in this way: Good people of faith, hear Gods call: (quote the passage). Go now living a new life of justice and compassion. Amen.

Learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

What does God require of you,
but to do justice, and love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

You are the light of the world. . .
Let your light so shine before others,
so that they may see your good works and give glory
to God in heaven. (Matthew 5:14,16)

Love the Lord your God
with all your heart, with all your soul,
with all you mind, with all your strength,
and love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:30–31)

Hear the word, hold fast with an honest and good heart,
and bear fruit with patient endurance. (Luke 8:15b)

My beloved, be steadfast, immovable,
always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know
that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.
Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another,
live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.
(2 Corinthians 13:11)

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy,
love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.
Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse;
but on the contrary, repay with a blessing.
It is for this you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:8, 9)

You might also use the following popular Sending Forth based on several scriptures:

Go out into the world in peace; have courage;
hold on to what is good; return to no one evil for evil;

strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak, and help the suffering;
honor all people; love and serve God,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Timothy 2:1; Ephesians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:13–22; 1 Peter 2:17)

9 Meeting the Word: Suggestions for Grounding the Church’s Meetings in Scripture

Leader preparation: Often church meetings begin and end with a prayer. This bookend of prayer is helpful. God does come in prayer. Yet, meetings that also take time to reflect on scripture, listening to God’s word in scripture, deepens the skill of listening for God’s word in the fullness of a meeting. Prayerful engagement with scripture during a meeting may open participants to understand discipleship and their work in new ways—especially grounded in God’s vision of the church.

Supplies:

- None

The method for biblical reflection may be simple, requiring little time, or involving more extended Bible study. For the simplest method, invite the meeting participants to close their eyes and be open to God during the reading of the passage. Ask them to listen for one connection—one word, image, question, concern, joy—that they make with the reading. Then have someone slowly read the passage aloud. Invite participants to share their response with a partner. Then ask, “Out of our hearing scripture, what might God want us to keep in our hearts and minds during this meeting?” Other methods for Bible reflection are described in Activity 4 in each of the six Explorations for the Faith Practice of Encountering Scripture.

The following scripture references may be especially helpful to prayerfully explore in church meetings. These Bible verses seem to easily connect with the mission and vision of the church.

Readings from the Gospels

- Matthew 5:13–16 (Salt and Light)
- Matthew 11:28–30 (My yoke is easy)
- Matthew 22:36–40 (Greatest Commandment)
- Matthew 25:34–40 (The Least of These)
- Matthew 28:18–20 (Great Commission)
- Mark 10:41–45 (Greatest is servant)
- Luke 4:18–19 (Spirit of the God is upon me)
- Luke 4:43–45 (Proclaim the Good News)
- John 4:23–24 (God is Spirit)
- John 10:14–18 (The Good Shepherd)
- John 13:34–35 (A New Commandment)
- John 20:21 (Peace be with you)

Readings from Acts of the Apostles

- Acts 1:6–14 (You will be my witnesses)
- Acts 2:41–47 (The early church devoted themselves to . . .)
- Acts 5:42–6:7 (Seven chosen to serve)

Readings from the Epistles

Romans 12:1–8 (Varieties of gifts)

Romans 15:1–7 (Please others, not yourselves)

1 Corinthians 12:12–27 (One body—many members)

2 Corinthians 5:17–6:1 (In Christ, a new creation)

Galatians 5:13–15 (Freedom or indulgence)

Galatians 6:1–2 (Bear one another's burdens)

Ephesians 2:19–22 (No longer strangers or aliens . . .)

Philippians 2:1–11 (Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ)

Colossians 3:12–17 (As God's chosen ones . . .)

Timothy 3:12–16 (Do not neglect the gift within you)

Following the Church Year

For more information on the themes and texts of the church year, read Sidney D. Fowler's article "Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship" under "Following the Church Year" in the Discovery Exploration. The preceding Discipleship Exploration activities link with several days in the Church Year and readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Draw upon them as you plan worship and preaching.

- Holy Thursday/Maundy Thursday, Years A, B, C: Activity 1, "Preparing for Worship: Putting on Servanthood" based on John 13:1–17.
- Proper 26, Year B: Activity 3, "Reading Ruth: Taking a Stand for Love;" Activity 4, "A Picture's Worth of Bible Words: Viewing and Hearing the Story of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi;" Activity 5, "Singing in a Foreign Land;" based on Ruth 1.
- Also, check out the various biblical benedictions suggested in Activity 8 "Worship Is Over, the Service Begins: Biblical Sending Forth." Many are appropriate throughout the church year.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Even in the most contemporary worship services, tradition undergirds liturgy. Although the language and media of worship may be fresh and speak to people of today, it flows out of ancient practices. Breaking bread, singing, praying, proclaiming, giving, confessing, forgiving, and praising—all are ancient practices lived through new expressions today. Especially scripture and the practice of using it were part of both early Jewish and Christian traditions. Recall Jesus at worship in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4). There, as he began his ministry, he read the words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus' embodiment of that scripture on that day in a new context brought a fresh understanding to the prophet's word. Today, scripture is read, sung, and preached, but it, too, is made alive in our day. We are linked to those who have proclaimed the Word in the past and to those who will bear the good news in the future. The ancient traditions of God's Word and worship are passed on through the ages (2 Timothy 1:1–14) by the Still-speaking God—bringing fresh life and hope to generation after generation.

This Exploration of Christian Tradition includes nine different suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The three activity suggestions listed under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with the Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your own personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The next three suggestions listed under Discerning and Deciding include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three suggested activities, for Sending and Serving, point to the closing time in worship and offer worship ideas for blessing. They will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

Encounters with God through scripture take many forms. Christian tradition offers a rich treasury of practices for personal, family, and community engagement with the Word. Over the centuries, scripture story has been read aloud in worship, sung through the Psalms, or enacted in medieval mystery plays. Scripture has been shared through mosaics, painting, dance, architecture, and sermons. Families have anchored their days in the sharing of scripture. Bold souls immersed in God’s word have sparked social change movements. Memorized passages have given courage to those who struggle. Our Reform tradition reminds us that all Christians have the privilege and responsibility to wrestle with God’s word and to give it new voice in our own lives.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 96
2 Timothy 1:1–14

Leader Preparation

To assist in prayerfully preparing yourself as a worship planner and preacher, check out Activity 1 and 2 in each of the six Explorations. As you begin this Christian Tradition Exploration, offer this prayer or one of your own:

*Eternal God,
From generation to generation,
you have passed on your way of love and
justice.
For those faithful ones who have come
before us, we thank you.
For those who follow us in your way, we
pray your grace and wisdom.
Now, in this time, among these people,
move among us once again.
Open us to your Word and Way today.
Make us alert to your movement among
us.
In your name we pray, Amen.*

You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann’s book of prayers, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar’s engagement with scripture while teaching Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Let the Words of My Mouth: A Prayer about the Words We Speak

Leader preparation: It’s traditional. Before the preacher dives into a sermon, many preachers pray, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and redeemer.” This prayer is an ancient petition found in Psalm 19. The preacher prays these words with the hope that the sermon that tumbles out of the mouth will be transformed into God’s word—a word of healing, compassion, justice, and peace. Yet, this practice of prayer before speaking should not be reserved for either the one who preaches from a pulpit or for a sermon. How might the holy preparation of the words we use in worship transform all our speaking, all the words we speak in the world? As worship planners and clergy, our work and prayers about words should transform all our speech. The Still-speaking God can transform all our speech. Our words, all of them, become a holy offering to God shared in compassion with the world

Supplies:

- Bible

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Psalm 19:14 emphasizes the deeply spiritual and liturgical offering of all our words and thoughts. Should we not only offer our worship words, but all the words we speak on the Altar-Rock God?

These are the words in my mouth;
these are what I chew on and pray.
Accept them when I place them
on the morning altar,
O God, my Altar-Rock,
God, Priest-of-My-Altar

Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006) 730–31.

Spend time during the week before Sunday’s worship and sermon praying that God might transform the words you are planning for Sunday into words and actions throughout the week. Pray the prayer of Psalm 19:14 often—perhaps use Nan Merrill’s version:

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
find favor in your Heart
O my Beloved, my strength and
my joy!

Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 33.

You or your congregation may also pray Psalm 19:14 by singing Eli Wilson Jr.'s "Acceptable to You." Link to a musical sample of the song at http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000VAX46G/ref=sr_1_album_1_rd?ie=UTF8&child=B000VB4FZY&qid=1283895716&sr=1-1.

② Passing the Children's Fire: Planning Worship with Children at Heart

Leader preparation: The Hopi American Indians have an ancient tradition called the "Medicine Wheel." The whole community sits around a circle to figure out important decisions. And at the center of the circle is the "children's fire." Next to the children's fire sit the grandfather and grandmother, the elders. When the community discerns something, they bring it to the children's fire and the elders. The Hopis ask the elders who guard the children's fire. If the elders decide that the request is not good for the children's fire, then the answer is "No." They are the only ones in the circle that have veto power.

Supplies:

- None

The request is tested by the children's fire. The grandparents' question is simple: "Does the request help or hurt the children?" Only if what they are deciding can pass the test of the children's fire—help or at least not hurt the children—can it be done. For more information, see "Trail of Tears" in *In the Spirit of the Circle* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1989).

The children's fire is a radical way of discovering what is right. It is compelling and challenging—bringing those who are usually outside decision making, children, into the center—in the midst of the decision makers. May God be calling you to bring children to the center of your congregation's worship planning?

As you or your worship planning committee discerns what will go into your sermon or liturgy, how do you make your decisions? Do you consider in what ways can and does worship nurture children? How do you pass on the tradition of faith to children? Consider at least these five questions as you pray and plan for worship. Bring your worship discernment to the children's fire:

- God, how will this worship service touch the hearts and minds of children? How will it care for your children?
- God, how is scripture conveyed that will inspire and communicate with children?
- God, what images, songs, movies, and other arts link scriptures for the day with the interests of children?
- God, how would you have us directly engage children in this worship service?
- God, what are you saying to our congregation through the voices, hearts, wisdom, and experiences of your children?

③ A Jewish Heart of Tradition and Prayer: Singing and Praying the Shema

Leader preparation: Deuteronomy 6:4–5 is one of several popular or "memory" verses for many Christians: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In Jewish tradition, the verse, called the Shema, is far more than a mere memory verse. It is the heart of both tradition and scripture.

It is a prayer, a call, a statement of identity, and a command that in the Hebrew language begins: “Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai ehad . . .” The Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin has said about the Shema: “It is the first ‘prayer’ that children are taught to say. It is the last utterance of martyrs. It is said on rising in the morning and on going to sleep at night. It is said when one is praising God and when one is beseeching [God]. . . . The Shema is said when our lives are full of hope; is said when all hope is gone and the end is near” [Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Pray as a Jew* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 144].

Supplies:

- Bible

When Jesus, a Jew, was tested by those who were against him to name the greatest commandment, Jesus surprised them by reminding them of the Shema, the heart of the tradition. He also added words that clearly flowed out of the prayer for the faithful Jew—words of compassion for others, love of neighbor (Mark 12:28–34; Matthew 22:34–40; and Luke 10:25–28). The Shema that is found in the Hebrew scripture or Jesus’ own expression of it are found in each year of the Revised Common Lectionary. (Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Mark 12:28–34 are used in the Revised Common Lectionary on Proper 26, Year B. Matthew 22:34–40 is used on Proper 24, Year A, and Luke 10:25–28 is used on Proper 10, Year C.) Beyond mere scripture reading, incorporate this prayer throughout worship. There are wonderful new musical versions of the Shema. The Shema could be sung at the beginning or end of the service or before the sermon. Following the sermon and moment of silence, it would provide a powerful moment of reflection. Consider singing one of the versions from *Sing! Prayer and Praise*:

- James Martin’s prayerful “Enter My Heart” The accompaniment version is available at https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/311699629?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=25181&store_id=1401.
- Ruth Sandberg’s haunting melody and canon-version “You Shall Love Our God” The accompaniment version is available at https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/111449188?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=26801&store_id=1401.

You can listen to the musical melodies of these two songs, and others, by linking to the *Sing!* website: “Sing! Music”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Community Exploration of 2 Timothy 1:1–14: The Lambeth or African Bible Study Method

Leader preparation: Even as tradition values what was understood in the past, each generation is called to discover God’s word for them in their time.

Supplies:

- “Lambeth Method of Spiritual Practice,” Attachment: Activity 4

As you plan worship or work on a sermon, what are the ways you listen for God speaking today in scripture? The following method, often known as the Lambeth or African Bible Study method, is similar to the spiritual practice of lectio divina.

Like *lectio divina*, the approach is a prayerful, devotional way with scripture that draws upon imagery, heart, and discernment. Use it for exploring 2 Timothy 1:1–14, or adapt it for use with other passages.

After this method, you may ask the group to pray and respond to the following: O God, what direction might you be calling us to go in planning worship and preaching for our wider congregation?

5 The Illuminated Word: Photos of Psalm 96

Leader preparation: The Book of Psalms in the Bible, and for that matter many poems and songs of religious tradition, are grounded in images that surrounded the person who wrote them. Some of the ideas in these writings are drawn directly from what one can see; others are more about ideas and feelings. When we read Psalm 96 we hear grand phrases about God’s marvelous works and worshipping God in holy splendor. It would be hard to know what the writer—the psalmist—saw as she or he wrote the words, or how it sounded. Perhaps they were humming it or singing it as they wrote. For the hearer, it may be impossible to see the images from the writer’s viewpoint. It is likely, however, if we take a few of the words and say them over and over, these words will begin to evoke and call up images from our own experience and the world around us.

Supplies:

- Bible
- (optional) art to match text

Prepare for an encounter with Psalm 96. Gather a group of people who are willing to look at a psalm with the goal of presenting it in worship. Tell them that they will be finding images to relate the psalm to their own lives. Begin by having everyone look at a copy of the psalm. Read it aloud. Identify some verses that evoke images. Perhaps an easy choice would be verse 11, “Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it.” Or “let the field exalt.” Ask what kinds of images in our own world these words bring up. After looking at a couple other verses, quickly move to proposing that if some were to go out with digital cameras, they might be able to capture images from their world that could be used to present the psalm in worship. Not everyone in the group needs picture-taking capability, but all can plan together. Finish talking about possible pictures, and when that is completed, plan for a second meeting to look at the results. You will need someone familiar with PowerPoint to assemble the photos on a computer, and you will need a way to project the images in worship.

Next, imagine ways to show the psalm. Perhaps the words of the psalm could be shown over the music. Perhaps the words could be read by several readers while the slides are shown. Or just project the words. Perhaps music could be played. *Suggestion:* If you are projecting or saying words, then use instrumental music with no words.

