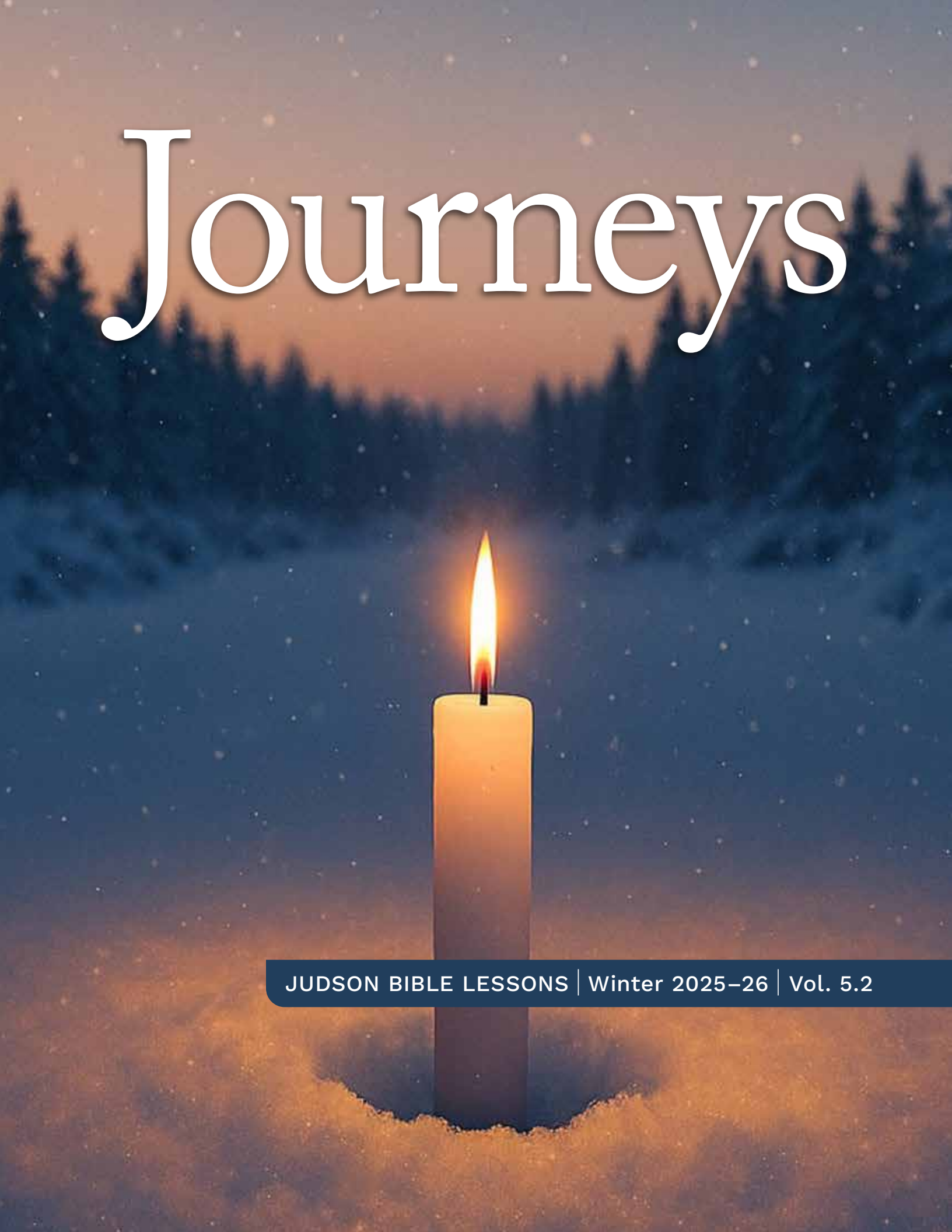
Journeys



JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | Winter 2025–26 | Vol. 5.2

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Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS • WINTER 2025–26 • VOL. 5.2

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About the Quarter

This newly revised edition of *Journeys: Judson Bible Lessons* reflects the thoughtful feedback of our readers and is designed to be both spiritually enriching and adaptable for a variety of learning settings. The Winter 2025–2026 quarter invites us into a season of reflection, renewal, and hope, anchored in the themes of Advent and the transformative power of Scripture.

Each lesson offers a balance of biblical scholarship and life application, encouraging both personal devotion and group study. As we explore the miracles of the Incarnation and Transfiguration, we are reminded of God's enduring presence and grace. Through stories of faith, prayer, leadership, and perseverance, we witness how God meets us in our present moment and equips us for the journey ahead.

Whether you are a teacher or student, we hope this quarter's lessons will inspire deeper discipleship, spiritual growth, and meaningful engagement with your community. May this season renew your spirit and strengthen your walk with Christ as you prepare to face the new year with confidence, knowing that God is with us.

About the Writers

Rev. Dr. May May Latt was born and raised in Burma (Myanmar). She earned her M.Div. from Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), where she later taught Old Testament. She holds a master's degree from Boston University School of Theology and a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Dr. Latt has taught at MIT and Lisu Theological Seminary of Myanmar. She currently serves as Metadata Analyst in Biblical Studies and Archaeology at Atla and as Minister at Milwaukee Myanmar Christian Church. She is married to Dr. Thomas R. Blanton IV, a scholar of New Testament and Ancient Religion. This quarter, she contributed lesson 10: *Teachability*.

Rev. Dr. Carla A. Romarate-Knipel has served as senior pastor of Central Baptist Church of Woodbury, New Jersey, since 2012. She earned her B.Th. and M.Div. degrees from Central Philippine University (CPU), where she also served on the faculty for ten years. Her Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree is from Palmer Theological Seminary. Dr. Romarate-Knipel has published articles in *The Baptist History and Heritage Journal* and currently writes for *The Secret Place* and *Journeys*. She previously pastored churches affiliated with the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches. Carla met her husband, Rev. David N. Knipel, at CPU, and they are blessed with a son, Isaac Norman. This quarter, she contributed lessons 5–9: *Incarnation, Restoration, Spiritual Gifts, Love,* and *Grace Gifts*.

Rev. Meriah J. Tigner is pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Tipton, Indiana. She is passionate about Scripture and helping others engage deeply with God's Word. Her ministry invites people to wrestle with the biblical text while remaining open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Meriah and her husband, Josh, live in Indiana with their menagerie of pets. She enjoys handcrafting items such as arrows, furniture, and art. This quarter, she contributed lesson 11: *Forgiveness*.

Mrs. Korri Garrett Williams began her career as a promotions producer for television networks in Hartford, Connecticut, after earning a B.A. in Broadcast Journalism from Hampton University. She later earned an M.S. in Secondary/Literacy Education from Old Dominion University. Now in her eighteenth year of teaching, Korri has accepted a call to ministry and is extending her passion for education to focus on the mission and teachings of Jesus Christ. Originally from Richmond, Virginia, she now lives in Williamsburg with her husband, Charles David Williams. This quarter, she contributed lesson 12: *Transfiguration*.

Rev. Dr. Michael Woolf serves as the senior minister of Lake Street Church of Evanston, Illinois, and is a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, where he earned his Doctor of Theology (Th.D.) degree. His work centers on justice, particularly through interfaith and Christian perspectives on reparations. His scholarship explores the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s through a practical theological lens. You can follow him on X at @RevMichaelWoolf. This quarter, Dr. Woolf contributed lessons 1–4: *Anticipation, Renewal, Sacrifice,* and *Growth*.

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Lorenzo Scott, Baptism of Jesus, 1987, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

ANTICIPATION

Every Valley Shall Be Filled

> *"'. . . and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"* (LUKE 3:6)

There are few scenes more iconic in Scripture than John the Baptist's call to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." As John was the forerunner to Jesus, this lesson explores the complex relationship between the two and introduces one of the most important hallmarks of God's divine activity—reversal. In the beautiful imagery of mountains being laid low and valleys lifted up, we are asked to consider the ways that God has accompanied us through the mountains and valleys of our own lives, all while considering whether there are any changes we might consider making to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Lesson Objectives

- To develop an understanding of John's ministry and its relationship to the burgeoning Jesus movement.
- To gain understanding of the dynamic of reversal that is one of the key hallmarks of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, revealing that God is not allied with power but is, instead, a friend of those whom society has forgotten.
- To teach individual readers of the study to map the mountains and valleys of their lives, considering the ways they feel called to engage with our world on issues of justice.

Luke 3:1-6 NRSV

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Into the Scripture

The Gospel of Luke is believed to have been written around 80–90 CE, and it is the only gospel to directly state its audience in its first chapter: "I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:3-4). As the writer of both this gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke purports to be collecting data from eyewitnesses, almost like a modern-day anthropologist or historian.

In the first two chapters, Luke outlines how the births of Jesus and John the Baptist were foretold and pays significant attention to both Mary (the mother of Jesus) and Elizabeth (the mother of John). In the third chapter, where our lesson begins, Luke introduces Jesus' ministry with his baptism in the Jordan River by John. Jesus' baptism by John is considered to be one of the most likely events to have actually occurred in the New Testament due to what scholars call the criterion of embarrassment. This line of thinking suggests that Jesus' baptism by John would not have been added by authors of the Gospels because it would have been difficult for them to explain why the Messiah would be baptized by another religious leader.

The congruency between the ministries of John as the forerunner and Jesus the Messiah may have encountered some friction. In presenting their narratives as twinned, Luke may be attempting to argue for the continued cooperation between the groups after the two men's deaths. Indeed, in the events of Acts 19, Paul baptized a group of "disciples" that had received baptism of John but were unaware of the Holy Spirit, meaning that there were groups that were following John's teachings separate from and perhaps in competition with Jesus' movement. Furthermore, Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* (93–94 CE) records some Jews as blaming the destruction of Herod Antipas' army on his execution of John, showing that the memory of John the Baptist continued to hold weight.

Into the Lesson

In Advent, we are invited like John to "prepare the way of the Lord" and "make his paths straight." Yet, that work is not comprised of landscaping; instead, it's about our striving to be friends of God and allies of God's work in the world. Moreover, we are given a striking vision of what the preparing and path making looks like—reversal. Our text reads, "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth" (verse 5). This thought echoes the idea found throughout the New Testament that Jesus' coming changes everything, and that in the middle of that change, what is low will be made high, and what is high will be made low.

One thing is certain: the coming of Jesus in the form of the Kingdom of God is not a friend to the established social order of our world or the order that we have crafted for ourselves in our own lives. To encounter Jesus is to be invited, and perhaps required, to change in a way that we had not imagined. For all the self-help books aimed at getting us to change, doing so often corresponds to discomfort—our mountains are made low, but our valleys can rise and burst into song. But we are often quite fond of the mountains of our lives, and any reversal that impacts a mountain is likely to be met with some well-deserved hesitance.

Our mountains serve as points of pride, anchoring our ego and helping us form our identity. Yet, in the vision of the Kingdom of God, mountains can be slated for demolition. Nonetheless, I have often found that when I am brought low by life is when it has been easier to find God, an insight that many communities—including the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Late Antiquity—have found to be true over time. Human beings, if offered the chance, would be like Peter after the Transfiguration, seeking to dwell on a mountain forever, and yet we see throughout the Gospels that Jesus is not a mountain dweller and that "Jesus people" are much closer to the ground than we probably would prefer to be.

The Tree of Jesse, Unknown Artist (c. 1240, Würzburg, Germany). Image courtesy of the Getty Museum

It is worth pausing to consider that Jesus came into the world in Nazareth, an imperial backwater of the Roman Empire that had a reputation for being "worthless." In 1 Kings 9:10-13, Nazareth is part of a group of cities that King Solomon gave to the king of Tyre as a token of friendship. When he went out to see the cities, he wrote back a rather frank response: "'What kind of cities are these that you have given me, my brother?' So they are called the land of Cabul to this day" (verse 13). *Cabul* means "worthless" or

"good for nothing." Thus, it is no wonder that one of Jesus' future disciples asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" when told about Jesus (see John 1:46).