More options and ideas:

- Choose any psalm. Psalm 8 might be interesting.
- Choose nature pictures that are not from your community. For example, you live in the prairie and want pictures of mountains. How about asking for vacation pictures?
- Use pictures of people in your church, but be sure they give permission, and use them in a sensitive way.
- Don’t use just any pictures from the Internet. Some are copyrighted. Check to make sure you have permission.

- Less is more. Too many pictures (especially when used with words said and/or projected) can be confusing to some.
- If you do not have the capability to project images in worship, consider these ideas. Do it in a different space. Do a bulletin board instead. Put them in a little booklet and “publish” it for the congregation.
- Instead of using a PowerPoint, the group might find ways to use other kinds of images or interpretations that arise out of scripture. One possibility would be expressive movements by some who are comfortable “acting out” some of the ideas while others read the words to a musical background.
- Give yourself plenty of time for this project. It might be for a special season.



6 Sharing the Storyteller Tradition with a Story Stick

Leader preparation: Here is a way to reclaim a tradition of the early Christian church, biblical storytelling.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Story Stick Directions,” Attachment: Activity 6

Some people are discovering these days that they don’t know many Bible stories. Even in churches where the Bible is read Sunday after Sunday, sometimes people do not remember the readings as stories. That may be because they are only hearing part of a biblical story, or perhaps the way it is read is not in a way that catches the imagination. What would happen if a worshiping community would try to reclaim the ancient tradition of telling the stories to one another? Imagine what it looked like in the early church. Some people would come to town and a little group would gather around to hear one of the parables that Jesus had taught. The people listened, intrigued. They went home and retold the story in their homes. The family shared in the telling of the story as each one recounted what he or she remembered. Someone might add a missing detail. Someone else remembered one more twist. The story was kept alive in the retelling. The family told it at another gathering or to an upcoming generation. Such is the story of the gospel. We know there must have been different ways to tell the story, as well as different storytellers. The actual written story happened later. The oral version was first.

Some people recommend the memorization of scripture and telling it back in an engaged way. The attachment describes an idea to try in your church setting that is designed to create interest in telling the Bible stories. Here are some more ideas and variations:

- Have the group talk about their next gathering and what kind of story they will use. Old Testament? Jonah? Crossing the Red Sea?
- As the sessions proceed you might introduce the telling of the same story as it is recorded in different Gospels, then divide the group to read different Gospel accounts.
- Maybe the group would like to decorate the stick, bringing something to tie on it.
- Maybe the group would rather have something of their own choosing, such as a story stone.
- Some soft drumming might happen during the story to add a little drama or just create an ancient mood.
- The group might like to prepare for the next session by reading a story in advance.

- Depending on the time of the year, consider meeting around a small fire.
- There may be a song that the group can learn to sing at the end (or perhaps to gather and focus). Perhaps you can teach them a verse of “I Love to Tell the Story.”

Sending & Serving Activities

7 The Tradition of the Didache and a Song for Holy Communion

Leader preparation: One of the earliest Christian writings is the Didache. This little book may have been written as early as 50 CE and was considered scripture in early times. Didache means “two ways.” It begins with the choice between the way of life and death—and contains directions for how to baptize and celebrate the meal and even has an early version of the “Prayer of Our Savior.” A look at the Didache could be a whole study that includes questions such as: Who wrote it? Why isn’t it part of the Bible? What language was the original written in? What do the old copies look like? For more information visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki///Didache//> or see Tony Jones’ book *The Teaching of the Twelve: Believing and Practicing the Primitive Christianity of the Didache Community* (Cape Cod, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009).

Supplies:

- Didache, <http://www.paracletepress.com/didache.html>
- grapes
- wine
- pitcher
- cup
- bread
- wheat
- hymn: “As the Grain Was Scattered,” Attachment: Activity7

One activity connected to worship would be to first examine this text from the Didache that can be used in a communion service and then use it. “As the Grain Was Scattered” has been set to music by Arthur Clyde. See the attachment. You can hear the music at https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/159607757?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=26861&store_id=140.

Worship Moment

Prepare to use the song at the beginning of communion. The ancient tradition is that bread and wine would be brought into the congregation and, after prayer, shared. This is called the offertory. It is the moment when those gathered, in a ritual way, bring the food and drink for the meal. The song “As the Grain Was Scattered” is for that moment. The congregation can sing it or, perhaps the first time, the choir or soloist(s) can sing it for them. As the song is sung, the bread and wine may be carried through the congregation and placed on the communion table. Thus, a tradition that comes from the earliest Christian community has been honored and recreated in your own worship service. The rest of the communion service can be done in any way that is customary in your church.

Here are some ideas: Bring in a big plate of grapes along with a pitcher of wine/juice and a cup followed by a plate of bread and perhaps some sheaves of wheat. Lay these on the communion table. They can be processed or danced in, perhaps by children or youth. Be sure to have the soloists, choir, or congregation prepared with the song so that they can enjoy the movement. It might help to have the elements processed during a musical introduction and have the congregation seated throughout so they can see the movers. The same people who brought the elements in can also become servers, perhaps moving through the congregation.

In preparation for this service, find a time to talk about the words of the song and the Didache. You could explain how the words had and still have special meaning to Jewish people: the Vine of David. You could ponder what “scattered on the hills” means. Is it a recollection of Manna? Is it about scattered believers? You might mention how the Didache must have served as a direction book for worship.

A study group might wish to examine questions such as these: Is the cup and bread used in the same order as what many churches do? Does the Didache mention the Last Supper? What other prayers and directions, are in the Didache? Does the version of the “Prayer of Our Savior” found in the Didache differ from what we say?

Here is a prayer for a study group: *God of all our life, we gather around the words of our ancestors in faith, wondering how they lived, what they hoped for, and how they worshiped you. Bring them into our midst as we reflect on their words, that we may see you more clearly, know you more dearly. Amen.*



8 Presenting and Celebrating the Gift of the Bible

Leader preparation: Many congregations give Bibles to children—as they enter a particular grade or while participating in baptism or confirmation preparation. This is a very explicit way that the church passes on its tradition from one generation to the next. Below is a two-fold process for orienting children to the Bible and then presenting the Bibles during a worship service.

Supplies:

- Bibles for Children
- “Bible Discovery,” Attachment: Activity 8-1
- “Books of the Bible,” Attachment: Activity 8-2

An Evening of Bible Discovery

Perhaps a week before or the evening before children are to be presented a Bible, invite them and their parents/sponsors to a meal and a time of Bible discovery. Provide food that children would enjoy. Decorate the fellowship hall with posters, including the phrases and verses from the Bible verses from the attachment. Add balloons. Make the evening a celebration! By the end of the evening, children are to select a favorite passage/verse of scripture that they will present in worship on the Sunday when they “officially” receive their Bibles.

After the meal, give each child a Bible and copies of the attachments “Books of the Bible” and the worksheet “Bible Discovery.”

Invite the children and adults to work in groups and find passages listed on the “Bible Discovery.” Use the “Books of the Bible” to help them locate the books and verses. Explain also how to use the “numbers” to find a passage. When they find a passage, invite them to talk briefly about the passage, identifying anything they like about the passage or wonder about the passage. Encourage the adults, if they

wish, to hunt up their own favorite passages. Then, have the children select a favorite verse out of the passages they hunted up. This will be the verse that each child will read in worship. Spend around 30–45 minutes for finding the passages and selecting a favorite. End with children sharing their passages with one another. If possible, collect the Bibles so they might be formally presented to each child during worship.

A Worship Moment to Present Bibles

In Sunday’s worship service, perhaps before scripture is formally read, invite forward the children who will be presented Bibles. Explain to the congregation what happened in the evening of “Bible Discovery.” Then say the name of each child and present her or his Bible to each. Once all have their Bibles, invite each child to share his or her favorite verse. After each child says a verse, say, “Thanks, this is the word of God.” Conclude by inviting all the children to hold their Bibles close to their hearts, and offer a blessing or prayer such as the following:

*God, bless these Bibles and these children [or speak the name of each child].
May your word and love fill them with joy and hope and peace.
May your word be a friend and guide to them.
May they feel free to wonder, discover, and question.
May they hear your voice in these words.
God, bless these Bibles and these children. Amen.*



9 From Table to Garden, Cross to Tomb: A Biblical Journey for Holy Thursday and Good Friday

Leader preparation: Scripture is passed on in vivid ways through the liturgy of the church year. In the Scripture Exploration for this practice, we see the story of Jesus’ birth in the Christmas Eve Service of Lesson and Carols. In a similar way, the story of Jesus’ trial, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection are retold in the traditional liturgies of Holy Week and Easter. For more information about these days in the church year, link to <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/ww-maundy.pdf> or <http://www.crivoice.org/cyholyweek.html>.

Supplies:

- (optional) meal
- decorating supplies (see options below)
- “Combined Holy Thursday and Good Friday Worship Service,” Attachment: Activity 9

Included here is an evening worship service and meal that blends the traditional biblical texts and stories of Maundy Thursday/Holy Thursday (which often focuses on the Last Supper) with the stories and texts for Good Friday and Tenebrae liturgies (which focus on the death and entombment of Jesus). Many congregations have separate services for Thursday and Friday. Many congregations, however, are unable to have services on both evenings. Instead of two services, this service blends both into one service—and could occur on either evening. In the service, participants are invited to move to four different stations for a time of scripture, prayer, and music.

A version of this service may be adapted to your congregation’s distinctive practice and is on the attachment. The four stations include:

Station 1: “We Join Jesus at the Table.” At this station the congregation gathers around a table/tables for a simple meal and Holy Communion.

Station 2: “We Pray with Jesus in the Garden.” The congregation moves from the

place of sharing the meal to a place or setting of a garden. There they hear and reflect on Jesus' prayer and time with the disciples at Gethsemane/the Mount of Olives.

Station 3: "We Face Jesus: His Trial and Cross." The congregation moves from the garden to a place where they can focus on a cross.

Station 4: "We Watch as Jesus Is Placed in the Tomb." The congregation moves from the garden to a place where they can focus on the tomb.

Suggestions for Preparing for the Service:

A simple meal: Set up tables for your congregation to share a common meal. Sometimes tables are set up as a cross or in a T shape. A simple meal of fruit, breads, and soup/broth may be served or set up as people come to the table. Often purple or white tablecloths cover the table, and palm branches from the Palm Sunday service are placed on the table. Lighting is low—with candles.

Decorating or preparing the stations: Station 1 is often set up in a fellowship hall or place where food may be shared. Station 2 is often outside the building in a garden or lawn. Station 3 may focus on a cross that is outside or back inside the church building where a cross may be seen. Sometimes a cross is constructed for the service. Station 4 may be in the sanctuary with an image or video of a tomb projected on the wall. Such images are available through stock photo sites as iStock photo at <http://www.istockphoto.com/video> (for example, see iStock Photo image "Tomb in Holy Land," #8368395, or the "Empty Tomb" continuous video clip, #9593248). During the service, there is a large lighted candle at each station. It is extinguished as the participants leave for the next station.

Scriptures, music, and chime/bell: If you use the Revised Common Lectionary to guide worship, adjust the gospel readings for the particular year. The various readings are included in the worship attachment. For year A of the RCL use the readings from Matthew. In year B, use readings from Mark, and in year C, use the gospel of Luke.

The refrain from the Taizé song "Stay with Me" is used throughout the service as the "bidding song." The congregation sings it as they move from station to station. Listen to a recording of "Stay with Me" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nENazSENMNY&feature=related>. If you are unable to locate the music for "Stay with Me," use the first verse of "Were You There" as the bidding song.

In the service following each reading, there is a "song for meditation." These songs may be sung by the choir, a solo, or the congregation. Choose appropriate songs for each reading. Such songs for Holy Week may be found most hymnals. This service also suggests the song "Come to the Table of Grace" after the reading about the Last Supper and "Were You There" (perhaps sung as a solo without accompaniment) following the last reading in the service.

As indicated in the attached service, at the sound of a chime or bell, the participants will know that a moment of silence is over. They will also know that it is time to sing the bidding song and when to move to the next station.

Holy Communion/Lord's Supper: Please use the liturgy that is appropriate to your tradition. If possible, however, allow Holy Communion to be shared following the eating of the simple meal—seated around tables.

Readers and dancers: Invite different readers to lead the “bidding prayers” and to read the scriptures. Instruct them to read slowly and clearly. Allow a time of silence following each reading. You may also invite a dancer or guide to lead the participants from one station to another. In the garden, at the cross, and at the tomb, the guide or dancer may kneel in prayer during the readings. Following the silence, they may be the ones to extinguish the candle.

Removal of Bible, basin, candles, and the conclusion of the service: Some congregations strip the sanctuary of symbols during the conclusion of a Good Friday service. They return the symbols to the sanctuary as part of one of the Easter services. In this service, the removal may be done in silence following the singing of “Were You There.” At the conclusion of the service, offer a benediction and extinguish the final candle. As safety will allow, the congregation leaves in darkness.

Following the Church Year

For more information about the themes and texts of the church year, read Sidney D. Fowler’s article “Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship” under “Following the Church Year” in the Discovery Exploration. The preceding Christian Tradition Exploration activities link with several days in the church year and readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Draw upon them as you plan worship and preaching:

- Maundy Thursday/Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Years A, B, and C: Activity 9, “From Table to Garden, Cross to Tomb: A Biblical Journey for Holy Thursday and Good Friday.”
- Easter 3, Year C: Activity 6, “Sharing the Storyteller Tradition with a Story Stick” based on John 21:1–19.
- Proper 21, Year B: Activity 1, “Let the Words of My Mouth: A Prayer about the Words We Speak” based on Psalm 19:7–14.
- Proper 26, Year B, based on Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Mark 12:28–34; or Proper 24, Year A, based on Matthew 22:34–40; or Proper 10, Year C, based on Luke 10:25–28: Activity 3, “A Jewish Heart of Tradition and Prayer: Singing and Praying the Shema.”
- Proper 22, Year C: Activity 4, “Community Exploration of 2 Timothy 1:1–14: The Lambeth or African Bible Study Method,” based on 2 Timothy 1:1–14.

Attachment: Activity 4

Lambeth Method of Spiritual Practice

Step 1: Silent prayer

Begin in silent prayer—opening yourself to God.

Step 2: Listen to First Reading.

Invite participants to identify a word, phrase, or image that catches their attention as they hear the passage read. What shimmers, disturbs, or comforts? Then invite one person to slowly read 2 Timothy 1:1-14 aloud.