In the ancient Near East, status and power went together with the divine. If you had money, fame, or influence, then it was because you were blessed by the gods. Jesus' story flips that script on its head, firmly articulating that God is with the weak, poor, and distressed. Those experiencing valleys are not far from the grace of God; they are right in the very heart of God's love. Indeed, when you consider how valleys are made, that might make some sense. Valleys are places where water once flowed, hollowing them out and making their typography reflect the ravages of their geological experience. So, the Kingdom of God's promise to "fill" them is a promise of restoration to wholeness—a welcome reversal.

In the welcome and not-so-welcome reversals that God brings, we are reminded that through it all, we are accompanied. We never do anything alone, and the end is assured: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (verse 6). In knowing how things end up, we can receive the strength we need to endure change, perhaps even coming to celebrate it.

In the welcome and not-so-welcome reversals that God brings, we are reminded that through it all, we are accompanied.

Into Discipleship

In this second week of Advent, we are invited to make clear the paths for God into our lives, which takes place on two fronts: our internal spiritual lives and our world. With regards to our internal spiritual lives, we must ask the question, "What do we need to change in order to experience God?" Change can happen through removal or through addition. In this way, we might think about what we might stop doing, thinking, or celebrating to make ample room for God. Perhaps we would like to stop worrying or judging others or spending too much time angry.

Likewise, in a season like Advent, we might feel a draw to do more with our spiritual lives. One of the primary ways we might grow in our capacity to experience God is by adding a spiritual practice like prayer, fasting (if physically able), meditation, or Bible reading—to name a few. Even practices not typically associated with religion or spirituality (like exercise or going for a walk) can make us more able to experience God, if we think about them as building a more resilient self. What matters is that we pick additions that speak to us wherever we are in our own lives, and that we spend some time before we begin thinking about how we might hold ourselves accountable in our new practices. Practices done in community tend to lend themselves more to accountability and sustainability in the long term.

But our spiritual selves are never disconnected from the world in which we live. Although it may seem like we are individuals, our lives intersect with, affect, and are affected by the lives of others every step along the way. Therefore, it is important not to spiritualize the image of valleys being raised up and mountains being laid low too much. People in our world face real barriers to their flourishing: systemic racism, police violence against Black Americans, and an unjust immigration system fundamentally grounded in exploitation all come to mind. Seeing such injustice in the world, we ought to be moved to act, and it is up to us as Christians to be a part of removing those

obstacles to flourishing by participating in our world with compassion, mercy, and justice.

What are you being called to do in the world? What is your faith moving you to do so that others might have flourishing? How we answer those questions is every bit a part of our spiritual lives and the way-preparing and path-making work to which we are called in Luke 3:1-6. Too often we are content to pretend that our spiritual lives are a retreat from the world in which we live, but our faith ought to move us toward further engagement with and transformation of that world. Our world could do with a few mountains made low, and a few valleys lifted up.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of valleys and mountains, prepare our hearts for your coming by humbling our pride, lifting our burdens, and guiding us to walk in your path of justice and peace. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **Consider the dates when the Gospels were written—from 70 CE to 110 CE. That would be like receiving the first written biography of Martin Luther King Jr. in the 2000s . . . almost unthinkable! What is the role of information in our communities of faith? What are your sources of information? Whom do you trust for spiritual information, and why?**
- **When have you experienced reversal in your own life? Jesus tells us that the first will be last and the last will be first, but what does that mean for us? Surely that image is not at all rosy for those of us who have power in this world.**
- **What do you want to change about your life so that God can do God's transformative work in your life? Try making a list, keeping it, and seeing what stands out to you.**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Have a group member use a pen or pencil to draw a rough sketch of a mountain on a sheet of paper. Then, for as long as you are comfortable, have members of the small group label parts of the mountain with events from their lives, paying particular attention to how they felt the presence of God accompanying them or not during those times. You may find that near the top of the mountain, even though things

are good, God might not have been as important as you'd like, for instance. Such revelations are key to building an introspective, resilient spirituality.

Activity 2

Read the article "Biblical Waters: Can the Jordan River Be Saved?" We oftentimes think about biblical events as happening outside of time and space, but the events of the Bible happened in the real world in real places, like the Jordan River. The once-mighty tributary is facing ecological disruption and pollution, threatening the site of some of the Bible's most important events. What did you think the Jordan River looked like before reading the article? Did you think it was mightier than it turned out to be? Was it disappointing? Our minds often create images that don't map onto reality—does seeing the real Jordan River change how you think of biblical scenes? What about what human beings can do—what's our responsibility in caring for the earth and its special and ordinary places?

Sources and Resources

- Curtiss Paul DeYoung—*The Risk of Being Woke: Sermonic Reflections for Activists*
- Jonathan A. Malone—*A Peculiar Church: Practicing Baptist Theology*
- Alice Burnette Greene—*The Revolutionary Power of the Lord's Prayer*

Scan for *The Risk of Being Woke* by Curtiss Paul DeYoung

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Second Sunday of Advent / Week of 12/5/2021)
Week of December 7, 2025

Sunday, December 7
Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Monday, December 8
Psalm 126; Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:22-25

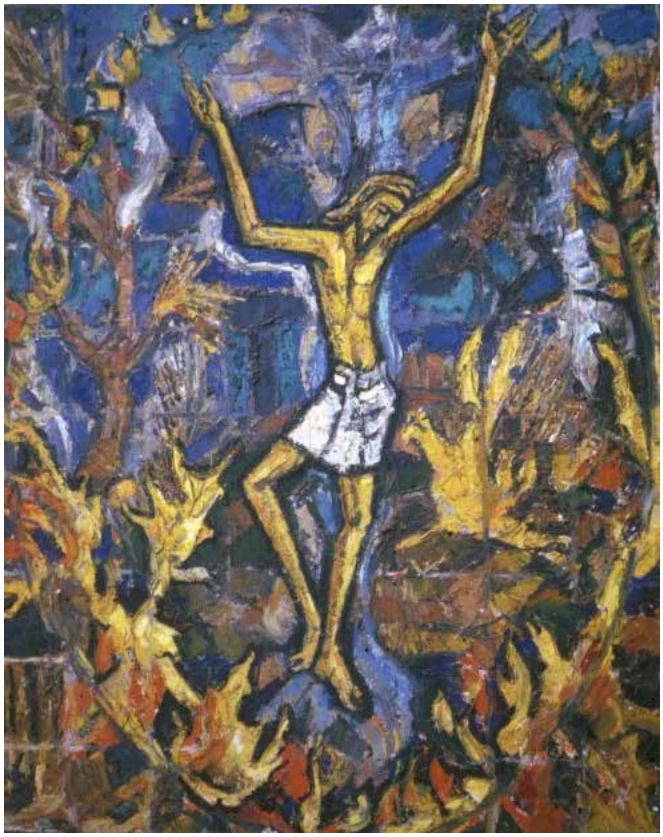
Tuesday, December 9
Psalm 126; Isaiah 19:18-25; 2 Peter 1:2-15

Wednesday, December 10
Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:3-7; Luke 7:18-30

Thursday, December 11
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Friday, December 12
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 8:4-12; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Saturday, December 13
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 9:8-15; Luke 1:57-66



Jyoti Sahi, Lord of Dance, 1980. Oil on canvas

RENEWAL

A God Who Sings

> *"The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."* (ZEPHANIAH 3:17)

In this lesson, readers are asked to consider different images for God that are found in the text from Zephaniah: Warrior, King, and Singer. With such a variety of images, it is only natural that we would be drawn to some and find others challenging. In exploring different images for God, readers are invited to ask questions about the sort of God they imagine and to name the ways that they experience the divine in their daily lives. In growing our vocabulary for God, we may find that our experience of God changes and grows.

Lesson Objectives

- To situate Zephaniah the prophet and the book of the Bible within its appropriate context, shedding light on many of the key images of the text presented.
- To consider the many different genres of literature that comprise Scripture. For instance, this reading is a song, many of which are the oldest extant parts of the Hebrew Bible, but the Bible also contains poetry, prose, narrative, legal codes, and letters.
- To become acquainted with the myriad symbols and representations of God in the Bible, asking key questions about which symbols "work" best for the reader.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSV

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he
has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you
shall fear disaster no more. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear,
O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you
in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18 as on a day of festival. I will
remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 19 I will deal with
all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I
will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will
bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and
praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your
eyes, says the LORD.

Into the Scripture

Zephaniah, the name of the book in the Hebrew Bible and also the titular prophet of the book, was composed in the seventh century BCE. What little we know about Zephaniah comes from the first verse of the text: "The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah" (1:1). Zephaniah is one of the twelve "minor" prophets, a designation of length instituted by St. Augustine rather than a statement about importance of the book.

It was written during the reign of King Josiah, who instituted major reforms based around a rediscovered "Book of the Law" thought by earlier scholars to be Deuteronomy. Zephaniah was part of a religious renaissance in the Kingdom of Judah, which saw a return to the state-sponsored worship of Yahweh and a denigration of the "high places" and worship of the Baals that plagued both the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah for generations.

Zephaniah was aware of how the Assyrians conquered the Kingdom of Israel and dispersed them throughout the vast empire, resulting in the "ten lost tribes of Israel." Subsequently, Zephaniah admonished and called the remnant of Judah to right belief and practice in order to forestall impending judgment by God over the lone Kingdom of Judah.

Zephaniah's name means "Yahweh has hidden," and the prophet offered a route for protection of a remnant of Judah from the wrath of God, the coming "Day of the Lord" that features heavily in Zephaniah's writings, as well of those of prophets like Joel. Consider Zephaniah's description of the Day of the Lord:

> *The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish,*

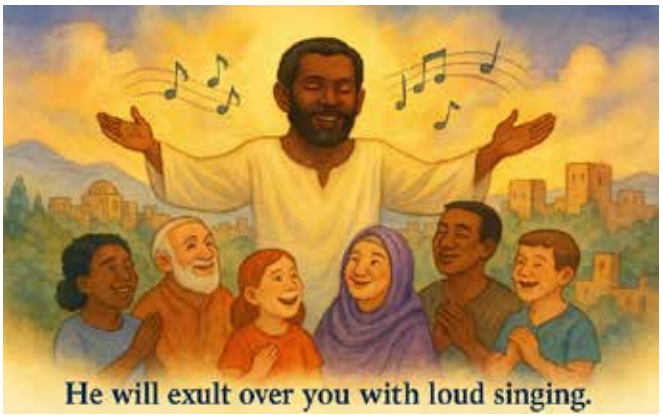
a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung (Zephaniah 1:14-17).

So, while the phrase "Day of the Lord" might sound like a good thing, it most certainly was not a pleasant experience! In sum, Zephaniah's message was a last-ditch effort to preserve the people of Judah from the coming judgment of God, thereby avoiding the portentous dispersal that the Kingdom of Israel suffered.

Into the Lesson

Thank goodness the story does not end with the Day of the Lord. In the text this week, this part of Zephaniah is commonly referred to as the "Song of Joy." The singer is God, and in this text, the remnant of those who are faithful to God are invited to join in a joyful song of praise and exultation. God reigns as king and conquering warrior. Where God once made war via divine wrath on the people of Judah, now God turned God's wrath towards the enemies of Judah and set about restoring the name and place of Judah in the eyes of the nations.

The primary theme is the restoration of relationship with the people of Judah, resulting in the in-gathering of all the dispersed, a particularly resonant promise for a people who had seen the Kingdom of Israel conquered, subjugated, and forcibly assimilated. It is not merely the brave, heroic, lucky, or whole that participate in this in-gathering, but the entire community, even the lame and outcast—two identities that had been excluded from temple worship in the past.



The vision of Israel restored is a more inclusive, more intimate place than it had been before the judgment of God. Indeed, the outcast and lame have their shame turned into praise, and the entire community that is gathered will be renowned in the estimation of other nations and peoples. For a tiny kingdom trapped between Egypt and Assyria/Babylon/Persia and relatively little is noted in those imperial records, such a promise must have seemed not only unlikely but also wondrous.