Step 3: Share Image, Word, or Phrase.

Invite participants to each share the word, phrase, or image that came to heart or imagination. Simply allow each person to share without any group discussion.

Step 4: Listen to Second Reading.

Invite participants to listen for how the passage connects with their life today. Ask another person to read the passage again.

Step 5: Share Connections.

Invite participants to share their connections with the passage. Ask each person to share without group discussion.

Step 6: Listen to Third Reading.

Invite participants to name or write a response to the following questions after they hear the passage read one more time: "From what I have heard and shared, what do I believe God wants me to do or be? Is God asking me to change? What may God be calling us to focus on in our worship and preaching?" Then have a third person read the passage aloud.

Step 7: Share Meanings.

Invite participants to listen to each other's response one more time without group discussion.

Step 8: Offer Prayers.

Carefully holding one another and their insights, each person silently prays for the person on their right and left.

Attachment: Activity 6

Story Stick Directions

Step 1: Have supplies on hand and prepare the space.

A story stick: In some tribes of Native Americans a stick was used when people met to talk. It was passed from person to person, and whoever was holding the stick spoke and everyone else listened. You will need a story stick (or a stone, or some other object).

Bibles: To recreate the oral tradition, we can first read a story in the Bible, and then play it back as we heard it in our minds. Everyone in the group will need a Bible. It's fine if there are many versions, probably better.

A place for a circle: Put enough chairs in a circle for everyone who is going to attend. If you are the leader, prepare these things in advance, and invite people to come to a session on biblical story telling. For the first session pick a simple story, for example John 21:1–20, the Easter story of Jesus feeding the disciples by the seaside. Begin by telling everyone that we are going to have some fun with a Bible story, trying to tell it like it was done in the early days using some of the ideas above.

Step 2: Invite participants to tell a portion of the story.

Explain how it will work: that you will begin first (holding the stick) and then pass the stick to someone. They will say something that continues the story. A couple or a few sentences are enough. Then they pass the stick to the next person.

Here are some "rules": It's OK to just hold the stick in silence while you put your thoughts and words together. It's OK to hold the stick in silence and if the words don't come, pass it to someone. It's important to not exclude anybody from a chance to speak. It's important not to put pressure on anyone to speak. It's important not to correct someone who didn't get it "right." It's OK to say something that accepts everyone's version—the way they read it, something like, "and others heard it this way."

Step 3: Pray and reflect.

At the end of the story, ask everyone to take time to breathe a bit and be silent. Then have a little prayer such as: *O God of our parents and their parents and their parents, we thank you for the stories you have given us to help us find the way for our lives. Give us open hearts to let the stories be part of us and shape us as you would have us grow. Amen.*

Then you can lead people in a time of reflection with questions such as: Did the story come alive for you in any particular way? Did you think about how the story was told in its first tellings and retellings? Do you think some stories might work better than others? Could we try it again? (Set a time for the next meeting.)

Attachment: Activity 7

ENCOUNTER

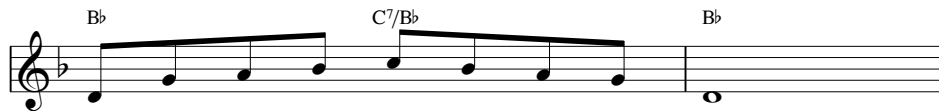
As the Grain Was Scattered

$\text{♩} = 85$


1. & 3. As the grain was scat-tered on the hills,
 2. From the vine of Da - vid we will drink,



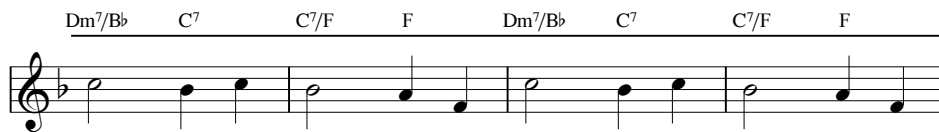
and was brought to - geth - er to be - come our bread,
 as we give you glo - ry in this ho - ly place



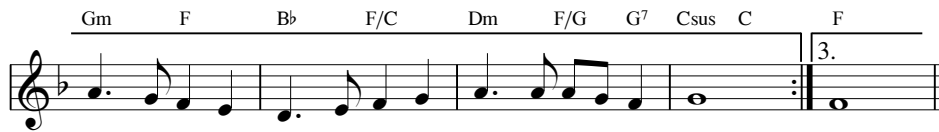
so we gath - er from the ends of earth,
 for the gifts of know - ledge and of life,



joined a - round this ta - ble as your Church. On
 through your Child, Je - sus Christ, re - vealed.



hill - sides you feed us, through des - erts you lead us, now



at this ta - ble all are one in Christ. We have new life. Church.

Words adapted from the *Didache*, 2nd century.

Words and Music: Arthur Clyde

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Attachment: Activity 8-1



BIBLE DISCOVERY

HUNT UP AND DISCOVER A FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE!

SCRIPTURE VERSE

Genesis 1: 1-6, 31

"It was very good. . ."

Exodus 20:1-17

"God who brought you out of Egypt"

Ruth 1:16-18

"Where you go, I will go. . ."

Psalms 23

"The Lord is my shepherd. . ."

Micah 6:8

"to do justice, love kindness. . ."

Isaiah 40:28-31

"they shall mount up with wings. . ."

Matthew 19:14

"Let the little children come. . ."

Mark 12:30 "

love God with all. . . and your neighbor"

Luke 2:8-14 "

Glory to God in the highest. . ."

1 Corinthians 13:13

"And the greatest of these is love."

1 John 4:7-8

"For God is love. . ."

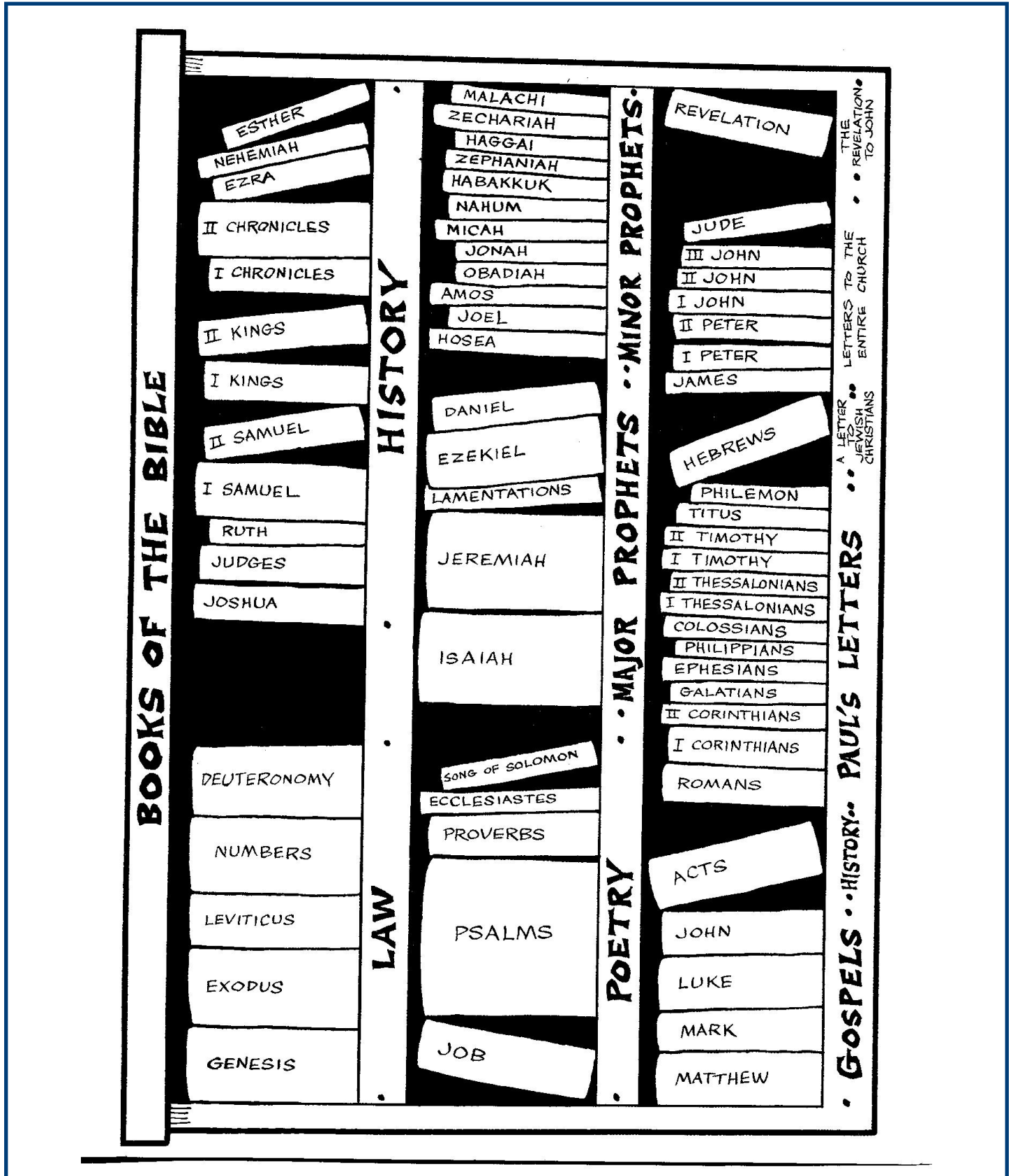
Revelation 21:1-4

"God will wipe away every tear."

I LIKE ABOUT IT

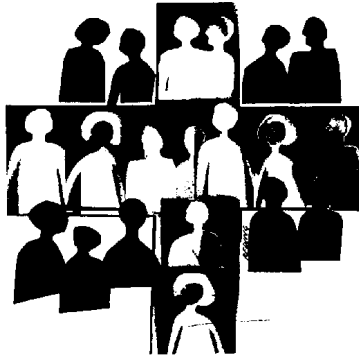
I WONDER ABOUT IT

Attachment: Activity 8-2



Attachment: Activity 9

Combined Holy Thursday and Good Friday Worship Service



It's worth the journey . . .

From Table to Garden, Cross to Tomb

Stay with me, remain here with me.

Watch and pray, watch and pray.

Taizé prayer song

Greeting and Introduction

Christ's peace be yours this evening. This night combines traditions of Holy Thursday and Good Friday. On this night, we join Jesus in those last days around a table with his followers. We join him in a garden wondering if we can stay awake and abide with him. We will join him at his trial and witness the cross. Tonight, Jesus will be put to rest in a tomb. Silence and darkness await us. Friends, we join together as companions on this journey. May God touch us, draw us close to Christ and one another, and may we be changed. God is with us.

Throughout the service when you hear the sound of the chime, we will sing together the refrain "Stay with Me." Following our guide, we will then move together to another station on this evening's journey. Now, let us begin by greeting one another and offering the peace of God to those around us at the table.

Passing of the Peace

Station 1

We Join Jesus at the Table

Bidding Song (*at the sound of the chime*) "Stay with Me"

Grace (*unison*)

(attributed to Martin Luther)

**Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest.
Let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.**

A Simple Meal Shared

Bidding Song (*at the sound of the chime*) "Stay with Me"

Attachment: Activity 9 (Continued)

Bidding Prayer (*unison*)

**Christ, you call us to your table to share in your presence.
Bless us as we remember that last supper with your friends.
And on this night, strengthen us for the days ahead
as you come once again in the sharing of bread and cup. Amen.**

Mt 26:17–25/Mk 14:12–21/Lk 22:1–13 Jesus prepares for the supper and predicts betrayal.
(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Song of Meditation “Come to the Table of Grace” (#112 in Sing!)
(Choir sings first verse. Assembly sings the following.)

Mt 26:26–29/Mk 14:22–25/Lk 22:14–34 Jesus blesses bread and wine.
(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Holy Communion

*(All are invited to participate. Following the blessing, please pass
the bread and cup to one another saying “Body of Christ” or “Cup of Blessing.”
Then dip bread into cup.)*

Station 2

We Pray with Jesus in the Garden

Bidding Song (*at the sound of the chime*) “Stay with Me”

(All follow to the garden.)

The Bidding Prayer (*unison*)

**Christ, you call us to join you in a time of prayer and testing.
Though we may leave you – sleep, betray, or flee – forgive us.
Keep us awake. Keep us faithful. Amen.**

Mt 26:36–46/Mk 14:26–42/Lk 22:39–45 Jesus and the disciples go to Gethsemane.
(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Song of Meditation

Mt 26:47–56/Mk 14:26–42/Lk 22:46–62 Jesus is betrayed, arrested, and denied.
(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Station 3

We Face Jesus: His Trial and Cross

Bidding Song (*at the sound of the chime*) “Stay with Me”

(All follow dancer to the cross.)

Attachment: Activity 9 (Continued)

Bidding Prayer (*unison*)

**Christ, you face conflict and the cross.
We face you and all who suffer.
Forgive our sin. Pour out your love.
Transform us. Amen.**

Mt 26:57, 63–66/Mk 14:53/Lk 22:66–71

Jesus is accused by religious leaders.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Lk 23:1–5 (Year C only)

Jesus first encounters Pilate, Governor of Judea.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Mt 27:11–26/Mk 15:1–20/Lk 23:6–25

Jesus is tried and sentenced.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Luke 23:26–43 (Year C only)

Jesus is led away and crucified alongside criminals.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Song of Meditation

Mt 27:27–56/Mk 15:21–41/Lk 23:44–49

Jesus is crucified.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Station 4

We Watch as Jesus is Placed in the Tomb

Bidding Song (*at the sound of the chime*) “Stay with Me”

(All follow dancer to the tomb.)

Bidding Prayer (*unison*)

**Christ, we watch as those who loved you grieve,
and wrap your body in linen.
Hopeless, they place you in a tomb and go away.
We join them even now.
So on this night, keep us constant in prayer and hope,
looking for the fulfillment of your resurrection in our day. Amen.**

Matthew 27:55–56 (Year A only)

Women were present.

Mt. 27:57–61/Mk 15:42–47/Lk 23:50–56

Jesus is placed in the tomb.

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Attachment: Activity 9 (Continued)

Song of Meditation

“Were You There?”

(a time of silent reflection and prayer)

Removal of Bible, Basin, and Candles

Benediction and Extinguishing the Light

(Please prayerfully leave the sanctuary in silence or humming “Stay with Me.”)