At the same time, this glorious in-gathering of the community is predicated on God as Warrior-King, who is able to subdue enemies. In this vision, God has the force to institute this new vision of communal life. This God is the one who "turned away . . . enemies" and stood as a "warrior who gives victory." It should be noted that these images of God have much in common with ancient Near Eastern visions of divine activity; images abound of gods as warriors showcasing their strength. In this final restorative vision, God's warrior status is turned to the restoration of Judah and the safeguarding of the oppressed.

But in the Day of the Lord that aw(e)ful power was directed against Judah. Such images ought to give us pause, forcing us to consider whether these seventh-century BCE images map onto our understanding of

God. When are we comfortable with God as a warrior? I find myself more at peace with the images when they are on behalf of the oppressed, but I oftentimes struggle with violence in biblical depictions of God.

Finally, we ought to consider the fact that this is a song! The restoration of relationship between Judah and God is cause for celebration in a way that few events in Scripture match. God sang and provided a poem on the occasion of Judah's eventual deliverance from its enemies. The song is not a prediction, but it is an important bookend to an otherwise bleak book. We might not know how things will work out with certainty, but when it comes to the final outcome, we can be assured that God is in the restoration and relationship business, and we can take comfort that we are not abandoned by God.

Faith is an invitation to growing our vision of who God is, such that we come to experience God in new, exciting ways.

Into Discipleship

If Zephaniah's dazzling "Song of Joy" should do anything, it should cause us to pause and consider the power of image in our spiritual lives. As human beings, we make meaning through analogy, inference, and, most especially, images. God appears here as a singer, a warrior, a king, the One Who Gathers All, and Homemaker. Such a dizzying array of symbols is enough to make the head spin, but it is also an invitation to consider which images resonate with us personally. It is also an opportunity to be challenged by images that don't immediately connect with you as a reader of this ancient text.

I want to focus on two of those images in detail—the singer and the warrior, as they are the two most likely to produce interesting theological engagement. In the first instance, it is likely that you, like me, have rarely considered God a singer, but here we have a Song of Joy, and the evocative turn of phrase that promises God's own singing: "[God] will exult over you with loud singing" (verse 17c). I invite you to spend some time with that image. Does your God sing? What would God sing?

After all the trauma that Judah had just experienced, what song could do justice to the journey of desolation, abandonment, accompaniment, and restoration that Judah had been a part of for generations? Would there be a grand swell of hope? Would it be a lullaby? Would it sound like the prelude in your church? All are open opportunities for reflection and engagement with the text, and in considering God as Singer, we may find our own visions of God expanded, perhaps even enough to imagine a Dancing God.

Similarly, we might find ourselves challenged to consider God as a Warrior, who used might and violence to punish Judah and to restore the nation to right relationship with God. Such is the double-edged sword of divine violence. We may like it when directed on behalf of the oppressed, but it could cause some sense of ambivalence when we consider its use in the judgment of Israel and Judah, who doubtlessly had countless innocents in each kingdom that did not deserve slavery, death, or assimilation.

When have you experienced God as a Warrior in your own life? Does the image hold any import for your spiritual life? When is divine violence acceptable, if ever, and when is it not? How do you conceive of God's power apart from capacity for violence? All are foundational questions that we ought to engage with in this text.

Meister Eckhart, the famous thirteenth-century German mystic, once stated, "The

eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love." Said another way, our capacity to experience and interpret God's action in our world is directly tied to how big or small our concept of God is. If we can only think of God as a divine warrior, then that is the only way we experience God. If we only think of God in dour frames, then God can never sing or dance.

In considering different images of God—trying them on and taking them off as our consciences will—we grow our capacity for experiencing God's action in different ways. Faith is an invitation to growing our vision of who God is, such that we come to experience God in new, exciting ways, while maintaining those ideas of God that have sustained us over the course of our lives. That invitation should be exciting, and I encourage you to consider and share what works for you. Who knows? Maybe your God dances and sings!

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a famous twentieth-century rabbi, gave this celebration of wonder in his work *God in Search of Man*: "[Humanity] will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living."

CLOSING PRAYER

God who sings over us with joy, renew our hearts with your love, gather us in your grace, and help us see you in every image of hope, strength, and song. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **At various negative events, some are quick to suggest that the outcome was due to God's "judgment," even when there is no evidence of that. What do you make of the "Day of the Lord" that Zephaniah speaks of? Have you seen any "days of the Lord" and, if so, why do you think God was a part of that judgment?**
- **What are your most enduring symbols and images of God? Do you have any that have withstood the test of time in your own life? Which images challenge you, and which are new and delightful?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Listen to the hymn "Bring Many Names"—noting the various images associated with God. Which resonate with you? Which are not traditionally associated with God? Does listening to the hymn widen your experience of God in the way that Meister Eckhart commends?

Activity 2

Create a collage representing different images of God that are meaningful to you. You can use magazine cutouts, drawings, printed images, or even words. As you work, reflect on how these different images help you connect with the divine in various situations in your life. Share your collage with the group, explaining why you chose each image and how it represents an aspect of God's character or activity.

Sources and Resources

- Jeffrey A. Johnson—*Got Style? Personality-Based Evangelism, Revised Edition*
- Terrell Carter—*Taking Apart Bootstrap Theology: Gospel of Generosity and Justice*
- Joseph Evans—*The Art of Eloquence: The Sacred Rhetoric of Gardner C. Taylor*

Scan for *Got Style?* by Jeffrey A. Johnson

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Third Sunday of Advent / Week of 12/12/2021)
Week of December 14, 2025

Sunday, December 14
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Psalm 126 or Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Monday, December 15
Isaiah 11:1-9; Numbers 16:1-19; Hebrews 13:7-17

Tuesday, December 16
Isaiah 11:1-9; Numbers 16:20-35; Acts 28:23-31

Wednesday, December 17
Isaiah 11:1-9; Micah 4:8-13; Luke 7:31-35

Thursday, December 18
Psalm 80:1-7; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 10:10-18

Friday, December 19
Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 42:10-18; Hebrews 10:32-39

Saturday, December 20
Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35

Sadao Watanabe. Good Shepherd. 1977

SACRIFICE

Repairing the Relationship

> *"It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* (HEBREWS 10:10)

In this lesson, readers are introduced to some of the key arguments of the Epistle of Hebrews, particularly Jesus' mediation between humanity and God through the establishment of the new covenant. We will consider the significance of Christ's mediation as the ultimate sacrifice. Finally, readers are cautioned against adopting supersessionism (also known as replacement theology) that has proven harmful to our Jewish neighbors and friends. Instead, this lesson shifts the focus to considering our own ongoing sanctification.

Lesson Objectives

- To develop an understanding of Hebrews' claims about Christ's mediation, the new covenant, and God's relationship with humanity.
- To consider supersessionism and the subtle ways that our reading of Scripture can be harmful to our Jewish friends and neighbors.
- To create a space where group members are free to consider and share how they are becoming friends of God, being challenged to do something new, or feel accompanied by God in their lives.

Hebrews 10:5-10 NRSV

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings
you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; 6 in burnt offerings and
sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7 Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to
do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." 8 When he said
above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and
burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he
added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish
the second. 10 And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering
of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Into the Scripture

In the King James Version of the Bible, the title for the Epistle of Hebrews was "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," reflecting a tradition that counted Hebrews among Paul's Epistles that dated back more than one thousand years. More recent scholarship has focused on differences in the Greek syntax of the epistle, leading many to claim that it was not written by Paul. Importantly, the author is never identified, meaning that it was not pseudepigraphic, or an author claiming to be another author—a common practice in Late Antiquity.

Indeed, concerns over the authorship of Hebrews arise even earlier, with Origen proclaiming, "Who wrote this epistle is known to God alone." But Origen did not fault those who would ascribe it to Paul: "If any church regards this epistle as Paul's, it should be commended for so doing." What has been universally acknowledged is that the author writes in a Pauline way about Jesus, and that the Greek is much more polished and refined than Paul's. While Paul's letters are typically dated from 49–62 CE, Hebrews is widely thought to have been written anywhere from 62 CE to 100 CE.

A New Covenant

A primary focus of the epistle is developing a theology of Christ as mediator between humanity and God. Hebrews 9:15 encapsulates this view nicely, articulating a viewpoint that through Christ, God has formed a new covenant with humanity: "For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant."

Hebrews is also the clearest articulator of New Testament covenantal theology, which receives explicit attention in chapter 8: "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. . . . In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (8:6-7, 13).

Christ has opened the door to a restoration of the relationship with God and is a "priest . . . according to the order of Melchizedek," and "has also become the

guarantee of a better covenant" (7:17, 22). Through Christ's ministry, the old priestly system has ceased to function, and a more direct relationship with God through Christ is possible.

Such proclamations ought to be read in the context of questions in the early church about the role of Jewish observance. Should Gentile followers of Jesus follow Jewish law and customs? Must they be circumcised? Hebrews argues for the superiority of the second covenant over the first and, in so doing, makes a supersessionist argument that has had dire consequences for Christian persecution of our Jewish friends and neighbors. While the theology might remain meaningful for many in our tradition, caution should be exhibited so that a "new covenant" does not participate in antisemitism.

Into the Lesson

Hebrews 10:5–10 makes a clear and straightforward argument in favor of the new covenant over the old. By focusing on the sacrificial practices of the Old Covenant, the author of Hebrews joins Isaiah and Amos' insistence that the sacrificial system was deficient in restoring relationship because it did not attend to the heart. The author quotes heavily from the Psalms in making that case in Hebrews 10:5–10, particularly Psalm 40:6–8, which proclaims, "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'"

The claim that God has no delight in sacrifice but, instead, desires a change of heart appears consistently throughout the Prophets. Amos states that God requires the sacrifice of justice and righteousness rather than religious adherence: "I hate, I despise

In faith, we continue a journey deeper to the center of God's love.

your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

Isaiah makes a similar case in the opening chapter: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats" (Isaiah 1:11).

Hebrews joins a longstanding tradition of God's refusing the sacrifices that God had instituted because the relationship between the people and God had been severed by injustice. Importantly, it is not because the sacrifices themselves were wrong (and these statements should not be used as critiques of ancient Jewish practice). Rather, those sacrifices were to be offered out of right relationship with God, who demands justice and a change of heart before those sacrifices will be considered.

A Perfect Sacrifice

Instead of those sacrifices, which have been revealed to be unsatisfactory, Christ is revealed to be the true sacrifice that can bridge the gap between humanity and God. It is through that sacrifice that we are "sanctified," and that sacrifice is given willingly. Christ offered himself to God as that sacrifice, giving his "body"—which was not an accident of history or a failure of Jesus' ministry, but is revealed to be the transformative will of God. The old sacrificial system has been "abolished," and a new covenant based in Jesus has been "established."

How that establishment takes place has been a matter of much debate. While the church has had many church councils throughout history that have decided crucial matters of faith, no decisive decision was reached about atonement; theologies of atonement remain "theories of atonement." Was it Jesus' blood that atones, or his whole life, ministry, and resurrection? Does God require punishment in the form of the cross to heal the relationship with humanity, or is it Jesus' example of sacrificial love that is salvific? Such questions have been a part of the church's story since the beginning, and they continue to have importance for people of faith today.

Through Jesus we are invited into a new kind of relationship with God: discipleship, collaborator, parent, and friend.

Into Discipleship

Through all the talk of mediation, sacrifice, and atonement, what the author of Hebrews wants us to consider is the relationship that we have with God. Jesus fundamentally altered the covenant so that we might continue to grow in faith and love. Although the text from Hebrews includes the phrase "once for all," this sacrifice was not an event that we passively receive as a one-time moment of reconciliation that fixes everything. Rather, through Jesus we are invited into a new kind of relationship with God: discipleship, collaborator, parent, and friend. In changing ourselves to align ourselves with Jesus, we are invited to continue to grow more loving, compassionate, just, and Christlike. In faith, we continue a journey deeper to the center of God's love.

Dorothee Sölle, the twentieth-century German theologian, once reflected, "In the Nazi period in Germany God was small and weak. God was in fact powerless, because God has no friends." How might we become "friends" of God? If Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have fundamentally changed the relationship between humanity and the Divine such that we are invited to ally ourselves with God's vision of the world, what might that look like?