This service was prepared by Sidney D. Fowler for Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria VA.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

In worship “seeds” of God’s Word are planted. Those who plan, preach, pray, praise, or preside in worship never fully know how God’s realm will flourish through what happens in worship. Yet God is at work. We are called to prayerful preparation and openness to God’s work among us. Scripture, in many ways, is a primary seed that is planted and nourished in worship. We hear about and can experience God’s realm of justice and love not only in scripture readings and sermons, but also in prayers, song, sacraments, and calls to service. Planted in a congregation’s heart, the Word is lived and worked out in the lives and witness of the people. When we leave worship, with God’s justice and love implanted in us, we can recognize God’s work in the world and join in that holy mission.

This Context and Mission Exploration includes nine different suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The three activity suggestions listed under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with the Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your own personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The next three suggestions listed under Discerning and Deciding include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three suggested activities, for Sending and Serving, point to the closing time in worship and offer worship ideas for blessing others and for calling the congregation to acts of God’s justice and compassion. They will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

Jesus offered an image of God’s realm as a tiny seed planted and flourishing. God’s word can be like a seed in our lives and in our world. Individually and collectively, we encounter scripture with the hope of better understanding our own context—the place, time, and circumstances in which we live. Scripture invites us into a more intimate knowledge of God and community. It guides and challenges us to discern our mission to our faith community, our neighborhood, and our world. The tiniest of seeds can produce a rich harvest of peace, justice, and restoration.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 4:26–34
Esther 4:1–17

Leader Preparation

Many hymns can be found at www.hymnsite.com. To assist in prayerfully preparing yourself as a worship planner and preacher, check out Activity 1 and 2 in each of the six Encountering Scripture Explorations. As you begin this Context and Mission Exploration, offer this prayer or one of your own:

*God of our beginning and ending,
God of planting and harvesting,
press the seeds of your realm into our
hearts.*

*Challenge us, heal us, enliven us,
so your Word may grow in our
lives.*

*Sow the way of justice and love in
our worship and work.*

Amen.

You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann’s book of prayers, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar’s engagement with scripture while teaching the Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Take My Life, God, Let It Be Consecrated—Preparing for Your Mission and Ministry

Leader preparation: Read Esther 4:13–14 with these questions in mind: Where in scripture do you find inspiration for your own mission and calling? What stories compel you to remain faithful—even during the tough times—to what God is calling you to do?

Supplies:

- Bible
- hymn: “Take My Life, Let It Be” (words by Frances R. Havergal, music by Louis J. F. Herold Messiah 77.77D)
- Michael Sweet’s version of “Take My Life, Let it Be,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9OgHFtLMK4&feature=related>
- film clip: “One Night with the King,” a popular retelling of the Esther story, http://www.8x.com/onenight/trailer/video_trailer_update.htm

Look closely at the Hebrew story of Esther. The ancient story points to one woman’s call and abiding follow-through on faith. In Esther 4:13–14, Queen Esther is challenged by Mordecai, her cousin, to accept the call to speak to her husband, the Persian king, and save her people, the Jews, from genocide. This was a courageous moment for her—for her own Jewishness was hidden from the king. As Mordecai suggested, Esther was called for “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). This story is a beloved story and the entire book of Esther is read during each year’s Jewish celebration of Purim. Esther’s courage and devotion saved an oppressed people as she stood against oppressors. It is a story to be remembered and celebrated—inspiring people of faith to sustain God’s mission of justice and love in the world.

In light of engaging the story of Esther, what might be your prayer? When the contemporary Christian singer, Michael Sweet, read the book of Esther, the hymn “Take My Life and Let It Be” came to his heart and mind. He set the words to a beautiful new tune. The lyrics of the hymn could be a prayer of Esther, but also your own prayer as you consider your calling and mission. Will you offer your life, your spirit, your will, your heart, your love to God for God’s mission?

Read and sing the hymn; make it your prayer. Listen and view the hymn and video clip. Pray and sing the prayer throughout the week as you prepare for worship and preaching. Let the prayer of self-offering sink deeply into your heart and work. God may be calling you, as God called Esther, for “such a time as this.”

② Waiting for the Word: The Seed Breaks Forth

Leader preparation: Preachers and worship leaders often hit a wall in their planning and preparing for Sunday. After intense study, juggling commentaries, reviewing contemporary literature, checking out critical current issues, and considering the life of their local church, they can be overwhelmed and confused. The harder one seems to push to know exactly what to say in a sermon or exactly the direction of a service, the more lost one might become. Seeds are planted, but clarity does not always come.

Supplies:

- None

Bruce Epperly and Kathryn Gould Epperly in *Tending to the Holy: The Practice of God in Ministry* and Kay L. Northcutt in *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction* all advise making space for the Spirit to work—for seeds to germinate and blossom. Bruce Epperly talks of taking his “sermon for a walk.” In that time, he prays for God’s guidance. He trusts God to work in the time away with his hunches, dreams, and insights. Kathryn Gould Epperly also enjoys walks, but looks forward to opportunities to discuss and explore possibilities with others. They say: “Whether we pastors walk our sermons, take them out for a jog, or simply imagine the text emerging unhindered in our lives, movement liberates our spirits to embrace God’s ever-creative inspiration flowing through our lives” [*Tending to the Holy* (Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 43].

Northcutt speaks about making room for the Holy Spirit as a critical step in preparing a sermon. She describes the step in this way: “It is now time for the preacher to think indirectly about the sermon while, as my spiritual director would say, waiting to ‘see what surfaces’ from among all the pages of insights and scholarship gained. . . . Both the sermon and preacher are now at the mercy of the Holy Spirit. . . . [A]llowing the preparation to lie fallow—even for a few hours—inevitably surfaces the more salient aspects to be included in the sermon” [*Kindling Desire for God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 144]. This may mean that mowing the lawn, washing dishes, or weeding the garden are prayerful opportunities to wait on God’s word to come.

Allow for such a movement and take time away as a vital step in your regular planning or when you hit a worship or sermon “block.” Seeds have been planted. Trust God to work deep inside you and surprise you with a word that blossoms.

③ Seed Songs of Faith, Love, and Justice

Leader preparation: One of the daily prayers of the church has these words: “You have raised us from the earth; may you let the seeds of justice, which we have sown with tears, grow and increase in your sight. May we reap in joy the harvest we hope for patiently.” It is taken from Psalm 126. Seeds and the idea of planting seeds and growing things have provided vivid images in the Bible, in prayers, and in songs and stories of the church. Sometimes the image is about growing faith, sometimes growing justice, growing peace, sometimes about eternal life.

Supplies:

- Bible

Seeds of Faith

- “The Seed Song” by Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan. The song, a listening version, and a theological explanation are found at <http://www.world-making.net/>. It is from the album *Seeds of Faith*. It’s great for children.
- “We Plant a Grain of Mustard Seed” (tune: New Beginnings 8.6.8.6.8.6.), a whole song about practicing faith by planting seeds of love.
- “Now the Green Blade Rises” (tune: Noel Nouvelet 11.10.10.11.) contains a paraphrase of Psalm 126: “One who sows the fields with weeping . . .” <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/minako/watanabe/blade.htm>
- “Hymn of Promise” (tune: Promise 8.7.8.7.D.) words and music by Natalie Sleeth. One verse includes the words: “. . . in the seed an apple tree . . . in our end is our beginning” <http://hymntime.com/tch/htm/h/y/m/hymn-prom.htm>

Mission: Plant the Trees of Peace and Justice

- “Children of God,” (tune: Welwyn 11.10.11.10) (in some hymnals, look for “O Brother Man”) “The tree of peace will be planted in the ashes of anger” <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/b/obrother.htm>.
- “Sois la Semilla (You Are the Seed)” (tune: Id Y Ensenad 10.9.10.8.D.) “You are the ones to spread justice.”
- “Come to Tend God’s Garden” (tune: King’s Weston 6.5.6.5.D) is a commission to be the cultivators of God’s garden of justice and peace, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUZkdjvboh0>.

Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy (Psalm 126)

- “Let Us Hope When Hope Seems Hopeless” (tune: Let Us Hope 8.7.8.7.D or Hyfrydol), <http://mp3bear.com/hope-19oct08-anthem-let-us-when-seems-hopeless>
- “Bringing in the Sheaves” <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/b/r/bringing.htm>

Thanksgiving and Growing in Faith

- “For the Fruit of All Creation,” (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos 8.4.8.4.8.8.8.4) speaks of sharing the fruits of God’s abundance, <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/f/f211.html>.
- “Growing in Faith,” by Gerard DeMan, is a statement of confidence in our God-given faith. For an accompaniment version of the song, link to https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1212670300?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=28981&store_id=1401.

Even in an age of technology and urban life, we can still appreciate the agrarian image—even if for some the growing takes place in a small window box in the city or in a virtual plant on the computer. The concept is constant: from a small seed something big can grow. We prefer to think of it in a positive sense, but it holds true for seeds that bring bad things, too. Our mission is to focus on planting good seeds, healthy seeds, seeds that will bear God’s good fruit. At the same time, we are called to pull some thistles and vines that might choke out God’s garden.

When you sing these songs in worship, consider accompanying them with a growing or planting activity. In one church the children planted winter wheat in pots, timed so that Easter Sunday they processed the sprouted grain for the service. “Sois la Semilla” would be a wonderful song to sing while children hold up images or objects to accompany the many symbols in the song as bread ingredients, sparkling lights, stars, shepherds. Use your imagination.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Seed Parables to Act Out in Worship

Leader preparation: Drama is an effective way to bring scripture alive in worship. This activity provides one skit, but it can be adapted for use with other texts. Allow yourself to be creative as you live with whichever text you are studying and encourage your actors to use their own creative license as well.

Supplies:

- Bible
- The Parable of the Growing seed and the Parable of the Mustard Seed,
Attachment: Activity 4
- (optional) costumes

The example here tells the stories of the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:26–34 or Luke 17:5–10) with a narrator and two actors. You can easily use this model to build little dramas for parables that have more action and more characters. This parable about the sower and seeds can be done with as few as three people: one reader and two doing motions. Only the narrator needs to speak. It should be rehearsed several times so that it flows evenly

Have the reader practice to read slowly, with breaks. The reader should not look at the person(s) doing the movement/acting, because this is distracting. Likewise, the actors should not look at the narrator (as if waiting for the next cue). The actor (or actors) should be prepared to create and then practice and memorize a series of movements, so that they can be done smoothly. Each time, synchronize the movement with the sentence or phrase, and then the actors end with a pose or freeze.

More ideas:

- Have a flute play something calm and quiet in the background, perhaps a hymn such as “Come, O Thankful People, Come,” or “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” For this drama, maybe solid dark-colored clothing would help, perhaps black, so that costumes will not distract from the movement. For dramas with characters such as the Prodigal Son,” more colorful costumes and props might help.
- To develop a skit based on a different parable, first read the scripture together, and then talk about what the main movements and actions are. Talk about how they are best shown. Think about how you can divide the scripture into scenes. Break the scripture up to develop a portion of the reading with each of the scenes. Think about how each scene can move to the next one, and then freeze into a pose. If there is a group of people who have enjoyed doing one of these, perhaps they will want to develop more.
- To use the skit in worship, it can be performed at the time of the reading of the lesson, and then perhaps be followed by the singing of a hymn or song, and then a sermon, discussion, or reflection.

5 The Realm of God Is Like a Garden

Leader preparation: We can only imagine what God’s realm would look like and sound like if it were to contain all the many, many ages, colors, and sizes of people, not to mention the languages and voices. If we only begin to imagine all the people who now make up the body of Christ and then begin to add in the saints of all ages, our ancestors in the faith, we should begin to create an infinite mosaic in our minds.

Supplies:

- “De Colores” (“All the Colors”), Spanish and English lyrics at <http://www.songsforteaching.com/spanish/decolores.htm>; hear the tune at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sLQbOOUY4g&feature=related>

How could we capture such a diverse gathering? Perhaps one image we could use is that of a garden. The realm of God, we could say, is like a garden filled with glorious flowers of every variety, hue, and size. We could ask ourselves if that is what God’s realm looks like, and if our worship is a glimpse of what God intended us to be, if it is a “getting ready” for the realm of God, then how diverse are we? This becomes a question of who’s welcome. The song “De Colores” talks of flowers and rainbows and birds—all varieties and colors.

One way to use the song is to have a bouquet of diverse flowers prepared and laid out or in a vase so that each person can choose one as she or he enters the church building. At the chosen time in the worship service, explain the idea that the realm of God is like a bouquet of flowers, everyone different, everyone beautiful, and each one contributing to the bouquet. Then invite people to come forward and place their flowers in an empty vase while music is played. You might talk about the many kinds of diversity there are in the body of Christ, differing ages and ethnicities, difference in genders and sexuality, differences in how we believe in God. Perhaps invite people to reflect on their diversity. Be sure to take time to talk about the beauty of the bouquet.

You can also expand this idea by talking more about music. You could follow this activity by saying that another way we express the diversity of the realm of God is by singing the songs of all who are part of the body of Christ and will join us in the realm of God. Use this as a way of introducing some songs that help us give voice to the goodness of diversity and begin to create an image of what God’s future looks like.

6 Seeds of Change: Discovering a Parable from Different Perspectives

Leader preparation: God speaks a surprising word through the rich diversity of those who draw near to God. What difference does it make in who interprets scripture? How does God challenge our own perspectives when God speaks through those with a completely different life experience? What are the variety of voices, groups, and perspectives that you draw upon in planning worship and sermons?

Supplies:

- Bible

One of those distinctive and often neglected perspectives comes from transgender men and women. “Transgender” describes the experience of those who express their gender somewhat differently than the norm. Transgender people usually seek to align in some way their body appearance with what they believe to

be their true gender identity. For many transgender people of faith, their decision for this alignment is a prayerful and difficult journey. For others, the decision is prayerful, yet easy and one of serenity—making real what they believe God has planted in their hearts. Recently, three transgender people of faith—the Reverend Erin Swenson, Mr. Aidan Dunn, and the Reverend Elise Elrod—have reflected on the parables about seeds from a trans perspective. Their testimony brings fresh insights that deepen the meaning of these texts and calls the church to greater faith. How might their insights, such as the one in the following paragraph, inform your reading of the parables of the seeds in Mark 4:20–35 and Luke 17:5–10?

“Some transgender individuals see themselves in this image of the mustard seed—something that society sees as small and insignificant, but something that, given the right conditions, has a potential to become a source of nurture and nourishment for others. Just as the tiny mustard seed undergoes a dramatic transformation as it becomes a tree, the lives of human beings (transgender or not) can similarly transform—and inspire God’s transformation in others.” Read the entire reflection online at “Out in Season,” <http://www.hrc.org/scripture/oiseason3.asp>.