We have some ideas about the contours of that vision of a redeemed, sanctified person in the world. Such a person would be guided by love, seeing the face of Christ in others (see Matthew 25). They would bear "fruit" in their actions that testify to their changed nature (see Galatians 5). They would pursue justice, keeping in mind that justice flows out of love (see James 1). Indeed, Cornel West has imagined the link between love and justice in this simple, profound way: "Justice is what love looks like in public."

In the Prophets that Hebrews draws heavily from, we see a God who rejects God's own sacrificial system because the hearts of those who sacrifice have not been changed. This turning inward to changes of the heart ought to cause us to consider our hearts. Are there ways that you are feeling called to change your heart? Perhaps you feel led to

do something new or stop doing something in order to draw nearer to God.

Changes of the heart are not less important because of Christ's mediation between humanity and the divine—they are more important. In changing ourselves to become more like Christ through the practice of discipleship—a process often referred to as sanctification—we can find the center of our faith and develop a more robust relationship with God.

God is constantly making all things new, and the covenant is no different. God "abolishes the first to prepare the second," and the same is true of our lives. We often have to lose something to gain something else, and if our hands are grasped tightly around the old, we can lose our opportunity to seize something new. What might you have to get rid of to make room for something better? What might that look like in your life?

Equally, you might feel called to "pick up" something that you moved on from long ago. Are there any ideas about God that you might need to reexamine? Whatever the answer, through Christ's mediation, we can be confident that we are accompanied by God wherever our paths lead. Those paths are often winding, and sometimes in our journey we wind up right back where we began, asking questions that we felt like we resolved long ago. Such is the human experience, and God is with us the entire way.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of new beginnings, sanctify us through Christ's love, that we may grow in justice, compassion, and friendship with You each day. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **Consider the question of Paul's authorship of Hebrews. Does it matter to you who wrote the epistle? Does it matter that the epistle was meant to be read in community? How would hearing it aloud, as opposed to reading it silently, change the experience of the text?**
- **What do you think of *atonement*, the process by which Jesus makes possible a new relationship in God characterized by salvation? Is it Jesus' death that is salvific? His life and ministry? His resurrection? Is it all of those things? How do you make sense of Jesus' role as mediator?**
- **What about covenants; have you ever made a covenant with someone else or even with yourself? Such sacred promises made in community have profound power to shape our lives. Are there any "new covenants" you feel called to make?**
- **What's your experience of sanctification or discipleship? Are you growing to be a friend of God's? How so? What sorts of practices make you feel closer to God?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Listen to the hymn "Bring Many Names"—noting the various images associated with God. Which resonate with you? Which are not traditionally associated with God? Does listening to the hymn widen your experience of God in the way that Meister Eckhart commends?

Activity 2

Create a collage representing different images of God that are meaningful to you. You can use magazine cutouts, drawings, printed images, or even words. As you work, reflect on how these different images help you connect with the divine in various situations in your life. Share your collage with the group, explaining why you chose each image and how it represents an aspect of God's character or activity.

Sources and Resources

- For a well-done summary and categorization of theories of atonement, take a look here: https://hackingchristianity.net/2013/03/primer-on-atonement-theories.html
- For a brief analysis of early Christian teachings about Judaism and how these led to antisemitism, visit the following site: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-early-church-and-the-beginnings-of-anti-semitism.

Scan for *The Sunday After*
By Clarence Wright

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Fourth Sunday of Advent / Week of 12/19/2021)
Week of December 21, 2025

Sunday, December 21
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Monday, December 22
Psalm 113; Genesis 25:19-28; Colossians 1:15-20

Tuesday, December 23
Psalm 113; Genesis 30:1-24; Romans 8:18-30

Wednesday, December 24
Luke 1:46b-55; Micah 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:11-22

Thursday, December 25
Luke 1:46b-55; Micah 4:6-8; 2 Peter 1:16-21

Friday and Saturday, December 26–27
(Nativity of the Lord)
Proper I: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)
Proper II: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20
Proper III: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14

The Boy Jesus in the Temple.
https://www.heqiart.com/store/p58/12_The-Boy-Jesus-in-the-Temple_Artist_Proof.html

GROWTH

Increasing in Wisdom, Cultivating Wonder

> *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.* (LUKE 2:52)

In this lesson, readers are introduced to an adolescent Jesus teaching in the temple, a story that invites us to consider Jesus' ordinariness and humanity. Of particular importance in this lesson is the final verse: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Readers are asked to imagine how they too might increase in wisdom, and particular attention is paid to wonder as a spiritual practice that might help us experience faith in new and exciting ways.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand how the Gospels relate to one another in composition and in response to gaps in their accounts of Jesus' life.
- To consider a God that is "on the move" as opposed to the static way that we oftentimes conceive of the Holy. In addition, to introduce Jesus as existing within frameworks and experiences that we can understand—parenthood and adolescence in particular.
- To encourage the cultivation of wonder as a spiritual practice, marking the faith experience as filled with joy and playfulness, as opposed to rote, dour repetition.

Luke 2:41-52 NRSV

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Into the Scripture

The Gospel of Luke, believed to have been written around 80 CE, has a few things that make it unique. First, it was likely part of a bigger work that included Acts, which scholars generally refer to as Luke–Acts. Second, it pays particular attention to the role of women in the Jesus narrative, placing them in more prominent roles than other Gospels. For instance, it is Mary who reacted to the annunciation in Luke, not Joseph (see Luke 1:26-38).

Moreover, Anna, Elizabeth, Mary (the mother of Jesus), Mary (sister of Lazarus), and Martha all play prominent roles in this Gospel. Third, it builds off of the work of Mark, which makes up more than a third of the Gospel, and shares about a quarter of its material with Matthew, from a source called Q, believed to be a sayings gospel (i.e., a collection of Jesus' sayings) but yet undiscovered. The remaining third or so of the Gospel is made up of material that is found solely in Luke. On that last point, Luke 2:41-52 fills in important questions that the audience of Mark's Gospel must have had.

Mark begins with Jesus as an adult, beginning his ministry and moving immediately to the "binding of the strongman" through prophetic and divine action. But how did Jesus get here? What was Jesus like as a child—surely he did not arrive as a fully formed adult? Luke and Matthew both posit answers to that, and they are the only Gospels to give an account of Jesus' birth and infancy, although their accounts conflict at several points. Luke takes that further, giving us a picture of an adolescent Jesus teaching in the temple . . . the only Gospel to do so.

Like many books of the New Testament, Luke is believed to have been meant to be

read aloud in community as opposed to read individually. We come as close as possible to this when the Gospel is read aloud in a worship service, and it does change the experience to be a hearer instead of a reader. Knowing this, we ought to consider how reading the text aloud might change how you engage with the Gospel.

Into the Lesson

Luke 2:41-52 is a unique look into the adolescence of Jesus, but before we consider some of the profound implications for how we think about Jesus and our faith, we should pause to note the reason why Jesus was in Jerusalem. The backdrop for the story is the celebration of Passover, which was cause for Jews from the countryside as well as those farther away to journey to the Holy City. Time and time again, the events of Jesus' life occurred in the context of Jewish observance (his return to Jerusalem during Holy Week was due to Passover), and Jewish observance is the probable backdrop of his healing miracle at the pool of Bethesda—just to name two. In this way, it is impossible to extricate Jesus from his Jewishness; Jesus is a Jewish Rabbi with much in common with the co-religionist leaders with whom he often sparred . . . the Pharisees.

The intent of the story is clearly to locate Jesus as someone special, able to hold forth in complex discussion with religious leaders who were "amazed" at his understanding. Jesus' words—"Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (verse 49b)—indicate a special relationship of intimacy between him and God that would go on to characterize his prayer life, another one of Luke's special focuses. And yet, Jesus is relatable. He made plans without checking with his parents, not just because he is Jesus, but because he was twelve. He

Cultivating wonder and curiosity in our faith is oftentimes an underappreciated art.

responded incredulously at their chiding and their "great anxiety," not just because he was right where he needed to be, but because twelve-year-olds are not great at taking their parents' feelings into account. When he went with them, he was "obedient," but we are left to wonder just how long obedience can last in a precocious adolescent. Jesus is unique, one-of-a-kind, and immediately relatable and ordinary in the text.

Indeed, the parents were relatable, too. For parents of children, anxiety is simply part of the process of child-rearing, and what parents would not be alarmed to discover that they had been traveling for three days without their beloved? Mothers across generations have heard that "his mother treasured all these things in her heart," and nodded sagely, understanding exactly what was meant. What parents do not remember things their children forget, treasuring them in their heart? In this narrative, Luke's exceptional storytelling skill comes to bear, rendering larger-than-life characters like Joseph, Mary, and Jesus relatable. In their relatability, we are invited into the text, invited to imagine ourselves in the dramatic story of God's salvation of humanity.

Perhaps the most striking part of this narrative occurs in the last line: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (verse 52). Separated by two thousand years, we might be tempted to think about Jesus as static, unchanging. Certainly, to some extent that's true. Generations of faithful Christians have found solace in the fact that God does not change; but here we see a vision of Jesus' growing and increasing in wisdom, just like we all do. The final words of the narrative invite us to consider a Jesus that is fully human, growing, and changing. Even though many Christians could repeat that Jesus is "fully God and fully human," actually incorporating such a thought into our conceptions of God is difficult. If we are willing to engage with this week's reading, it might move us to question whether our ideas about the Divine ought to be allowed to ossify, or whether we too should be growing in wisdom in our conception of God.

"What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder."

Into Discipleship

If Luke's response to questions about Jesus' childhood and adolescence was to fill in the gaps with an oral tradition about Jesus, we are invited to ask what are some of the gaps that we wish we had answers to in our faith? Certainly, there are places where the Gospels leave events up to the imagination of the audience. John 21:25 gives us a tantalizing look at the incomplete nature of the narratives we are given: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

I have always been personally moved to wonder about those events. What was Jesus up to? What lives did he touch? Was there something he said that would have had a profound impact on me? Who gets to decide what makes it into a gospel, and what was their criteria for deciding? Perhaps you, too, share a personality that seeks to bridge gaps in knowledge, like myself. But that sort of curiosity ought to be something we bring to our faith journeys, as we seek to mirror Jesus' growth and understanding.

Another word for that sort of curiosity is *wonder*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, a famous twentieth-century rabbi, gave this celebration of wonder: "[Humanity] will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder." In wonder, the spiritual counterpart to curiosity, we are invited to ask questions, to celebrate the known and unknown, to live in what Heschel called "radical amazement." In so doing, even the ordinary is revealed to be infused with the divine, giving rise to an appreciation that can change how we live our lives.

Cultivating wonder and curiosity in our faith is oftentimes an underappreciated art, being substituted instead for odes to certainty. To be clear, certainty has a place in the life of faith . . . but so does wonder. We cultivate wonder when we ask questions about Scripture, meaning, our lives, and God's action or perceived lack thereof in the world. Wonder oftentimes takes us outside our comfort zone, which is a good thing because that is a requirement for growth. But wonder is not all about movement. Counterintuitively, one of the ways in which we cultivate wonder—whether in reading a text, hearing it aloud, or in the world we live

in—is through stillness. In being still, we can connect to our bodies, quiet our minds, and revel in our place in a God-drenched world.

In the process of engaging with wonder, we may feel our faith shift beneath our feet, but we can be assured that we are accompanied by the One Who Created wonder, and who will accompany our meaning making. When was the last time you brought a spirit of creativity, wonder, or playfulness to your reading of Scripture? Engaging with the Bible and with God should not be a solemn affair; it should be interactive. Are there things that you wonder about in the Bible or in your faith? Is there something which cultivates "radical amazement" in you? Are there ways that you are being called to "increase in wisdom"?

Answering those questions might be easy for you, or it might provoke some discomfort. Either way, getting in tune with the ways that we are invited to grow, understand, and change is what our faith is all about.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of wisdom and wonder, help us grow in understanding and grace as we follow the example of Jesus, who teaches us to seek, question, and treasure your presence in every moment. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **What are some of the questions you have that are unanswered in the Gospels? What would you like to know more about?**
- **How does your experience of childhood or parenthood affect how you read this story? Does Jesus act like a child you know or maybe even raised? How does knowing that Jesus was once a child affect your perception of him? Does it change anything?**
- **How are you being called to "increase in wisdom"? Have you increased in wisdom over the past year? How so? What does it feel like to increase in wisdom?**
- **What are the sorts of practices that help you to pursue wonder? What does it feel like to experience "radical amazement"?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Find your favorite narrative from any Gospel on https://www.gospelparallels.com, a free online parallel Gospel that shows other places in the Gospels where that

story appears, side-by-side. You will notice that while Mark and John don't offer any content about and insight into Jesus' childhood, Luke and Matthew do. Does your favorite story appear in another Gospel? If so, is it slightly different? Why do you think that might be?

Activity 2

Write down your questions that remain unanswered in the Jesus story. Would you like to know more about Jesus' profession? How about his twenties? Would you like to know his favorite food, or whether he could write? All are good questions. Share with each other what you've written down. Are there similarities in the questions? Did you have a question in common with someone?

Sources and Resources

- Joy Skjegstad and Heidi Unruh—*Real Connections: Ministries to Strengthen Church and Community Relationships*
- Debora Jackson—*Spiritual Practices for Effective Leadership*
- Jessica Young Brown—*Making Space at the Well: Mental Health and the Church*

Scan for *Real Connections* by Joy Skjegstad and Heidi Unruh

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C First Sunday After Christmas Day / Week of 12/26/2021)
Week of December 28, 2025

Sunday, December 28
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Monday, December 29
Psalm 148; Proverbs 8:32-36; John 21:19b-24

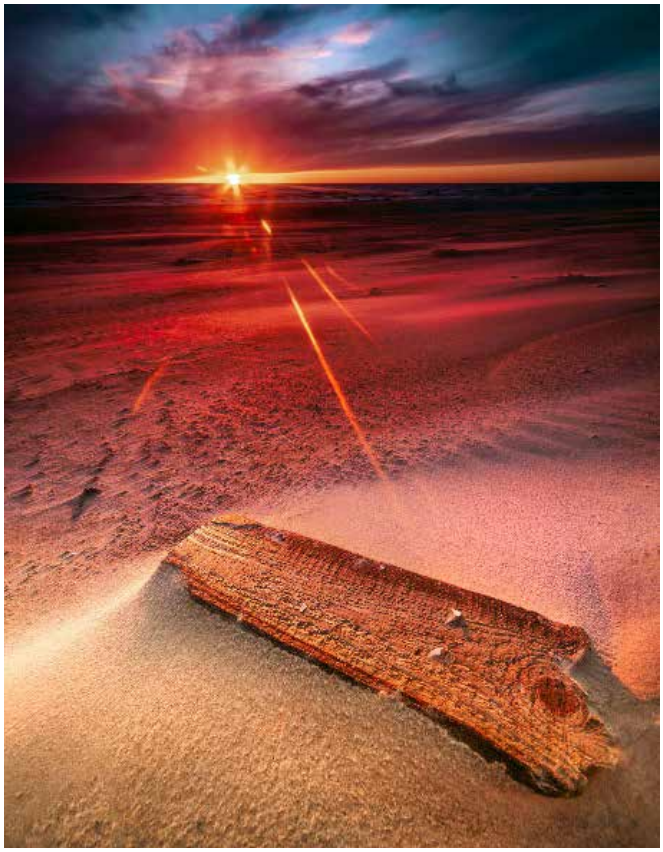
Tuesday, December 30
Psalm 148; Isaiah 54:1-13; Revelation 21:1-7

Wednesday, December 31
Psalm 147:12-20; 1 Chronicles 28:1-10; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17

Thursday, January 1
Psalm 147:12-20; 2 Chronicles 1:7-13; Mark 13:32-37

Friday, January 2
Psalm 147:12-20; 1 Kings 3:5-14; John 8:12-19

Saturday, January 3 *(Holy Name of Jesus)*
Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21
Originally New Year's Day: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46



INCARNATION

Living the Logos *Lifestyle*

> *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* (JOHN 1:1)

Logos is not a word that you encounter every day. It is a New Testament Greek word that John used to refer to Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel. In this lesson, you will learn what Logos means in relation to Jesus; reflect on Jesus' Incarnation—that is, God's Word becoming human; and Jesus as God's Son—the source of eternal life and light (knowledge) who empowers people who believe in him to live as God's children. Based on these insights, the Logos lifestyle inspired by Jesus' incarnation will be explored. The Logos lifestyle involves three practices: (1) show up (Compassionate Presence); (2) speak up (Authentic Witness); and (3) step up (Creative Service).

Lesson Objectives

- Define what *Logos* means as it applies to Jesus and the Incarnation.
- Understand the three practices of the Logos lifestyle.
- Make a commitment to cultivate the Logos lifestyle.

John 1:1-18 NRSV

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Into the Scripture

Jesus: A Different Kind of Logos

Unlike the Logos of the Greek philosophers that is impersonal and intangible, Jesus is the Logos who came as a person, someone with flesh and bones. John's message about Jesus as the Logos is a head-scratching message to first-century readers influenced by Greek thought.[1] The Greek philosophers of that time thought of Logos as Reason. They also understood Logos as part of the realm of the spirit (which was of goodness) that could not mingle with the material world which they believed to be evil. For the Jews who knew their Holy Scriptures, God's becoming human was unthinkable. They struggled to grasp the meaning of Incarnation because their understanding of the promise of the Messiah was one who was like King David, a warrior-king, divinely appointed but not divine.

Even those who had real-life experiences with Jesus in his earthly ministry did not all believe him to be God in the flesh. It took Jesus' disciples a while to understand who he really was and what that meant for them as his disciples. With the infilling of the Holy Spirit as reported by Luke in the Book of Acts, they boldly proclaimed Jesus as God Incarnate and risen Lord and became

powerful witnesses of Jesus and the Good News of God's reign through him.

Jesus: The Message and Messenger of Hope

The opening phrase of John 1:1 is like Genesis 1:1—"In the beginning."[2] It alerts the reader who is familiar with Genesis in the Old Testament that the next verses are related to the creative act of God. The difference between John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1 is that the Gospel writer focuses on God as the Word. In John 1:1, *Word* or *Logos* begins with a capital letter to signify that it is a proper noun. This Word is Jesus, who is Co-creator of the world with the Father and the Spirit. Jesus was not one of the words that God spoke to create the world as narrated in Genesis 1. Jesus is also the Word that existed before other words were spoken. In becoming human, Jesus became the Message and the Messenger. His message was Hope.

Later in the Gospel, John's story confirms that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures), the Messiah sent by God to save his people, Israel. Jesus was not accepted as God's Son by most of his own people. But those who did accept and believe in him as God's promised Messiah were empowered to become God's children. They became Jesus' spiritual siblings and like John served as witnesses to Jesus. Like Jesus, they will be the message and the messenger, sent out to proclaim a powerful message of hope that will change the world for good.

Into the Lesson

New Beginnings

January is associated with new beginnings. There is a sense of hope and anticipation of a better future. For a disciple of Jesus and the church, this is an opportunity to respond to the Holy Spirit's invitation to try new pathways of growth that lead to spiritual maturity and a fruitful life. The continuing challenges of living during a pandemic, political turmoil, economic devastation, racial enmity, and environmental degradation also call for a renewed commitment to live as children of God who witness to God's redeeming presence in the world.

Take time to pray and reflect.

An Invitation to the Logos Lifestyle

This section of the lesson invites you to learn about the Logos lifestyle inspired by John 1:1-18.[3] This ancient hymn/Scripture celebrates a loving God who shows up as the Word-made-flesh on the earth, giving light and eternal life to all who believe in him. It is a lifestyle that follows the example of Jesus' coming to the earth as the "Logos" (Word). It involves three practices:

1. *Show Up* (Compassionate Presence)—Be present to God and others. How? Listen . . . really listen. If you listen long enough, you will hear the music from God's very own heart. The ministry of spiritual direction is an example

of compassionate presence. Spiritual directors do not direct your spiritual life; rather, they help you to listen to God so that out of that deep and mindful listening, you can discern God's will for you and act in response to God's call. It also helps you to listen to others with more patience and understanding.

2. *Speak Up* (Authentic Witness)—Be a witness by sharing your story and your personal experience with Jesus as well as what you have learned and discovered from the Bible. When you have spent enough time listening to God and others, you will have something meaningful and powerful to say. But remember that when you speak up as a witness to Jesus as John did, it involves the risk of being rejected or oppressed. One must count the cost and be ready to live with the consequences of being an authentic witness of Jesus. But be encouraged that the light of God's truth will overpower the darkness of sin and falsehood (see John 1:5).
3. *Step Up* (Creative Service)—Be a creative servant of God who steps up by stepping down in humble service. This is what Jesus, God's Son, did when he came to the world as a human. Though he was the Creator of the world, he humbled himself and showed God's love through loving, self-giving service (see John 1:14). In following Jesus' creative and humble example and responding to God's love as God's children, we are called to offer our gifts and skills to step up and serve in the name of Jesus.

Make a commitment to cultivate the Logos lifestyle.

Into Discipleship

Make a commitment to cultivate the Logos lifestyle by trying to work on one of the lifestyle practices for a month. Write about your experiences on a regular basis. Take time to pray and reflect on what you have learned. By the end of the month, choose another practice and do the same thing. After a month, do the same with the remaining practice. At the end of the month, prayerfully evaluate how God has become incarnate in and through you, where you struggle the most, and what gives you the most joy. This personal evaluation will help you in discerning God's call for you in this season of your life.

The class leader or facilitator can invite class participants to share at the beginning of the class session before moving on to the next lesson or set aside a Sunday at the end of the year to do this. In this sharing exercise, remember to have a covenant of confidentiality and mutual respect for all class participants, and affirm at the beginning of the session that sharing reflections is purely voluntary.

CLOSING PRAYER

Our loving and creative God, we humbly pray that you send us out into our communities empowered by your Spirit to show up, speak up, and step up as Jesus' hands and feet in the world you love so much. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **John used Logos, a well-known philosophical concept in his first-century culture, to proclaim the Christian gospel. Think about a widely known idea or principle in your twenty-first-century culture that you can use to communicate the Good News about Jesus and God's kingdom.**
- **What does it mean for you to believe in Jesus as God's Son and to live the Logos lifestyle?**
- **How do you introduce Jesus to others in a caring, creative, and respectful way?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Spiritual Practice Journal

Create a spiritual practice journal to document your growth in one of the three Logos lifestyle practices over a four-week period. Each day, write down one specific way you practiced "showing up," "speaking up," or "stepping up." Note any challenges you faced, insights you gained, and how you experienced God's presence in the practice. At the end of each week, reflect on your growth and set intentions for the coming week.

Activity 2: Age-specific Learning Activities

- Elderly Adults: Write and share a two-minute testimony about your faith in Jesus. Answer this question: "Who is Jesus to you?"
- Middle-aged Adults: Play the game *Scattergories*, using the words Jesus, Logos, God, and Light. You can use an online version of this game and customize it: https://scattergoriesonline.net/new-game.xhtml.
- Young Adults: Prepare/write a résumé or LinkedIn profile of Jesus. Or design an Instagram post about Jesus based on John 1:1-4 using pictures, words, and images.

Notes

1. *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible,* Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1802–1803.
2. Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel of John (i-xii)," in *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 23.
3. Carla A. Romarate-Knipel, "Lesson 6," in *Journeys* (January 9, 2022).