How might God touch you and your worship planning through the thoughts, longings, and prayer of these transgender individuals? Swenson, Dunn, and Elrod concluded their reflection on Mark 4:26–34 with a beautiful litany. You might use this litany as a call to worship, leading into a sermon, following a sermon, or as a benediction. (If you use the Revised Common Lectionary for planning worship and preaching, Mark 4:26–34 is used in Year B on proper 6 and its parallel, Luke 17:5–10 in Year C on proper 22.)

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Jesus’ Baptism and Mission: Stepping into the Mud

Leader preparation: How does your congregation practice baptisms in worship? What meaning does baptism convey in your church? How does baptism express your own mission and the mission of your congregation?

Supplies:

- (optional) Joseph Donder’s poem “Stepping in the Mud”, link to http://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Stranger-Reflections-Joseph-Donders/dp/1570752540/ref=sr_1_6?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1283519617&sr=1-6
- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401

Two images, one poetic and one visual, both out of an Africentric context, call for us to re-imagine the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism. Baptism, as portrayed in these images, is not a sweet infant sprinkling or an adult obligation to get the name on the church roll. Instead, Joseph Donder’s poem “Stepping in the Mud” from his collection *Jesus the Stranger* and Pheoris West’s painting “Baptism of Jesus” both invite us into a deeper meaning of baptism—and a commitment to join Christ in God’s mission of justice and love.

In planning for baptism, especially a youth or adult baptism, consider exploring one or all of the following suggestions:

Step 1: Read the story of Jesus’ baptism from a different perspective. You can find the story of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:13–17, Mark 1:9–11, or Luke 3:21–22. Choose one version of the story and read it aloud. Then review the passage identifying any aspect of the story that troubles you, heals you, or surprises you.

Step 2: Consider Joseph Donders’s poem “Stepping in the Mud.” If you are able to locate his poem in the book *Jesus the Stranger* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), pages 18–21, read it aloud. If you are unable to find the poem, consider these images that Donders uses:

- *Mud representing human evil* Invite participants to describe their images and experiences with mud, especially the kind of river-bottom mud that is smelly. Mud might also be an image for being “bogged down”—weighed down by brokenness or oppression or injustice.
- *Baptism in a river where the bottom is muddy* Invite the participants to imagine stepping into a mud-bottomed river for baptism by total immersion. What are you wearing? What will you look like when you come up out of the water? How will you feel?
- *Flooded with bright light* What might the light reveal about you after baptism? To what might the light lead you?
- *Full of God’s spirit* What is one’s mission in the world to be after being baptized? What might that have to do with stepping in the mud?

Prayerfully consider:

- What is new or challenging to you about Donders’s perspective on Jesus’ baptism?
- In baptism, you join Jesus in his baptism. What is the “mud” that people step into today when they are baptized?
- What difference does an understanding that Jesus steps into the mud with you at baptism make in living out your mission in the world?

Step 3: Pray Pheoris West’s “Baptism of Jesus.” Begin in silence with your eyes closed, asking God to be present in your viewing of the painting. Then open your eyes, and repeat “O God, I see . . .,” offering to God what you notice in the painting. Notice all kinds of aspects, from color, shapes, light, multiple faces looking different directions, to black arms pointing down and to the side. Continue repeating what you see to God. Then, while continuing to focus on the painting—and considering both your reading from the Bible and Donder’s image—complete the phrase: “O God, Jesus’ baptism calls me to . . .”

Step 4: Consider how to shape worship that includes baptism a baptism of stepping into the mud. What new understandings has God led you to in exploring these images? How might you incorporate those understandings in worship? In a prayer of confession, or in the actual liturgy for baptism? What about the water you use at baptism? If you use a basin with water, how might it shift meanings if the water is not crystal clear, but a bit muddy? What about music? The lyrics of “Wade in the Water” suggest a view of baptism that invites people into the muddy mission waters of Christ.

8 Dancing Circles, Climbing Ladders

Leader preparation: When it comes to folk music, a long-standing tradition is that words get changed and adapted. “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” is no exception. Since at least the 1970s people have been singing “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” to the tune of “Jacob’s Ladder.” Pete Seeger is purportedly the writer who coined “brothers, sisters, all” to replace “soldiers of the cross.”

Supplies:

- song: “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle,” (tune: Jacob’s Ladder, 8.8.8.5.)
<http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html>

Perhaps of greater significance than the history of the changed words is what they represent. Theologian Matthew Fox points out how different dancing in a circle is from climbing a ladder. He also points out that in the Bible it is not people who climb the ladder, but God who comes down the ladder to covenant with human life. Fox relates the idea of climbing up to God to humankind’s drive to both succeed and escape from the world. So he prefers the idea of dancing Sarah’s circle as a much more useful image for our relationship to God and each other. [Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1979, 1999), ch. 2]. It doesn’t take much imagination to begin to think of some of the differences between ladders and circles. On a ladder, somebody’s above you, somebody’s below you. You can’t really look anyone else in the eye. It’s hard work. In a circle, we can look at one another. We can begin to envision unity and community and relationship. We can dance. It’s pretty awkward to dance on a ladder.

Here are some ideas to introduce the song into a worship service:

- These songs make an excellent conversation starter around the images of ladders and circles. Sing both songs. Talk about how are they different. Which image best describes our worshiping community? Which do we want to model?
- If the two songs lead to a discussion, then it is worth taking time to look at “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” as an African-American spiritual. Consider that it is not intended as an accurate storytelling song, but as a dramatic springboard for the oppressed people who first sang it to be able to talk about their wanting to aspire to a spiritual world and leave their pain behind. The image of struggle and fight becomes more appropriate.
- The song “Sarah’s Circle” can provide an opportunity to sing in a new configuration. What if, as part of the church service, people formed a big circle to sing it? It could be a regular closing to the Sunday service. What if there was some light drumming, maybe a djembe drummer in the center of the circle? What kind of simple steps could people do that would be easily learned and safe for everyone to participate in? People could write down how they felt singing the song and being in a circle.
- The words can be found in various sources. The following words in *Rise Up Singing* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Corporation, 1992), edited by Peter Blood and Annie Patterson, with editorial assistance from Pete Seeger, are followed by this note: “Pete Seeger says this was written by a group of women in Milwaukee.”

We are weaving (dancing) Sarah’s circle (3x), Sisters one & all [Sisters, brothers all]

We will all do our own naming (3x)

Every round a generation (3x)

Here we seek and find our history [future] (3x)

On and on the circle’s moving (3x)

We are open, we are shining! (3x)

9 Take Your Bible and Take Your Newspaper. Read Both!

Leader preparation: How do the seeds of scripture—planted in a congregation’s worship or study—blossom in our real day-to-day lives outside church in the world? When you view a newspaper, check the news, or get an e-blast, do you connect what you discover there with God’s call to the realm of love and justice? Do you view the world and connect it with scripture?

Supplies:

- Bible
- newspaper

The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth has been pointed to as offering a way of connecting scripture and our world. He is often quoted as saying, “Read the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.” Although we are not certain that those words are his actual words, he often reflected that understanding. In 1963, *Time* magazine in an article about Barth said: “[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians ‘to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.’” For more information link to <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/faq/quotes.aspx?menu=296&subText=468>.

So take up your Bible. Read it. Take up a newspaper. Listen to the news. Connect the two. Listen for the voice of God. For example, prayerfully read Matthew 25:31–46 where God’s chosen one, at the end of time, judges faithfulness based on how one treats “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). How we treat the most vulnerable is understood as how we would treat God’s chosen one.

After you read the passage, take a moment of silent prayer, asking God to be with you as you view the paper. Then, repeating the words “least of these” aloud or silently, begin viewing the news. Be aware when the words connect with what you see or read. Who and what are the least of these that emerge? After some time, close your eyes and pray in silence. What comes to your heart and mind? What might God be calling from you?

Try this for morning devotions as you read the paper, scan the news on your computer/phone, or watch the news. Also, bring a newspaper into worship and let the concerns that arise out of it serve as your petitions in the pastoral or people’s prayer.

Following the Church Year

For more information on the themes and texts of the church year, read Sidney D. Fowler’s article “Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship” under “Following the Church Year” in the Discovery Exploration. The preceding Mission Exploration activities link with several days in the church year and readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Draw upon them as you plan worship and preaching:

- Advent 3, Year B; Proper 25, Year B; Thanksgiving, Year B; or Lent 5, Year C: Activity 3, “Seed Songs of Faith, Love, and Justice,” based on Psalm 126.
- Baptism of Jesus, Year A, based on Matthew 3:13–17, Year B based on Mark 1:9–11, Year C based on Luke 3:21–22: Activity 7, “Jesus’ Baptism and Mission: Stepping into the Mud.”

- Proper 6, Year B, based on Mark 4:26–34, or Proper 22, Year C, based on Luke 17:5–10: Activity 2, “Waiting for the Word: The Seed Breaks Forth”; Activity 3, “Seed Songs of Faith, Love, and Justice”; Activity 4, “Seed Parables to Act Out in Worship”; Activity 5, “The Realm of God is Like a Garden”; and Activity 6, “Seeds of Change: Discovering a Parable from Transgender Perspectives.”
- Proper 21, Year B: Activity 1, “Take My Life, God, Let It Be Consecrated—Preparing for Your Mission and Ministry,” based on the book of Esther.
- Reign of Christ, Year A: Activity 9, “Take Your Bible and Take Your Newspaper. Read Both!” based on Matthew 25:31–46.

Attachment: Activity 1

The Parable of the Growing Seed and the Parable of the Mustard Seed

<p><i>(Narrator, the storyteller, enters and takes his/her place at a reading stand and begins.)</i></p> <p><i>Narrator (after a pause):</i></p> <p>Jesus used little stories to explain big ideas to his followers. They are called parables. Listen now to a parable from the Gospel of Mark, chapter four, verses twenty-six to thirty-four. Jesus is speaking to a little group that was gathered with his disciples.</p> <p><i>(Brief pause)</i></p>	
<p><i>Narrator (resumes speaking at the same time the two actors enter):</i></p> <p>Jesus said to them, "The dominion of God is as if a farmer would scatter seed on the ground,</p> <p><i>(brief pause)</i></p>	<p><i>Actor A represents the earth and growing seed. Actor B is the one who plants—the Farmer. A enters and crouches down, head to the floor, and is still. B enters and standing, sows some seeds on the back of A. Freeze.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i></p> <p>And the farmer would sleep and rise night and day.</p> <p><i>(Brief pause)</i></p>	<p><i>Actor A curls up to sleep (facing away from B, who still remains motionless) and after a moment, rises, stretches and looks at B, sees nothing has happened and then curls up to sleep again, facing away from A. Freeze for a few seconds.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i></p> <p>And the seed would sprout and grow, without the farmer's knowing how.</p> <p><i>(Brief pause)</i></p>	<p><i>Actor B "sprouts" by rising to knees and looking upward. Then actor A awakens, gets to knees while looking at B and is surprised to see B has sprouted. Freeze</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i></p> <p>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain in the head.</p> <p><i>(Brief pause).</i></p>	<p><i>Actor A goes back to sleep, Actor B continues to grow, becoming first a stalk (standing up) then the head (cups hands below chin) then the full grain in the head) puts hands above shoulder height, palms upward, eyes upward. Freeze.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i></p> <p>But when the grain is ripe, at once the farmer goes in with a sickle, because the harvest has come.</p>	<p><i>Actor A awakens, is surprised to see the fully-grown plant, rises and gently "carries" the grain away.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i></p> <p>And then Jesus told them another parable:</p> <p>With what can we compare the dominion of God, or what parable will we use for it?</p>	
	<p><i>Actors A and B enter again. This time Actor A and B are both planters of seeds. They stand side by side. Freeze.</i></p>

Attachment: Activity 1 (Continued)

<p><i>Narrator:</i> The dominion of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.</p>	<p><i>Actors A and B this time are both doing the same thing. They both pantomime holding a tiny seed in their fingers, and then planting it in the ground. Then they freeze, watching the seed.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i> Yet, when it is sown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.</p>	<p><i>A & B "watch" the tree grow between them, and their gaze follows it as it grows above their heads.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i> And puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.</p>	<p><i>A & B "become" the tree, with their arms waving slowly like large branches.</i></p>
<p><i>Narrator:</i> And so, with many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it: he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to the disciples. <i>(Pause)</i> Here ends the reading from God's holy word. <i>(Narrator walks off.)</i></p>	<p><i>A & B lower their arms, and quietly walk off.</i></p>

2010 Arthur Clyde

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

The Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann talks about how preaching and worship can be a “counter-imagination of the world.” Through scripture, preaching, and worship, God creates a fresh vision of the world that is one of God’s justice and compassion and that stands against all forms of oppression. [Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.]

Scripture, especially enlivened in worship and preaching, inspires people of faith to see the world differently and to hope for the fullness of God’s realm. In scripture and in how it is lived out in worship (as by walking with Jesus through the church year or through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion), we experience life out of death, hope out of hopelessness, and peace in the midst of warfare. As worship planners, preachers, musicians, and educators we are called, as Brueggemann suggests, to “fund” this imagination, this vision. We are called to lift up this good news that has begun and continues into the fullness of God’s realm.

This Future and Vision Exploration includes nine different suggestions for the setting of worship and links them to the practice of engaging scripture. The three activity suggestions listed under Exploring and Engaging are intended to help you get started with this Exploration. They include ways to assist you in your own personal prayerful preparation and enrichment, ways to enrich worship planning with others, and a beginning activity related to the Exploration for your congregation. The next three activities, under Discerning and Deciding, include a deeper engagement with a particular Bible account, actual liturgies or ideas for worship services, and discernment connected to scripture. The final three suggested

activities, for Sending and Serving, point to the closing time in worship and will offer worship ideas for blessing others and for calling the congregation to acts of God’s justice and compassion. It will also suggest worshipful ideas for ways to link the practice of engaging scripture outside the traditional Sunday worship setting.