Scan for *Hiding God's Word in Our Hearts* by Marvin A. McMickle

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Second Sunday After Christmas Day / Week of 1/2/2022)

Week of January 4, 2026

Sunday, January 4
Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12;
Psalm 147:12-20 or
Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21;
Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

Monday, January 5
Psalm 72; Job 42:10-17; Luke 8:16-21

Tuesday, January 6
Psalm 72; Isaiah 6:1-5; Acts 7:44-53

Wednesday, January 7
Psalm 72; Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:10-18

Thursday, January 8 ***(Epiphany of the Lord)***
Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14;
Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Friday, January 9
Psalm 72; Daniel 2:1-19; Ephesians 4:17–5:1

Saturday, January 10
Psalm 72; Daniel 2:24-49; Ephesians 5:15-20

RESTORATION

Living on God's Promises

> *Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.* (ISAIAH 43:5)

"The future is as bright as the promises of God."[1] This was the response of pioneer Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson when asked, "What hope do you see for the years ahead?" It is a remarkable response for one who experienced so much suffering and loss. The Judsons did not live to see the fruit of their labors, but God rewarded their willingness to live on God's promises. More than two hundred years later, there are thousands of Christians in Myanmar, many of whom are Baptists who trace their spiritual heritage to the Judsons' ministry. God, who spoke through the Judsons, is the same God who spoke long ago through the prophet Isaiah to assure God's people that they do not have to be afraid; they just need to trust God. Today's lesson focuses on living with confidence in God's promises and explores the themes of redemption and restoration in Isaiah 43:1-7.

Lesson Objectives

- Reflect on God's promises of redemption and restoration of Jewish exiles.
- Determine how God's promises apply to contemporary disciples and the church.
- Develop strategies that will help disciples and the church to live with confidence in God's promises.

Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV

1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O
Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they
shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and
the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of
Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in
return for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will
bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6 I will say to
the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from
far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— 7 everyone who is called by my
name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Into the Scripture

Isaiah: A Messenger of Hope

The Book of Isaiah is frequently referenced in the New Testament. Many of the messianic passages that refer to Jesus are found in Isaiah. Bible scholars point out Isaiah 9:2-7, 11-13 as support for the view that a messiah would come from the line of David, whom many saw to be Jesus. The explanation for why Jesus must die as a suffering servant of the Lord for the salvation of others is also foretold by the prophet Isaiah in the "Servant Songs" (Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:1-11; 52:13–53:12).[2]

Prophetic books like Isaiah started as oral proclamations that were written down much later. Bible scholars have observed that Isaiah has three major parts: First Isaiah (chapters 1–39); Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55); and Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66).[3] Each section was written by a different prophet in a different time period. The first section is believed to have been written by the prophet who identifies himself as the son of Amoz in 1:1. Based on the period of his call story in chapter 6 and the historical reference to the death of King Uzziah, First Isaiah is believed to have been prophesied between 740 and 701 BCE. Second Isaiah is believed to have been a prophet in Babylonian exile following the Babylonian siege on Judah around 587 BCE. Second Isaiah was written between 547 and 539 BCE. Third Isaiah followed around 520 BCE.[4]

The prophets spoke to the ramifications of political and moral decline, which resulted in the downfall of both Israel and Judah. First Isaiah narrated the political situation in Judah during the latter half of the eighth century BCE, pointing out their disobedience and lack of trust in God. Second Isaiah spoke to their situation in Babylonian captivity, known as the Exilic period. Third Isaiah reflected the struggles that Jews faced when they returned to Judah under Persian rule in the late sixth century BCE.[5]

Today's Scripture from Second Isaiah proclaims a message of redemption and restoration—including in Isaiah 45:1, where it mentions Cyrus of Persia as God's anointed. God was going to use the Persian king and

empire to fulfill God's promise of redemption and restoration of Jerusalem as the center of worship for God's people. Throughout Second Isaiah, God is portrayed as the one universal, true God juxtaposed to unreal "gods" made by human hands (see 44:6-10; 45:20; 46:6). Our Creator God is thus able to use anything and anyone to bring about God's will. Our God is always supreme and in control. God even calls all the stars by their name (see 40:26). Second Isaiah reminds God's people, that no matter your current situation, God is a deliverer and a redeemer.

Into the Lesson

Blessed to Be a Blessing

Isaiah 43:1-7 is written in poetic form and was first presented as a word to Jewish exiles who were given the opportunity by the Persian ruler at the time, Cyrus, to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The phrase "Do not fear" is mentioned twice (verses 1b and 5a). "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you" (43:1b). This is repeated in verse 5 with the reassuring promise from God: "I am with you." "Do not fear" was first said in the Bible by God to Israel's ancestor Abraham (see Genesis 15:1). God blessed him and his wife, Sarah, stating that they would be ancestors of a great nation whose mission was to be a blessing to all nations (see Genesis 12:3). This blessing was renewed by God to Jacob (Abraham's descendant) who was renamed Israel after he wrestled with God and prevailed (see Genesis 32:28-29).

Redemption and Restoration

"Do not fear" in Isaiah 43:1b and 5:1a imply that the season of punishment for Israel's idolatry and disobedience was over; and a new season of renewal was about to begin. The exiles who had become comfortable in Babylon—with its culture, religion, and prosperity—were assured by Isaiah that just as God liberated their ancestors from their oppressors in the past and made them God's people, God would do the same for them. Their destiny as a nation created and formed by God (43:1) through God's covenant with their ancestors would be fulfilled. In Isaiah 43:6-7, God declared that the scattered people of Israel who were called by God's name would be gathered by God. For Israel, to be called by God's name implied that they were empowered by God to rebuild God's temple and renew the worship of God in Jerusalem. The exiles could depend on the promise that God would be with them to protect and provide for them on their journey home because they were beloved and precious in God's sight (Isaiah 43:2-4).

Faith Not Fear

Isaiah 43:1-7 highlights two promises of God to the Jewish exiles. First, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you" (Isaiah 43:1b) and, second, "Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you" (Isaiah 43:5). The first promise encouraged the exiles to trust God who redeemed them from their oppressors. The second promise affirmed God's faithful presence and power that encouraged these exiles to live with confidence in God's promise to restore them as a worshipping community.

Isaiah's message gave them hope and stirred up courage in those who chose to return to rebuild the temple—that God would be with them and provide them with all that they needed to begin a new life. It would not be the same as the glory days of king David and Solomon, but it would set the stage for God's next dramatic entrance into Israel's life. A new kind of king and messiah would come and fulfill God's promises and bring hope to the people who were in despair. This messiah would surprise God's

people by showing them that the way of servanthood and suffering will bring salvation and renewal to all who believe in him.

Living on God's Promises

Unlike the Israelite exiles, Christian disciples are blessed to know and believe in Jesus, God's Messiah, whose birth and ministry were interpreted by the Gospel writers as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, including the prophecies in Isaiah. In the New Testament, the Gospel writers affirm that Jesus, the Messiah, was sent to save not just the people of Israel but the entire world as well (see John 3:16). As contemporary disciples of Jesus, we are encouraged to live on God's promises and to live with hope and purpose found in Jesus (see John 1:12; Acts 1:8).

God's people will not just survive but thrive because God is with them and has promised to lead them to fulfill God's vision of a new world.

Into Discipleship

Make Living with Hope the "New Normal"

For some who lived through the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, there was a longing to go back to "the promised land" of normality and freedom. As followers of Jesus, we have struggled to worship and serve God and our community while exiled in the "land of social distancing" as a part of this new normal. One good thing is that the pandemic pushed churches to clarify what church is about. We are rediscovering that what is most important in living with hope and purpose is keeping ourselves connected to God and each other in worship, fellowship, and service, even if the church building was closed due to the lockdown. Yes, buildings are useful and helpful, but worship and ministry continue—even if we cannot gather in our buildings.

"The future is as bright as the promises of God." This was the response of pioneer Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson when asked, "What hope do you see for the years ahead?" It is a remarkable response for one who experienced so much suffering and loss.

We reclaimed the first-century church model of gathering in our homes with the help of twenty-first-century technology. We also found new ways of doing God's kingdom work with creativity and innovative partnerships. A group of churches in our community worked together to provide Thanksgiving dinners in a mall parking lot where families could drive through in their cars. One lane was used for dinner pickup, and another lane was for people who wanted someone to pray for them. Our food pantry that is supported by churches of different denominations experienced a surplus of funds for the first time in twenty years. It was like Jesus' miracle of feeding more than five thousand people! When the pandemic was over, it was important not to forget these lessons. God's people will not just survive but thrive because God is with them and has promised to lead them to fulfill God's vision of a new world united in worshipping God.

Life Application

Write God's promises in Isaiah 43 in a notebook. Choose a daily or a weekly schedule to reflect, pray, and act on these promises. Observe what is going on in your church and community and prayerfully consider how you can take part in ministries that affirm God's promises of redemption and restoration.

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, thank you for your redeeming love and faithful presence in our lives. Help us to find hope and purpose in your promises. As your gathered people, we pray for unity in your body, the church. By your mercy and grace, forgive us for our complacency and lead us to greater faithfulness and commitment to the work of your kingdom here on the earth. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **How do you relate Israel's experience of exile to your experiences of being in a crisis such as a pandemic or a family tragedy? How did you respond to it?**
- **What does it mean for you to live on the promises of God? What promises of God are especially meaningful to you in this season of your life?**
- **What are some of the spiritual practices or activities that you engage in to help you live with hope and purpose?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: "Promises of God" Collage

Create a visual representation of God's promises from Isaiah 43 using a collage of words, images, and Scripture passages. Gather magazines, newspapers, printed photos, coloring markers, and poster board. Cut out or draw images that represent key promises from the text (water, fire, redemption, God's presence, etc.). Include the text of specific promises that are meaningful to you. Share your collage with the group, explaining why you chose particular images, and which promises speak most powerfully to you in your current life situation.

Activity 2: Age-specific Activities

1. Elderly Adults: Bring photos of your family and ancestors to class and share stories and lessons learned about faith and hope in their journeys from the old country to the new world.
2. Middle-aged Adults: Write a letter to your children or the next generation about life lessons that have given you hope and purpose. Ask volunteers to share.
3. Young Adults: Do a round table or panel presentation (in person or virtual). Share what things you are passionate about and what you do to pursue them. Another

option is to invite people from organizations where you volunteer to share their experiences in class. Focus on what gives them hope and purpose while doing volunteer work. Reflect on how their faith influences their passions and work.

4. Video "Show and Tell": Share online videos of influencers who inspire you to live with hope and purpose. Compare their goals and lifestyles with what you have learned about God and Jesus. How are they the same, and how are they different?

Notes

Scan for *Living a Job Faith* by Paige Lanier Chargois

1. Rosalie Hall Hunt, *Bless God and Take Courage: The Judson History and Legacy* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2005), 353.
2. Robert Kugler and Patrick Hartin, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 240.
3. Ibid.
4. Duncan S. Ferguson, *Bible Basics: Mastering the Content of the Bible* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 32.
5. Kugler and Hartin, *An Introduction to the Bible*, 236.

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C First Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 1/9/2022)
Week of January 11, 2026

Sunday, January 11 *(Baptism of the Lord)*
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17;
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Monday, January 12
Psalm 106:1-12; Judges 4:1-16;
Ephesians 6:10-17

Tuesday, January 13
Psalm 106:1-12; Judges 5:12-21; 1 John 5:13-21

Wednesday, January 14
Psalm 106:1-12; Numbers 27:1-11;
Luke 11:33-36

Thursday, January 15
Psalm 36:5-10; Jeremiah 3:1-5; Acts 8:18-24

Friday, January 16
Psalm 36:5-10; Jeremiah 3:19-25;
1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Saturday, January 17
Psalm 36:5-10; Jeremiah 4:1-4; Luke 11:14-23

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Living as God's Gifted People

> *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*
> (1 CORINTHIANS 12:7)

"You are so gifted!" Perhaps someone has told you that, or you have complimented a friend or colleague with these words. The general view is that only a few are gifted. But in the Christian church this is not the case. Today's lesson will explore what this means and discuss the apostle Paul's teachings on the source, varieties, and purpose of spiritual gifts. Class participants will be invited to consider three recommended responses to the challenge of using these gifts for the common good of their communities.

Lesson Objectives

- Identify the source and varieties of spiritual gifts.
- Reflect on the purpose of spiritual gifts.
- Determine one's spiritual gift and how to use it for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 NRSV

1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are

varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Into the Scripture

The Corinthian Challenge

First Corinthians was the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Corinth in AD 55. During Paul's day, Corinth was the prosperous capital of the Roman province Achaia, in what is now known as Greece. The city had great wealth because the Isthmus of Corinth made it possible for maritime trade between Rome and Asia Minor. Before it became a Roman colony, Corinth was already known for its promiscuity and the wide gap between the rich and the poor.

Corinth had many temples dedicated to Greek gods and goddesses, with Apollos and Aphrodite as the most prominent. It also had Jewish residents and synagogues where devout Jews gathered for study of the Torah. In Acts 18:1-17, Luke wrote that Paul had stayed in Corinth for a year and a half after he left Athens. He lived with Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, who, like Paul, made tents for a living. When some of the Jews resisted Paul's message about Jesus as the Messiah, Paul preached in the home of a Gentile believer, Titius Justus. Paul founded the church in Corinth with the help of Aquila and Priscilla. First Corinthians is actually Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church.

Paul's Pastoral Intervention

Paul's original audience in 1 Corinthians was made up of predominantly non-Jewish Christians, although there were some who were Jewish. He wrote this letter to address theological misunderstandings on bodily resurrection, worship, spiritual gifts, problems of division, sexual immorality, and spiritual immaturity in the Corinthian church.

Paul had to deal with cross-cultural difficulties and the challenge of differentiating between the biblical Hebrew worldview and Greek culture, philosophy, religion, and social practices.[1] Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge") had a strong following among the Greeks and infiltrated Christian teachings.[2] Paul strongly opposed Gnostic beliefs, including the obsession with having special knowledge—and speaking in tongues that made the practitioners feel like they were spiritually superior over those who did not have this spiritual gift.

Into the Lesson

God's Spirit: The Source of Spiritual Gifts

In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Paul instructs the Corinthian church regarding three things: (1) God's Spirit is the source of all genuine

confessions of faith that "Jesus is Lord"; (2) the Spirit gives each member of the church a gift; (3) there is a variety of gifts that come from one Spirit and they are to be used for the common good (that is, to "build up the church," 14:12) and not just for personal edification (cf. 6:12; 10:23).[3]

The Greek word for "spirit" is *pneuma*, which also means "wind or breath."[4] "Spiritual gifts" is derived from the Greek *pneumatikos* (literally, "spiritual things").[5] "Spirit" in biblical Hebrew is *ruach*, which can be translated as "mind or wind."[6] In Genesis 1:2, God's Spirit (*ruach, Elohim*) creates—or shapes—order out of chaos through God's Word speaking, "Let there be . . ." (Genesis 1:3ff). The same Spirit who created the world created a new community, the church (see Acts 2) and gave each member a gift. The God who created the universe, humankind, and every living thing is the same God who created the church and spiritual gifts.

Many Gifts—One Spirit

There is a diversity of gifts (*charismata*, verse 4), services (*diakoniai*, verse 5), and activities (*energemata*, verse 6), but the same Spirit of God (see 12:11, 14). God gave and empowered each member to use their gift(s) to build up the church (see 14:12), to conduct God's mission, and to be witnesses of the Good News proclaimed by Jesus. The gifts should help to bear witness to God's vision of a new creation through Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

In 1 Corinthians, chapters 12–14, Paul acknowledged that "speaking in tongues" is one of the spiritual gifts and pointed out that it is not the only gift that manifests the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer. (Some contemporary denominations put a strong emphasis on speaking in tongues over evidence of other gifts, even to the extent of claiming that one must speak in tongues to show proof of the Holy Spirit. This is not true. We know as Baptists that God automatically grants us the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior.)

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (verse 7). Paul's instruction makes it clear that spiritual gifts are not reserved for a select few or meant for personal aggrandizement. They are given to every believer to benefit the entire community.

Paul did not prohibit the practice of speaking in tongues; rather, he clarified that its purpose is to be used for personal edification. He also suggested that the best time to use the gift is in conjunction with the gift of interpretation, so that what is spoken can be understood, especially by unbelievers who are present.[7] Without interpretation, the hearers might feel bewildered and confused by the manifestation of speaking in tongues. But if that which is spoken is interpreted, then all the hearers can benefit from the message.

Gifted to Serve for the Common Good

Even with the various problems that plagued the Corinthian church, Paul acknowledged earlier in his letter that it was a gifted faith community. Healings, miracles, and God's message revealed through Spirit-filled members appeared to be a regular part of Corinthian church worship and life. Paul affirmed their giftedness but warned them of using these gifts to create personality cults that destroy church unity and hinder their witness to the community.

The variety of spiritual gifts that Paul mentioned in verses 8–10 are some examples of spiritual gifts. They are meant to represent the diversity of the Spirit's work. Each of us can focus on what it is that God is calling us to do with the gift(s) we have been given. There are those who believe that the contemporary church is beyond the use of gifts as they were spoken of in Paul's day. Yet, at no point did God change the plan of

having churches equipped to carry out the Great Commission.

Churches need to reclaim the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit that seeks to work through each of us individually as God has so gifted us, and collectively as a synergistic representation of what God can do when we touch and agree. Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul urged the Corinthians to strive for the greater gifts and the more excellent way, which is LOVE (see 13:1-3, 13).

Prayer, worship, and study of God's Word are essential to knowing God.

Into Discipleship

How does the twenty-first-century church live in the Spirit, utilizing a variety of spiritual gifts for the common good? Three responses drawn from 1 Corinthians 12 and related instructions given by Paul in his other letters—as well as Jesus' teachings in the Gospels—are suggested below.

1. Know the Source of Spiritual Gifts Through Prayer, Worship, and Study of the Word

John 4:24 affirms that "God is Spirit," and they that worship God must do so in spirit and truth. Prayer, worship, and study of God's Word are essential to knowing God—who is the source of spiritual gifts. Following Jesus' example of prayer, work, study, and rest during his earthly ministry leads to a closer relationship and knowledge of God (see Mark 1:35-39). The early Christian churches as reported in the Book of Acts and in the letters of Paul were devoted to these spiritual practices that bore fruit in the growth of individual believers and the churches.

Life Application: The alarming increase of people suffering from mental health problems and suicides due to depression gives churches the opportunity to use the diversity of spiritual gifts available to respond to these needs. Two responses to mental and spiritual health needs are to offer spaces for prayer and solitude in your church building following health safety guidelines and enlisting trained volunteers to do phone call ministry to those who live alone.

2. Know Your Spiritual Gift Through Self-awareness and Humility

Self-awareness begins with humility and a prayerful spirit. Jesus thanked God for giving wisdom and understanding to his disciples, whom he compared to little children (see Matthew 11:25). "Little children" implies humility to receive knowledge from God. We are promised wisdom when we ask God for it out of a sense of sincerity. Take time to meditate on ministry opportunities about which you are passionate. Our gifts emanate from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and manifest themselves through our passions; we are usually passionate about things that we can do well or for which we have an inclination.

Gifts are like muscles—the more you use them the stronger they become. During your prayer and meditation, ask God for clarity concerning your gifts and how you can begin to exercise them more.

Life Application: A spiritual gifts inventory can help individuals and churches to name and affirm their spiritual gifts. In addition to this, intentional identification, affirmation, and celebration of spiritual gifts encourage everyone to take part more actively in serving the church and community. For example, choose a Sunday during Pentecost or the first Sunday of the year to celebrate spiritual gifts.

3. Know How to Use Your Spiritual Gift Through Mentoring and Training

Paul's writing letters to the Corinthian church was one of the ways that he mentored those he had led to faith in Christ. In 1 Timothy 4:14, the apostle Paul reminded Timothy not to neglect his spiritual gift. What he meant by this was that every Christian needs to actively participate in being trained in using their spiritual gift to serve. Do you see anyone in your congregation who is actively using the spiritual gift that you believe you also have?

Life Application: Consider using the intergenerational model of ministry where there is mutual learning that occurs between the older and more mature Christian and the younger and growing Christian. For example, churches can organize ministry teams (made up of older and younger people who have similar gifts and skills) to do a project together.

CLOSING PRAYER

Here we are, gracious God, open to your wisdom and guidance. Thank you for your love and for the spiritual gifts you have given us. Help us to use them for the common good and for your glory and honor. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **How similar were the challenges of the Corinthian church to today's church? How different was their situation from twenty-first-century realities? What can you learn from the Corinthian church?**
- **What does Paul mean by "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"?**
- **What are the ways that twenty-first-century churches can utilize their spiritual gifts for God's purpose to serve the common good?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Spiritual Gifts Discovery Workshop

Organize a two-part spiritual gifts discovery workshop. In the first part, participants will complete a spiritual gifts assessment (there are many available online or through denominational resources). After identifying their potential gifts, participants will form small groups based on similar gift areas (teaching, service, leadership, etc.). In these groups, they will discuss how these gifts might be used in the church and community. In the second part of the workshop, participants will create personal action plans with specific ways they can begin using their gifts in the next month. Include a follow-up session where participants can share their experiences.

Activity 2: Age-specific Learning Activities

- Elderly Adults: Play a *Jeopardy!*-type game on spiritual gifts. This can be done in person or online. You could create categories like "Old Testament People with Spiritual Gifts," "New Testament People with Spiritual Gifts," "Spiritual Gifts for Personal Edification," "Spiritual Gifts Helpful during Worship," etc.
- Middle-aged Adults: Invite volunteers to share their experiences in identifying a spiritual gift and the people who helped them grow and utilize this gift.
- Young Adults: Each class participant identifies a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 and makes a spiritual gift inspiration board using photos, magazines, or Instagram or Pinterest posts to inspire creative ways to serve, using the spiritual gift. And organize teams to create a short video about spiritual gifts and share in class.

Notes

1. *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1980.
2. Ibid.
3. Richard B. Hays, "1 Corinthians," in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays et al, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 211.
4. Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 86.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Hays, *Interpretation*, 207.

Scan for *Engaging Intergenerational Faith*, edited by Jeffrey Haggray, Cheryl Price, and Rachael Lawrence

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Second Sunday After the Epiphany Week of 1/16/2022)
Week of January 18, 2026

Sunday, January 18
Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10;
1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Monday, January 19
Psalm 145; Isaiah 54:1-8; Romans 12:9-21

Tuesday, January 20
Psalm 145; Song of Solomon 4:1-8;
1 Corinthians 1:3-17

Wednesday, January 21
Psalm 145; Song of Solomon 4:9–5:1;
Luke 5:33-39

Thursday, January 22
Psalm 19; Isaiah 61:1-7; Romans 7:1-6

Friday, January 23
Psalm 19; Nehemiah 2:1-10; Romans 12:1-8

Saturday, January 24
Psalm 19; Nehemiah 5:1-13; Luke 2:39-52

LOVE

The Primacy of Godly Love

> *And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*
> (1 CORINTHIANS 13:13)

"Love is patient; love is kind." How many times have you listened to a reading of 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings? It sounds strange that this beautiful love poem was actually written by Paul and originally was not to be read in a wedding. These words were written to a divided, fighting, sexually immoral and ill-mannered church. The problem of how to live empowered by God's love in a society that teaches otherwise was not just an issue for the Corinthian church but for every church in the subsequent centuries. Today's lesson focuses on the primacy of godly love. Class participants will discuss this well-known "love chapter" and how it can spur us on to good works through our spiritual gifts.

Lesson Objectives

- Reflect on Paul's definition of "godly love."
- Ponder why godly love is the greatest of God's gifts.
- Identify ways to cultivate godly love as a motivation for the exercise of spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 NRSV

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over

my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Into the Scripture

A Tough "Love Letter"

In lesson 3, it was pointed out that Corinth was a city famous for its sexual promiscuity. It was reported by historians that the verb "Corinthianize" was coined by the Athenian poet Aristophanes to refer to "engaging in sexually licentious activity. Historical records show that Corinth hosted a thousand priestesses of the goddess Aphrodite (Venus) who were in essence prostitutes."[1] Paul's work in Corinth covered a period of eight years. He had spent eighteen months in the city during his second missionary journey and was knowledgeable of what was going on there. He was a caring spiritual parent to the believers in Corinth and wrote letters to them to respond to the issues and problems they were facing in a society that did not share the values of their new faith. First Corinthians was one of those tough "love letters" that Paul wrote.