About this Exploration

As we look toward a shared future as a community of faith, our encounter with scripture restores our sense of hope, renews the multilayered meanings of the texts, and opens our imaginations. We reclaim the stories that shape us and discover possibilities for change and transformation. Encountering scripture fills us with new vision, opening our hearts to Christ, who invites us to proclaim and celebrate God’s realm. Engagement with the Bible nurtures our faith community from generation to generation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 30:15–20
Hebrews 11:1–16

Leader Preparation

To assist in prayerfully preparing yourself as a worship planner and preacher, check out Activity 1 and 2 in each of the six Encountering Scripture Explorations. Many hymns can be found at www.hymnsite.com. You might find that site helpful in choosing a variety of music for worship. As you begin the Future and Vision Exploration, offer this prayer or one of your own:

*God of Vision,
 kindle a passion for your possibilities of
 hope eternal
 within your people.
 Give us courage, persistence, and
 faithfulness
 as we meet the challenges of our day.
 Where you bring life to death—let us join
 you.
 Where you bring joy out of despair—keep
 us company.
 Where you bring reconciliation from
 division—unite us with you.
 Where you bring peace out of violence—
 show us your way.
 In all our work, in all our worship,
 make us into your people of hope.
 In the name of the Living Christ, Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Choose to Live, Choose to Pray

Leader preparation: Prayer is a choice. We choose to direct our hearts and prayers to the God of life. Deuteronomy 30:15 says there is a choice between life and prosperity, death and adversity. What if we would use this as a starting point for prayer, and decide that we will pray for life? Spoken prayers often contain words that ask God to do something or give something or stop something. These are prayers about the future and what we want or want it to be. We can be sure that God hears all of our prayers. But what about us? After we pray, do we feel that we have simply turned it over to God and can get on with other things? Have we been changed in any way?

Supplies:

- “Prayer Guide,” Attachment: Activity 1

The Prayer Guide is a way of praying that may help us to become more deeply involved in our connectedness to life, to God and God’s world, and enhance our connectedness to the present and future worlds of our experience. Try this way of praying a prayer of preparation before a day’s work, before preparing for a worship service or taking on a planning task, or before teaching a class. It might work best to use this prayer at a regular time, hopefully a time when you are alone and undisturbed. You might wish to try this practice once a day for a week or some period of time, and then evaluate how you feel about it.



2 Engaging the Hidden Depths of Scripture

Leader preparation: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1.) This Bible passage points to hidden depth. How do we plunge the depths of meaning that God offers in God’s word? What is the depth of faith that you bring to reading scripture? Here is a approach to scripture that invites you to go deeper.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Hidden Depths,” <http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=416482&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>
- “Engaging the Hidden Depths of Scripture,” Attachment: Activity 2-1
- “Guided Prayer for Hidden Depths,” Attachment: Activity 2-2

The photographer Ralph Clevenger has created a digital composite photograph that vividly depicts a hidden reality. The reality is—when it comes to icebergs—that only 1/7 to 1/8 of an iceberg can be seen above water. That means that there is far more going on down under water than appears to one’s initial viewing. The

You might also refer to Walter Brueggemann's book of prayers, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The collection is based on the Bible scholar's engagement with scripture while teaching the Bible and in worship. It is filled with prayers that set our hearts right for engaging scripture

photo "Hidden Depths" can function as a visual reminder of the depth and truth that is present in any engagement with scripture. Use the photo and the Guided Prayer for Hidden Depths as a prayerful image to lead you to deeper understanding of scripture.

Additional information: For more information about Ralph Clevenger and his photography, link to <http://www.ralphclevenger.com/>. For a fun science experiment that "proves" that only 1/8 of an iceberg is above water and 7/8 below, link to the experiment at <http://www.cartage.org.lb/en/themes/sciences/earth-science/hydrology/hydrology/Oceans/Experiments/HowMuchIceberg/How-MuchIceberg.htm>.

③ God's Language of Hope and the Future: The Future Is Now

Leader preparation: To move into the future confronts us with change. In the midst we hold to God as unchanging. At the same time we know that the ways we try to express our understandings of God continue to change. We can speak of God as a shepherd, but in an age when shepherds are seldom seen by urban dwellers, for example, we yearn and search for images of today that help us imagine God. New understandings of creation and the universe stretch us to find words that are less worldly, more cosmic.

Supplies:

- (optional) book: *In God's Name* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, illustrated by Phoebe Stone (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994)
- Inclusive language Guide, http://www.ucc.org/worship/inclusive-language/inclusive-language-resources.html-UCC_Brochure

A regained view of the equality of women causes us to rethink male-dominant language in poetry and the workplace. Often this is dismissed as political correctness, but when it is done out of a real passion for God's justice and truth, then it is not about being polite and political; it is about being fair and faithful. As we move into the future, it is important that we remind ourselves about the healthiness of change and the importance of continuing to educate ourselves and our children about the importance of the language we choose. One way we can embrace the future is to seek new and expansive language in the songs we teach children. We can also embrace new musical styles and seek songs for congregational singing that have new and enriched language, including inclusive metaphors and names for God.

These ideas may help prepare to teach children about God in a changing world:

- Gather a group to read a storybook that leads us to an understanding of the variety of names of God. Read Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's *In God's Name* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994). An animated version is also available: <http://videowithvalues.org/education/name.html>. For a clip of the video, link to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byeuazEzFvA>.
- Several denominations, such as the United Church of Christ, have a long-time commitment to language sensitivity. Explore this brochure and other links: http://www.ucc.org/worship/inclusive-language/inclusive-language-resources.html-UCC_Brochure.
- Examine a hymn from an older hymnal and compare it with the version found in a more recently published hymnal. How has the language been altered to be more inclusive? Choose a hymn from your hymnal and rewrite the lyrics to be inclusive. Here is an example: In the older version of

“If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee,” the first verse reads: “If thou but suffer God to guide thee, and trust in him through all thy ways, he’ll give thee strength whate’er betide thee and bear thee through the evil days. Who trusts in God’s unchanging love builds on the rock that naught can move.” Using inclusive language, the verse becomes: “If you but trust in God to guide you, with hopeful heart through all your ways, you will find strength with God beside you to bear the worst of evil days; for those who trust God’s changeless love build on the rock that will not move.”

- Talk about what these words might mean to a child of the twenty-first century: “suffer God to guide thee,” “whate’er betide thee,” “the rock that naught can move.” Think about this. A parent tells a child, “You’re going on and on like a broken record.” The child responds, “What’s a record?”
- Sister Miriam Therese Winter, in response to a question about revising and adapting poetry from the past into new and inclusive language responded: “When I’m gone, I hope someone will do the same for my poems.” Isaac Watts said the same about his work. What do you think about this idea?
- Discuss the adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” What words in songs and hymns that might be hurtful or exclusive? Is it all right to modify them?
- Discuss how it is possible to continue to love and teach about God and Jesus in new ways, with new words and images, and new language, and still embrace the same, unchanging God.
- Sing “God of Change and Glory,” also known as “Many Gifts, One Spirit” (tune: Katherine 6.5.6.5.66), <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/m/a/n/manygift.htm>.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Community Confrontation with Tough Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Leader preparation: Don’t avoid tough texts as you and your worship planning team discern your focus for worship and sermon. Spend prayerful time with the passages that seem strange to your ears. Listen for God’s voice in the texts that offend you or make you uncomfortable. Be honest in such encounters. You may be surprised at how God comes to you. Some of the most powerful worship services emerge out of such engagement. Deuteronomy 30:15–20 may be a good example of such a text. This Hebrew Scripture challenges those who were the future generation of Israel, the next generation after those delivered into the promised land, to choose again to live with God according to God’s way. It also challenges us to choose God and God’s way as we face the future. [For information about the passage, see Walter Brueggemann’s commentary *Deuteronomy* from the Abingdon Old Testament commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 266–71.]

Supplies:

- Bible

The following method, “Confrontation with Scripture,” was initially developed by Ken Smith, director of Congregational Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. It encourages honest and critical engagement—pushing the text, being pushed by the text—to discover meaning. Use it with Deuteronomy 30, or adapt the method as you wish for other tough and challenging texts:

Step 1: What's weird and strange? Begin in silent prayer asking God to come to you in the reading Deuteronomy 30:15–20. Have someone slowly read the passage aloud. Ask people to listen for things that seem strange or weird about the reading. After the reading, make a list of all those strange and weird dimensions. Don't try to make sense of things; allow the passage to be strange. Notice any tensions in you.

Step 2: What are all the possible meanings? Brainstorm with one another all the possible meanings of the passage. Push yourself to come up with meanings—a dozen or so. Include meanings that trouble you and comfort you, meanings that seem reasonable and those that feel off-the-wall. People might get the idea that there is a lot to the passage, that it is thick with meaning.

Step 3: What meaning is emerging for us? Of all the possible meanings, identify the meaning that seems to make most sense and is the most relevant to your community.

Step 4: What challenges our meaning? Become critical and suspicious of your own meaning. How would your context (racial community, economic group, sexual orientation, or ability) challenge or change the meaning of the passage? What if you are suffering from injustice, disease, or violence? What if you are homeless or poor? Be open and allow yourself to be pushed hard by the possibilities of other interpreters “going at” your meaning.

Step 5: Where's God pushing us and our meaning? After critically naming what was strange about the text, identifying possible meanings and, being challenged by suspicions, rest in silent prayer for a moment. Hold all that you explored. Then ask what significant meaning God might be presenting you and your planning group with. What is the one call you hear out of the text?

For more information about this Bible study method and others, link to <http://catechumenate.org/index.php?page=bible-studie>.

5 Singing Our Faith: Hebrews 11:1–16

Leader preparation: Finding just the right song is important. A well-chosen song after a scripture reading or a sermon or a prayer can give the congregation its voice, a chance to respond, to participate. Some scriptures are not very poetic, such as Hebrews 11:1–16: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen . . .” Yet in the hands of a troubadour, even “preachy” words can come alive. This is the case with the songs “Growing in Faith” and “Faith.” The songs’ catchy rhythms and lively melody are sure to catch people up in the idea that faith is an active endeavor.

Supplies:

- music (any hymn or song you want to teach in worship)
- (optional) song leader
- Bible

Prepare people to sing the song. Perhaps a song leader could teach the chorus at the beginning of the service. Have someone read Hebrews 11:1–16. Follow with the singing of “Growing in Faith” (https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1195294017?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=28981&store_id=1401) or another song such as “Faith” by John Hartley (<http://www27.brinkster.com/johnhartley/music/song-15.html>). Follow this with a reflection or perhaps a dialogue with the congregation around these questions.

- What hopes do you have for our future as a congregation?
- What hopes do you have for yourself? For others?
- If faith can move mountains, what are the mountains we need to move?
- Are we growing in faith?
- How far have we come?
- How have we come this far?

Conclude with a prayer such as the following:

*O God of our future,
we pray for faith to move the mountains that stand before us
so that we may journey in your way.
You have brought us this far by faith.
Bless us that we may grow in faith to be strong to face your future.
In your Holy Name we pray, Amen.*

Other hymns and songs that connect with Hebrews 11:1–16 include “We’ve Come This Far by Faith” (lyrics at <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/78155>) and “Great Is Your Faithfulness” (original lyrics and tune at <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/g/g390.html>).

6 Ubuntu—Dance a New Song

Leader preparation: Ubuntu is a word from Africa out of a Zulu and Sotho saying that means “I am because you are.” Bishop Desmond Tutu has said that this concept may indeed be the biggest gift of Africa to the world—the understanding that “my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours.” In African worship, the idea of “I am because you are” is exhibited in the way people participate fully. Dancing and movement are community actions through which people express their participation in an imagined world in which we all are one in body and spirit. John Cilliers, a South African teacher and liturgist, put it this way: “Small wonder then that dancing is so important in African worship services. It expresses, in a dynamic and corporeal way, the essence of participatory identity. One could even say: ‘I dance (with you), therefore I am.’ We dance ourselves into existence, together.” The idea of an African congregation silent and immobile is unimaginable. Yet in many Eurocentric worship services that is the norm. What follows is a look at movement and dancing in worship with some possibilities for broadening a worship experience.

Supplies:

- willing participants
- computer with Internet access and speakers
- Desmond Tutu’s message to the Rights and Humanities Global Leaders Conference, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOaJYtbZcfk>
- Interview with V. J. Kule <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129258724>
- Daddy Owen’s performance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrC9XzX5PFs>

Find a group that is willing to explore African music and dance and the concept of Ubuntu. Have the group to listen to Bishop Desmond Tutu’s message to the Rights and Humanities Global Leaders Conference in April, 2009. Link to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOaJYtbZcfk>. Discuss what the “new” message of Ubuntu offers to the world. Next, listen to a National Public Radio interview with V. J. Kule about how youth in Africa are experiencing a new wave of gospel dance music. Link to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129258724>. Discuss how the music of Lingala might relate to the message of Ubuntu. Discuss what similarities and differences there might be with U.S. church culture. Listen

to Daddy Owen’s performance of Tobina, the song mentioned in the interview. Link to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrC9XzX5PFs>. If there is time, look at some recent gospel songs with movement from Africa such as one by Kenyan gospel music artist Joyce Kinuthia, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGLvjUve-VM>. The next topic for discussion can be how the use of movement/dance/body in worship might help a group feel closer in spirit to Christian sisters and brothers elsewhere in the world. Ask questions such as these:

- Why is it a good thing to experience the diversity of the body of Christ through songs and arts from cultures other than our own?
- How does this help us imagine what the realm of God must really be like in God’s completed form?

Finally, if the group wants to explore how some of these ideas might be introduced into a worship service where it does not already happen, consider these ideas. Introduce some African drumming, perhaps as a call to worship. How might this help to introduce a wider worldview? How might some movement be introduced? Could people move to music in a way that would allow for various levels of participation?

Consider this example: Invite the congregation to join in singing “Siyahamba” (<http://ingeb.org/spiritua/siyahamb.html>). Give permission to sing in either English or Xhosa. Invite the congregation either to sing or move or do both. Some could walk rhythmically in place and others remain seated. Some might choose to do a march around the church while singing. The point is to give options to people that allows for all to participate in ways they are able. If you can, add African drums to the mix.

Be sure to give the congregation some of the insights of the study group that looked at Ubuntu and African dance in worship. This might be a time when youth can lead the way in exploring an exciting new contribution to worship.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 A Child Among Them: Picturing and Praying the Future

Leader preparation: Diego Rivera (1886–1957) was a famous Mexican painter known for his large murals that occupied public spaces and buildings. Although he used a variety of artistic styles over his lifetime, he is known as a “social realist.” His art depicted the economic, political, and social realities, the daily life, of common people. In 1926, when he painted “Two Women and a Child,” Rivera had returned to Mexico after time in Europe and was especially devoted to painting both the public murals and the indigenous Indians of Mexico. For more information about Diego Rivera, link to <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Pu-Ro/Rivera-Diego.html>.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Two Women and a Child: by Diego Rivera Rivera, <http://shop.famsf.org/do/product/PostersAndPrintsDeYoungPosters/RIVERA--TWO-WOMEN-AND-A-CHILD-POSTER-R1200>

View Rivera’s painting. Let it lead you into a time of prayer for the future and for future generations. Spend a few moments first gazing on the picture. Then close your eyes, and ask God to be with you as you explore the painting.

Explore the painting with questions such as these:

- What is the mood that is conveyed to you in the painting? What about the painting seems to create the mood? Light? Color? Expressions on faces and bodies?
- Given what you know about Diego Rivera, what mood and meaning might he meant to convey?
- How would you describe the economic or social status of the people in the painting?
- What kind of relationship do you think exists between the two women? How does the child, held by one woman, impact the relationship?
- How would you describe each person in the painting? The woman whose face you see, the woman with her back to you, the child that is held? Why?
- Describe the bowl in the painting. What are all the possibilities for why Diego Rivera placed it in the painting?
- One woman holds the child, sitting with her legs crossed. The other woman kneels with her hands enfolded. What might these postures convey?
- What might be the significance of the child in the painting—with only hand, clothed arm, and head visible?
- What hopes, fears, emotions, and commitments might each of the women have for the child?

After exploring these questions, close your eyes and see if anything about the painting lingers in your imagination. What prayer might it invoke from you? Consider the children in your congregation. Consider the relationship that you and others in your congregation have with children. Consider your deep hopes for all God’s children. What is your prayer for the children? What is your prayer for the world’s children? Gaze prayerfully one more time at the painting. What might God be calling on you to pray, do, express, or advocate?

8 Come to the Feast: Holy Communion and the Future

Leader preparation: Traditionally, when it comes to the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, people have an image of Jesus at his Last Supper. The focus is a meal of remembrance—often a time of sadness focusing on the death of Christ. There is also another image of the Lord’s Supper. However, it’s not so much one of remembrance as it is one of the future. The hymn “As We Gather at Your Table,” contains both remembrance—particularly the “sacred stories” of scripture—and the future—particularly pointing to a “holy banquet.” This image of the holy banquet connects the story of God’s Great Banquet found in Luke 14:16–24 and Matthew 22:1–14 with communion. The feast is not embedded in a time long ago, but is a hope, a vision of the realm of God where all gather around God’s generous table.

Supplies:

- song: “As We Gather at Your Table” (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D), <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html>; tune: <http://www.ccel.org/cceh/0001/x000147.htm>

In planning for your next service of Holy Communion, think about the future as much as remembrance. Allow communion to be a time filled with joy and hope. For example, begin the liturgy for communion with the following words and then invite children and others to process in with the bread and wine. They may process to the sounds of drums or joyful songs. Some possibilities for joyful processional music include: “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ” (<http://home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/employ.htm>), “We Are Marching in the Light of God” (<http://ingeb.org/spiritua/siyahamb.html>), or “Halle, Halle, Halleluja” (<http://www.ccel.org/cceh/0001/x000147.htm>)

www.hymnsite.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2026). Later, while people commune, invite the congregation to continue to joyfully sing other hymns, such as “As We Gather at Your Table.”

You might begin the liturgy with these words followed by a joyful procession:

One: Beloved friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God!

All: Women and men, youth and children, come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and gather about Christ’s table.

9 Down with Death, Up with Life: Scripture and Funerals

Leader preparation: In addition to Sunday worship there are occasional services in the life of congregations that are formed and shaped by the Living God through scripture. Funerals and memorial services that lift up eternal hope find inspiration in the rich resources of scripture where we discover God who brings life out of death. Past, present, and future converge under God’s ongoing care.

Supplies:

- Tom Long Interview on Funerals, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGNn15ozLvU>.

Funerals and memorial services do include time of remembrance and celebration of the life of the one who has died. Such services offer love and care for the family and friends that gather. Yet Christian funerals suffer when they only speak of the one who died. Out of death, God brings life. Engaging that biblical good news is vital to the service as well. In *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Thomas Long sees how such services can be powerful testimonies to the God of life and eternal hope—a testimony grounded in scripture. “Funeral sermons that spend all of their time on gentle themes of comfort and pastoral care miss both an opportunity and the point. Death is running after the pilgrim throng, pointing gleefully at the lifeless body and trying to drown out the songs of resurrection. It is the great privilege of the funeral preacher to shake a fist in the face of Death, to proclaim again the vow of baptism and the cry of Easter triumph: ‘O Death, we reject all your lies! O Death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ!’ [(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 188]. View an interview with Tom Long about his research on funerals at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGNn15ozLvU>.

These scriptures and hymns can assist you in shaping funeral and memorial services that are both services of remembrance and of resurrection hope!

Selected Scripture Suggestions for Funerals, Burials, and Memorial Services

Job 19:1, 21–27a: I know that my redeemer lives.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–15: To everything there is a season.

Isaiah 40:1–11: Comfort, comfort my people

Isaiah 40:28–31: Shall renew their strength, mount up with wings like eagles

Isaiah 43:1–3: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

Lamentations 3:17–26, 31–33: God’s steadfast love never ceases.

Micah 6:6–8: To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God

Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd.

Psalm 42: As a deer longs for flowing streams

Psalm 46: God is our refuge and strength.

Psalm 77: I cry aloud to God that God might hear me.

Psalm 121 I will lift up my eyes to the hills.
Matthew 6:25–34: Do not worry about tomorrow.
Matthew 25:31–40: As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.
Mark 15:33–39; 16:1–7: He is risen, he is not here.
John 11:21–26a: I am the resurrection and the life.
John 11:32–39a, 41–44: The raising of Lazarus: Unbind him, let him go.
John 14:1–6, 18–19, 25–27: Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Romans 8:31–39: Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
1 Corinthians 13:1–13: And the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 15:51–57: Behold, I tell you a mystery.
2 Timothy 2:8–12a: Having died with him, we also will live with him.
1 Peter 1:3–9: We have been born anew to a living hope.
Revelation 7:13–17: God will wipe away every tear.
Revelation 21:1–7 Behold, I make all things new.

Selected Hymns and Songs for Funerals, Burials, and Memorial Services

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”
“Abide with Me”
“Amazing Grace”
“Be Now My Vision”
“Be Not Dismayed”
“Be Still My Soul”
“Bless Be the Tie that Binds”
“For All the Saints”
“God Is My Shepherd”
“God of Our Life”
“God’s Eye Is on the Sparrow”
“Jesus, I Live to You”
“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You”
“Lead Us from Death to Life”
“I Come to the Garden Alone”
“In the Bulb There Is a Flower”
“In the Midst of New Dimensions”
“I’ve Got Peace Like a River”
“I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry”
“My Life Flows on in Endless Song”
“Nada te Turbe/Nothing Can Trouble”
“On Eagle’s Wings”
“Precious Lord, Take My Hand”
“Shall We Gather at the River”
“Softly and Tenderly”
“What Wondrous Love Is This”

Following the Church Year

For more information on the themes and texts of the church year, read Sidney D. Fowler's article "Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship" under "Following the Church Year" in the Discovery Exploration, Attachment, Activity Supplement. The preceding Future and Vision Exploration activities link with several days in the church year and readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Draw upon them as you plan worship and preaching:

- Epiphany 6, Year A, or Proper 18, Year C: Activity 1, "Choose to Live, Choose to Pray" and Activity 4, "Community Confrontation with Tough Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15–20."
- Proper 14, Year C: Activity 2, "Engaging the Hidden Depths of Scripture" and Activity 5, "Singing Our Faith: Hebrews 11:1–16."
- Proper 24, Year A, based on Matthew 22:15–22: Activity 8, "Come to the Feast: Holy Communion and the Future."

Attachment: Activity 1

Prayer Guide

Find a quiet space. Some soft music might be nice.

Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and take three deep breaths. As you do, say these words to yourself: "I am in God's world. God's world is within me. We are one."

Breathe slowly, regularly, easily, calmly. As you relax, let your mind begin to imagine anything that is an anxiety, a trouble, a worry, and let it fly gently away from you. Then begin to let your mind focus on some image that you hope for the future. Be patient. It need not come quickly. It might not be there today. Let your mind be open. Here are some of the images that you might begin to hold for your future. You might find it helpful to begin silently with, "O God, I imagine . . ." You might say it again, and keep breathing, and see what image of life, of future emerges in your thoughts.

Instead of simply praying for peace, imagine times of peace that you have known and give thanks for it. Imagine what peace would look like now. Hold the thought in your mind. Let it shape itself.

Instead of just praying for healing for yourself or others, imagine healing that you or others have experienced and give thanks for it. Imagine what you or someone looks like, completely healed and active. Hold the thought in your mind. Let it shape itself.

Instead of simply praying for an end to poverty, imagine times when people have been cared for and fed, and give thanks for them. Then envision people who are well cared for, well fed, and healthy. Hold the thought in your mind. Let it shape itself.

Instead of simply praying for an end to environmental destruction, imagine bright skies, beautiful streams, growing things that you have enjoyed. Give thanks for them. Then envision a green planet, clean running streams, bright skies. Hold the thought in your mind. Let it shape itself.

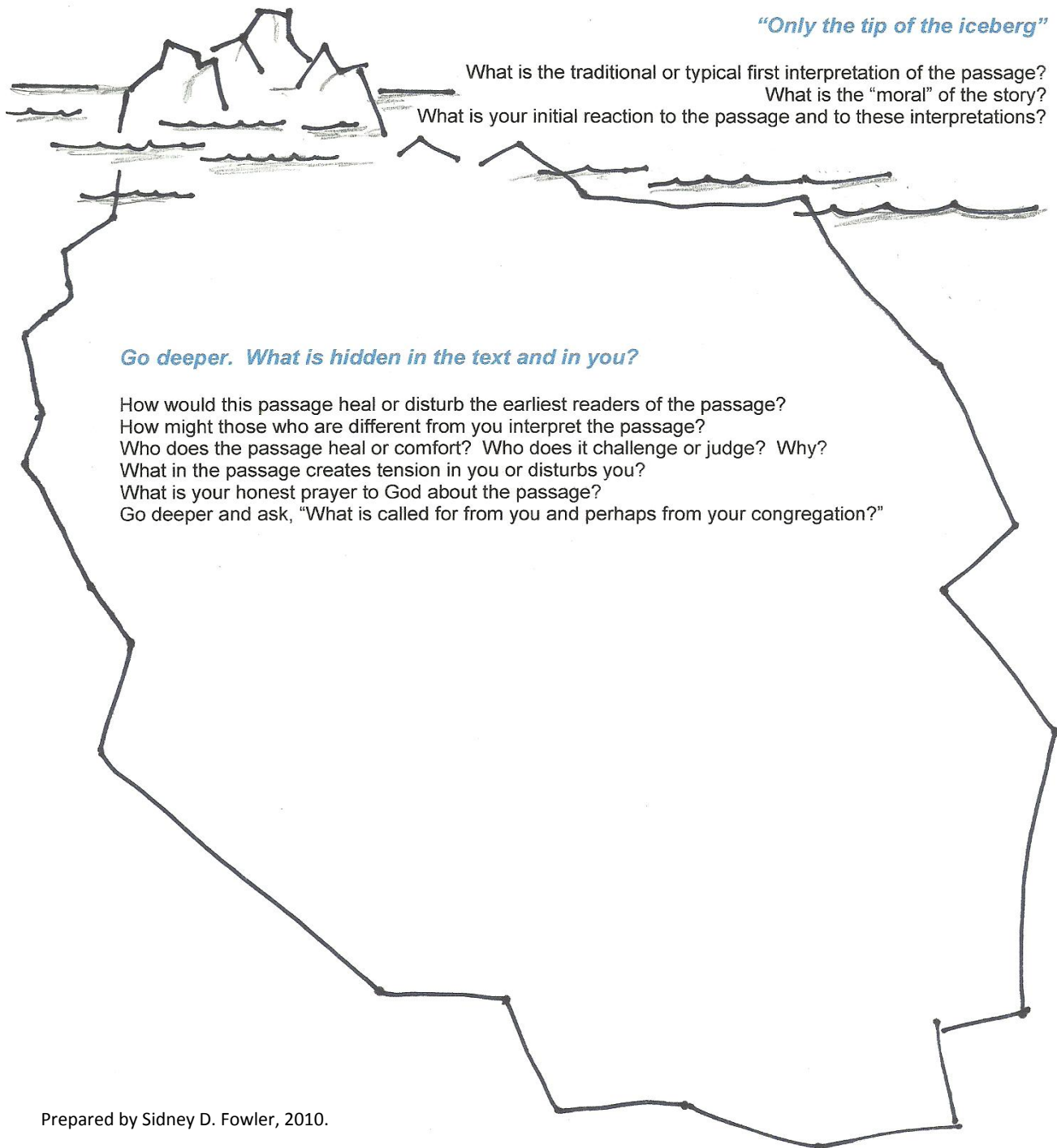
Be sure to end the time of prayer with thanks to God for the time together.

Take three deep breaths, open your eyes. Sit quietly until you are ready to go on with your day. Have faith that you are an active participant in God's world, that you are in God, and God in you. Rest in the thought that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Attachment: Activity 2-1

ENGAGING THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF SCRIPTURE

Based on the photo "Hidden Depths" by Ralph Clevenger



Prepared by Sidney D. Fowler, 2010.

Attachment: Activity 2-2

Guided Prayer for Hidden Depths

Step 1: View the artwork “Hidden Depths” and pray. Spend time carefully viewing the photograph. Alternate between looking at the photograph and closing your eyes imagining the photograph. What about the image stays in your mind’s imagination when your eyes are closed? How might you connect your impression of the image and your viewing of scripture? Be aware of God’s presence. As you close your eyes, from time to time, pray that God may lead you into the deeper meaning of the Bible passage that you are engaging. Continue to be prayerful as you move through the following steps.

Step 2: Read Hebrews 11:1–16 aloud. Pause if you wish along the way to imagine the passage. Similar to your viewing of “Hidden Depths,” alternate between viewing/reading the text and closing your eyes in prayer.

Step 3: Identify any surface or “only the tip of the iceberg” meanings. Complete the first three questions on the worksheet “Engaging Hidden Depths” under the heading “Only the tip of the iceberg.” Are you familiar with the passage? If you are, what’s the typical meaning that people have ascribed to the passage? If you are not familiar with it, what is the simplest meaning that comes out of it for you? How would you complete phrase “The moral of the passage is . . .”? What is your first response to these initial meanings?

Step 4: Go deeper by identifying what might initially be hidden. Again close your eyes, and visualize the photo and the huge iceberg that is under the deep waters. Ask God to draw you deeper into the meaning of the passage. Complete the second set of questions on the worksheet. Be as honest as possible. Identify your own deepest questions, doubts, or insights into the passage. Imagine how others are deeply touched—healed or troubled—by the passage as well.

Step 5: Share the journey below the surface. How might God be calling you to share your discoveries about the text in worship and preaching? How might you invite others into their own deepening exploration of the passage through worship?

Step 6: Rest and pray. View the artwork “Hidden Depths” once again. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for any understandings and calls for action that may have surfaced while engaging the Bible passage.

Attachment: Activity Supplement

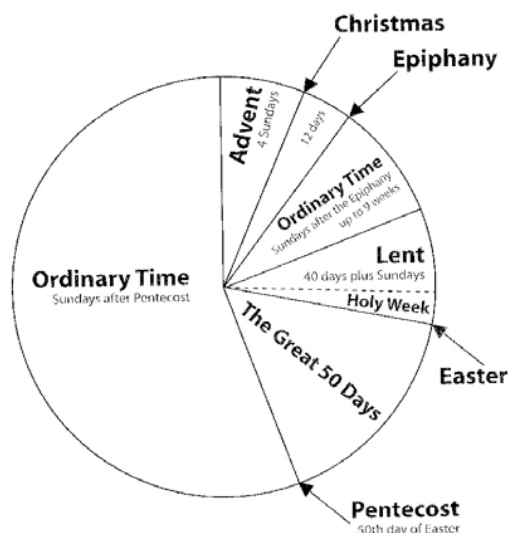
Looking at the Church Year, Scripture, and Worship
Themes, Traditions, and Texts
 Sidney D. Fowler

Through the church year, we—as both a community at worship and as individual people of faith—remember and engage in God’s holy time of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation. Year after year, this practice assists in transforming us into the fullness of Christ. The annual journey is most often guided by Bible readings as suggested in a lectionary. (The Revised Common Lectionary is an ecumenical three-year cycle of readings for worship and preaching.)

Yes, the church year is shaped by scripture, but the church year, its themes, and our worship often influence our understandings of scripture. The relationship between the church year and the lectionary is more than coincidental. The relationship is complementary. “Calendar and lectionary ground us in the deeply narrative nature of the human psyche and of the biblical narrative.” (Daniel Benedict, *Patterned by Grace: How Liturgy Shapes Us*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007, 66)

Listed below are the major themes, traditions, and texts drawn from the church year.

Exploring Themes and Texts of the Church Year



The Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and Days after the Epiphany

ADVENT

Includes:

First Sunday of Advent to the fourth Sunday in Advent

Traditional themes:

Watch, wake, expect, hope, "Prepare the Way," "O Come, Emmanuel," "the Mighty One has done great things"

Attachment: Activity Supplement (Continued)

"Advent derives from the Latin *adventus*, which means 'coming.' The season proclaims the comings of the Christ—whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and the Spirit, and whose return in final victory we anticipate. Each year Advent calls the community of faith to prepare for these comings; historically the season was marked by fasts and preparation." (*The United Methodist Book of Worship (UMBOW)*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 238)

In more recent times, the days of penitence are usually not emphasized. For example the theme of "joy" is often observed on the third Sunday of Advent at the lighting of a pink/rose candle in the Advent wreath. This follows the Roman tradition of *Gaudete*, which is Latin for "rejoice."

Distinctive practices:

Advent wreath, advent calendars, hanging of the greens, Las Posadas, Advent Lesson and Carols.

Usually observed with the use of the colors of purple and/or blue.

Traditional texts:

- In the readings, Isaiah and other prophets are prominent. (For example: in year A, the peaceable realm in Isaiah 11:1-10; in year B, good news comes to the wilderness in Isaiah 40:1-11; and in year C, in Zephaniah 3:14-20, the vision of the return of those in exile.)
- The gospel readings of the first Sunday in each year are all apocalyptic. (For example: in year A, Matthew 24:36-44; in year B, Mark 13:24-37; and in year C, Luke 21: 25-36.)
- Readings for the second and third Sunday refer to the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist. (For example: in year A, Matthew 3:1-12; in year B, Mark 1:1-18; and in year C, Luke 3:1-6.)
- On the fourth Sunday of Advent the annunciation of the birth is proclaimed and usually links with Mary, the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55), and/or Joseph. (For example: in year A, Matthew 1:18-25; in year B, Luke 1:26-38; and in year C, Luke 1:39-55.)

CHRISTMAS

Includes:

Nativity of Christ, Sundays after Christmas, New Year's Eve and Day, and the Epiphany

Traditional themes:

God-with-Us, incarnation, Word made flesh, "unto us a child is born," peace on earth/good will, covenant, manifestation, "Arise, shine!"

"Christmas is a season of praise and thanksgiving for the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The name Christmas comes from the season's first service, the Christ Mass. Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epiphania*, which means 'manifestation.' (*UMBOW*, 269)

Distinctive practices:

Christmas Eve service, Festival of Lessons and Carols, Covenant Renewal Service, Watch-night, Dia de Los Reyes

Usually observed with the use of the colors white or gold.

Attachment: Activity Supplement (Continued)

Traditional Texts:

- On Christmas, Hebrew Scripture draws again from the prophet Isaiah and the same readings are used for all three years of the cycle. For example, for Christmas eve/day, see Isaiah 9:2–7 (“the people who walked in darkness. . .” and “unto us a child is born. . .”).
- The gospel readings for Christmas Eve/Day are also the same across the cycles drawing from Luke 2:1–20 (In those days, a decree went out) and John 1:1–14 (Word became flesh). But in readings for other Sundays, the readings may include the slaughter of the innocents in year A (Matthew 2:13–23); Simeon and Anna in year B (Luke 2:22–40), and young Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41–52) in year C.
- The reading for Epiphany is the story of the Magi found in Matthew 2:1–12.

ORDINARY TIME: THE DAYS AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Includes:

The baptism of Jesus, the second through the eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, and the last Sunday after the Epiphany, usually observed as Transfiguration Sunday

Traditional themes:

Light of the world, “behold your Light has come,” “a light to the nations,” “this is my beloved,” baptism and baptismal renewal, first miracle at the wedding at Cana, transfiguration

“The Season after the Epiphany is a season of Ordinary Time. . . It is ordinary in that it stands between the two great Christological cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost and has no central theme. The First Sunday focuses on the Baptism of Christ and the Last Sunday on the Transfiguration” (UMBOW, 298).

Distinctive practices:

Celebration of baptisms and baptismal renewal/reaffirmation

Usually observed with the use of the color green with white used for the Baptism of Jesus and Transfiguration Sundays.

Traditional texts:

- Although Isaiah 60:1–6 (“Arise, shine for your light. . .”) is used on the festival Epiphany, other prophetic Hebrew texts used during these days also express the growing revelation and manifestation of God to the world.
- The baptism of Jesus is used on the first Sunday (in year A, Matthew 3:13–17; year B, Mark 1:4–11; and year C, Luke 3:15–17, 21–22). The last Sunday draws upon the account of the Transfiguration and bridges this season with the upcoming season of Lent (in year A, Matthew 17:1–9; in year B, Mark 9:2–9; in year C, Luke 9:28–43). Other gospel lessons during this time emphasize ways God is made manifest in the early ministry of Jesus (as in year B, Jesus’ call of the fishers in Mark 1:14–20, Jesus’ exorcism of an unclean spirit in Mark 1:21–28, and Jesus’ healing of many in Mk 1:29–39).
- One text used throughout the church’s history with the Sunday’s following Epiphany is the Jesus’ miracle at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1–11). It is often noted as the first manifestation, first miracle. In the Revised Common Lectionary, it is the gospel reading for the second Sunday after the Epiphany, year B.

Attachment: Activity Supplement (Continued)

The Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost

LENT AND HOLY WEEK

Includes:

Ash Wednesday, first through fifth Sunday in Lent, sixth Sunday of Lent known as Passion/Palm Sunday, and Holy Week including Holy or Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday

Traditional themes:

"Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return," repentance, penitence, forgiveness and reconciliation, renewal, covenant, conversion, baptismal preparation, "Hosanna!," "on the night Jesus was betrayed," atonement, "When I survey the wondrous cross," "It is finished"

"Lent is a penitential season of self-examination, prayer, and fasting that precedes the observance of the Triduum (Maundy Thursday evening, Good Friday, and the Vigil of Easter which begins on Saturday night). In Western churches, the season opens on Ash Wednesday and consists of forty days excluding Sundays. The term *Lent* is derived from roots that mean *to lengthen*. The season points to the spring of the year and to the increasing daylight hours which spring brings. . . (Historically,) in some places this season was the intensified period of preparation for those who were to be baptized on the eve of Easter." (*Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, Local Church Ministries, 2002), 21-22.)

Distinctive practices:

Ash Wednesday liturgy, giving up something, removing the "Alleluias," the catechumenate and preparation for baptism, Passion/Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, footwashing, Tenebrae, stripping the altar, Stations of the Cross.

Usually observed with the use of the color purple with red as an alternative for Holy Week and no color for Good Friday.

Traditional texts:

- For every year in the cycle, Ash Wednesday texts call on believers to "rend their hearts" and "return to God" (Joel 2:12-17); to observe a fast that looses the bond of injustice and lets the oppressed go free (Isaiah 58:1-12); and to humbly practice prayer and giving (Mt 6:1-6, 16-21).
- Readings are rooted in the ancient teaching of the church in preparation for baptism. The readings for Lent, regardless of the year in the cycle, have the following rhythm: "First we turn away from evil and toward Jesus Christ (Lent 1 and 2). Then we look at what we thirst for in life and ask for empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Lent 3 and 4). Then we put our whole life and trust in Christ, who leads us even through death into life (Lent 5)" (Joseph Russell, *The New Prayer Book Guide to Christian Education*, 69).
- Passion/Palm Sunday recounts both the palm Sunday narrative and the full passion of Christ from each gospel depending on the year. The baptismal hymn found in Philip-pians 2:5-11 (Have this mind among you. . . Christ humbled himself) is used in all years.
- During Holy Week, the gospel readings are drawn from the gospel of John: for Holy Thursday, the foot washing from John 13:1-17, 31b-35; and for Good Friday, the entire trial and passion narrative from John 18:1-19:42.

Attachment: Activity Supplement (Continued)

EASTER THROUGH FESTIVAL OF PENTECOST

Includes:

Easter eve and day, second Sunday to sixth Sunday of Easter, Ascension, Day of Pentecost

Traditional themes:

Liberation, resurrection, Alleluia, Christ is risen indeed, new life, baptism, transformation, gift of the Spirit, birth of Church

"The Easter Season, also known as the Great Fifty Days, begins at sunset on Easter Eve and continues through the Day of Pentecost. It is the most joyous and celebrative season of the Christian year. It focuses on Christ's resurrection and ascension and on the givings of the Holy Spirit on the first Easter (John 20:22-23) and on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). . . The ancient Christian name for this festival is *Pasch*, derived from the Hebrew *pasha* (deliverance or passover), thus connecting the Resurrection to the Exodus." (UMBOW, 368)

Distinctive practices:

Easter Vigil, lighting the paschal/Christ candle, baptism, Easter sunrise services, Ascension and Pentecost celebrations, confirmation.

(Usually observed with the colors white or gold with red for the Day of Pentecost)

Traditional texts:

- The extensive readings for the Easter Vigil rehearse the entire history of God's liberating and saving work—from Creation to Resurrection. For the Easter Sunday liturgies, we hear either John 20:1-18 (Jesus' appearance to Mary in the garden) or a different Easter account depending on the year. For year A, Matthew 28:1-10; for year B, Mark 16:1-8; or year C, Luke 24:1-12. For the other Sundays in Easter, we hear other resurrection accounts as Luke 24:13-49 (the appearance at Emmaus) and John 20:19-31 or descriptions/images of Christ in John as "true vine" and "good shepherd" found in the gospel of John.
- The Ascension account in Luke 24:44-53 as well as the Pentecost account in Acts 2:1-21 are used in all three years of the cycle.

The Season after Pentecost (Ordinary Time)

ORDINARY TIME: THE DAYS AFTER PENTECOST

Includes:

Trinity Sunday, second Sunday after Pentecost to the twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints Day, Thanksgiving, and last Sunday after Pentecost observed as Reign of Christ Sunday

Traditional themes:

Trinity, mission and ministry of the church, the life of faith and in the body of Christ, Jesus' ministry, life of gratitude, life of justice and love, parables, healing, saints, the realm of God

"The Season after Pentecost is not actually a season with a single common focus, but is simply the weeks between the Day of Pentecost and the First Sunday of Advent. . . . During these weeks, as the liturgical scholar Leonel Mitchell puts it, we celebrate 'the time in which

Attachment: Activity Supplement (Continued)

we actually live—the period between the Pentecost and the Second Advent. Two thousand years after the first Pentecost, the church still lives this ‘in between’ time before the fulfillment of time in Christ’s second coming. You might also hear these weeks called ‘the long, green season.’ . . . After Pentecost we settle into the growing season, nourishing the seeds planted at Easter and putting down roots in faith.” (Vicki Black. *Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 115.)

Distinctive practices:

Trinity Sunday, All Saints Day celebrations, Thanksgiving,

Usually observed using the color green with white for Trinity Sunday, All Saints, and Reign of Christ Sunday.

Traditional texts:

- Readings for Ordinary Time are not theme focused, but rather emphasis a continuous reading of the life of Christ from the particular gospels, Hebrew Scripture, and epistles assigned for each year. Year A focuses on the gospel of Matthew with five Sundays from John 6. Readings also come from Genesis and Exodus, as well as Romans and Philippians. Year B focuses on the gospel of Mark with Hebrew Scripture readings that focus on the covenant with David and Wisdom literature, as well as epistle readings from 2 Corinthians, James, and Hebrews. Year C focuses on the gospel of Luke and also highlights the prophet Jeremiah. The epistles used during year C include Galatians and Colossians.
- Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost, points to a theological doctrine, rather than an event. Among passages included: Genesis 1:1–2:4a (the Creation) and Matthew 28:16–20 (“Go therefore and make disciples. . .”) in year A; Isaiah 6:1–8 (“God sitting on a throne, high and lofty”) and John 3:1–17 (“God so loved the world. . .”) in year B; and Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31 (The work of Wisdom) and John 16:12–15 (“When the Spirit of truth comes. . .”) in year C.
- For All Saints Day, the gospels highlight the marks of those who are faithful when threatened even to death. See Matthew 5:1–12 (the Beatitudes) in year A, John 11:32–44 (raising of Lazarus) in year B, and Luke 6:20–31 (the Beatitudes) in year C.
- The gospel readings for Reign of Christ Sunday emphasize eschatological themes and understandings of the realm of God. See Matthew 25:31–46 (when Christ comes in glory. . . the least of these) in year A; John 18:33–37 (Jesus before Pilate—“My realm is not of this world”) in year B; and Luke 23:33–43 (Jesus and the criminal on the cross—“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”) in year C