This epistle helps us understand Paul's life, teachings, and ministry as well as his thoughts and feelings about the struggles of the young Corinthian church. He wrote this epistle while in Ephesus to answer the questions that the Corinthians had raised as well as issues that were of concern to Paul. Although it is called 1 Corinthians, it is in fact the second letter that Paul wrote. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul notes that he had already written one letter to Corinth—but this letter has not survived. Although we only have two surviving letters that Paul sent to the Corinthian church, there is ample evidence that he had written to them two more times. In writing these letters Paul showed his deep love and concern for the Corinthian church.

Into the Lesson

More than a Hymn to Love

Some scholars view 1 Corinthians 13 as a "hymn to love,"[2] while others regard it as an integral part of Paul's corrective teaching on spiritual gifts and how it relates to worship and the overall life of the Corinthian church.[3] In lesson 3, it was mentioned that Paul had urged the Corinthian Christians to strive for the greater gift and the more excellent way—which is love. As this last verse in 1

Corinthians 12 precedes 1 Corinthians 13, it is reasonable to conclude that the two chapters were possibly connected.

This beautiful and poetic definition of "love" was written in New Testament Greek but is coming from Paul's Hebrew worldview because it uses action words that are characteristic of the biblical Hebrew language. The thirteen verses of 1 Corinthians 13 comprise three parts: part 1 (verses 1-3) asserts the uselessness of exercising spiritual gifts without love; part 2 (verses 4-7) defines godly love in concrete terms. Part 3 (verses 8-13) affirms the temporary nature of all spiritual gifts and the enduring nature of love.[4]

The Necessity of Godly Love

One may wonder why it was necessary for Paul to write this "hymn of love." After all, wasn't the Christian church a place where love was present? Apparently in the Corinthian church, the answer was NO! Paul had to intervene and help the church reclaim God's love as the center and foundation of all that they did.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (verses 4-6). Paul's definition of love provides a challenging measuring stick against which we can evaluate our own expressions of love.

He used spiritual experiences that were commonly known in the Corinthian culture to remind the Corinthian Christians about the primacy of godly love. For example, in his opening statement he refers to speaking in tongues, a practice common not only among Christians but also in other religions in Corinth. It was understood as a language spoken by heavenly beings. This tongues speaking was not the same as speaking in different languages that Jesus' disciples

spoke at Pentecost. The former was heavenly language that could only be understood by the speaker, while the latter were human languages that could be understood by native speakers.

In the Christian church, speaking in tongues was a spiritual gift that Paul himself had, but he warned the Corinthians that it was useless without love. He then went on to say that one could preach with eloquence, have exceptional spiritual knowledge, give generously to the poor, or offer oneself to be martyred; but without love, all these would be considered worthless.

The Grammar of Godly Love

The Greek language has three words for "love": *philia* (brotherly love or love between friends), *eros* (sensuous and romantic love), and *agape* (unconditional love). In the early Christian communities, *agape* was understood as godly love. This love originated from God, who became human in the person of Jesus—the divine-human embodiment of agape.

Scholars point out that *agape* was seldom used in classical Greek literature. It is interesting to note that Paul defined "agape" like it was a person. The two positive definitions of love found in 13:4, 6 ("Love is patient, love is kind; . . . but rejoices in the truth") could be paraphrased in this way: *God is patient, God is kind. God rejoices in*

the truth. One could use this paraphrase on the negative definitions of love (13:1b-6): God is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. God does not insist on His own way, is not irritable or resentful, and does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Paul was teaching the Corinthian Christians the grammar of godly love. He strongly urged them to ensure that this is the kind of love that should be their motivation in using their spiritual gifts.

The Primacy of Godly Love

Paul's concluding remark in the love chapter is that in the Christian life, faith, hope, and love are the most important gifts from God. Among the three, godly love is the greatest because it will endure into the new world that God will establish at the final coming of Jesus. Faith and hope will not be needed because everyone will see God as God really is. But love will endure into eternity because it is the bond that unites God and God's beloved people. It is this enduring love that empowers everyone in the church to offer their spiritual gifts to achieve God's purpose and mission in the world. Later in his letter (16:14), Paul reaffirmed the importance of love by instructing the Corinthian church, "Let all that you do be done in love."

In the Christian life, faith, hope, and love are the most important gifts from God.

Into Discipleship

The Church as a School of Godly Love

Although there is a huge gap between the first-century church and today's churches, the struggles to live motivated by godly love are similar. Just like the Corinthian church, the contemporary church still needs to be reminded and taught how to live the love chapter. The church is like a school of godly love where everyone is a lifelong learner. There are three things from the love chapter that we can explore and apply in our current situation.

First, godly love is not abstract; it is action-oriented. What are the concrete ways that we can develop godly love in our faith community? In Woodbury, New Jersey, the Greater Woodbury Cooperative Ministries (GWCM) has a food pantry and clothing ministry supported by churches representing different denominations in the community. Volunteers from these churches work together in providing food and clothing for families in need. During the pandemic, the number of clients increased but so did the financial support and donations in kind. This shared ministry was a hands-on learning experience on cultivating godly love among volunteers and the people they served.

Second, godly love is not about competition, but cooperation. What ministries can our churches initiate that promote loving relationships, mutual respect, and partnerships in the community? In addition to having just one food pantry, the GWCM strives to have a Community Vacation Bible School, with member churches taking turns to host. This ministry model encourages mutual learning and appreciation for the diverse spiritual traditions that participating churches offer to all who participate. The process of learning how to do this together challenges church representatives to practice active listening skills and openness to new ways of doing ministry together.

The church is like a school of godly love where everyone is a lifelong learner. Although there is a huge gap between the first-century church and today's churches, the struggles to live motivated by godly love are similar.

Third, godly love takes practice. For godly love to flourish it needs to be practiced on a regular and consistent basis. How do we help one another practice our spiritual gifts motivated by love instead of pride? Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, GWCM churches tried their best to get together for worship, study, and fellowship. By taking turns preaching, teaching, and praying, pastors and church leaders got to know each other better. Friendships among clergy and congregations grew out of these experiences. It was in these different settings that godly love was practiced, stretched, and strengthened.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, help us to do everything out of love that comes from you—including Jesus, the greatest expression of your love. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **What specific problems in worship and church relationships in the Corinthian church was Paul addressing in 1 Corinthians 13?**
- **What is the Apostle Paul's definition of love?**
- **How can godly love (agape) be cultivated in today's church and in persons who are committed to living according to 1 Corinthians 13?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: "Love in Action" Service Project

Plan and implement a small group service project that exemplifies godly love in action. Begin by identifying a need in your community that your group can address. Using the characteristics of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as your guide, discuss how each aspect of love (patience, kindness, humility, etc.) can be demonstrated through your service. After completing the project, gather to reflect on how your understanding of godly love was deepened through the experience, what challenges you faced, and how you can continue to practice this kind of love in your daily life.

Activity 2: Age-specific Learning Activities

1. Elderly Adults: Encourage class participants to share a memory of a powerful experience of love. How does this experience relate to 1 Corinthians 13?
2. Middle-aged Adults: Ask each class participant to write their definition of love. Invite volunteers to share. Compare volunteers' definitions to Apostle Paul's definition.

3. Young Adults: If possible, organize the class into pairs, working together to choose a popular song about love and comparing it with Paul's "hymn of love" in 1 Corinthians 13. What are the similarities and differences?
4. Let each class participant identify their favorite influencer (athlete, singer, film star, poet, etc.) and find out what they say about love. Compare with 1 Corinthians 13.

Notes

Scan for *40 Years in the Wilderness* by J. Marshall Shammell

1. Robert Kugler and Patrick Hartin, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 433.
2. Ibid., 440.
3. Richard B. Hays, "1 Corinthians," in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays et al, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 221.
4. The following *Christian Citizen* article explores the ethical issues related to godly love during the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2, 2021): "Charity amidst the chaos—one year into the coronavirus pandemic and counting" by Curtis Ramsey-Lucas. https://christiancitizen.us/articles/charity-amidst-the-chaos-one-year-into-the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-counting

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Third Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 1/23/2022)
Week of January 25, 2026

Sunday, January 25
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Monday, January 26
Psalm 119:89-96; Jeremiah 36:1-10;
1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Tuesday, January 27
Psalm 119:89-96; Jeremiah 36:11-26;
2 Corinthians 7:2-12

Wednesday, January 28
Psalm 119:89-96; Jeremiah 36:27-32;
Luke 4:38-44

Thursday, January 29
Psalm 71:1-6; 2 Chronicles 34:1-7;
Acts 10:44-48

Friday, January 30
Psalm 71:1-6; 2 Chronicles 35:20-27;
Acts 19:1-10

Saturday, January 31
Psalm 71:1-6; 2 Chronicles 36:11-21;
John 1:43-51

GRACE GIFTS

Work Together

> *I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.* (1 CORINTHIANS 15:9-10a)

Today's Scripture focuses on the transformation of Jesus Christ from his mortal to immortal being. This transformation does not stop in Jesus Christ, but is transmitted to many people—including Paul—according to the grace of God. Therefore, the grace of God mentioned by Paul includes the gift that he received from God in his call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Lesson Objectives

- To learn about the grace of God as gift giving.
- To recognize belief in the Resurrection as a cornerstone of our faith.
- To know that despite differences, believers must work together as the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:1-15 NRSV

1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed
to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you
are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless
you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what
I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance

with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe. 12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

Into the Scripture

In accordance with the Scripture, Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day; then he appeared to all the apostles and many people. This passage points out the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul sought to address the unbelief in the church, which was that some Christians in Corinth were saying "there is no resurrection of the dead" (15:12). Paul emphasizes the reality of the resurrection as a foundational keystone of our faith as he delineates an eschatological paradigm of resurrection of the dead to the people in Corinth.

The Nicene Creed would centuries later become a benchmark solidifying the belief in the resurrection as central to Christian faith. The creed states the following (paraphrased): "God came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scripture and ascended into heaven." This is how the First Ecumenical Council had adopted the creed in 325 CE. The creed proclaims Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven. Before his ascension, Jesus validated his resurrection by appearing to his disciples and five hundred people after his death.

In the events of the Book of Acts, Paul experienced a metaphorical resurrection when he fell down to the ground and then was told to "get up" when Jesus appeared to him in a vision (see Acts 9:1-9; 22:6-11). As the result of his vision, Paul died to his old self and became a newborn, converted Christian. After he was baptized, he returned to Jerusalem, which was the most important place for the Jews because God's temple was there. Paul might have thought that he would need to return to God's temple right away to give testimony about his calling. Instead, he was given a different mission and was sent among Gentiles.

The Gift of Grace

As Paul talks about his calling and commitment to ministry, he credits God's grace for opening to him this leadership role. In the Old Testament, grace is the Hebrew

term *hēn*, which is also translated as "favor." The noun *hēn* occurs sixty-nine times in the Old Testament. Two occurrences in Genesis will be given as examples here. When *hēn* appears for God's favor, God's revelation and God's saving action to human beings follow. For example, in Noah' flood narrative, Genesis 6:8 reads, "Noah found favor [*hēn*] in the sight of the LORD." Noah was chosen by God; and God said to him, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, . . . I am going to destroy them along with the earth" (Genesis 6:13). However, since Noah found favor in God's sight, Noah and his family received God's saving action.

Genesis 18 also uses the word *hēn* [favor] for Abraham. When three strangers visited Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre, Abraham requested, "My lord, if I find favor [*hēn*] with you, do not pass by your servant" (Genesis 18:3). These three strangers stayed with Abraham, and Abraham showed hospitality to them. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, was infertile, which was considered to be a form of social death in ancient times. When Abraham found *hēn* (favor) in the eyes of these three strangers and offered them hospitality, Sarah was transformed from being infertile to becoming a fertile woman.

Thus, when Paul mentioned grace in 1 Corinthians 15:10a—"by the grace of God I am what I am"—he was saying that the grace of God afforded him the gift of preaching about Jesus to the Gentiles; therefore, he worked harder than any of Jesus' apostles. When the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul, he became saved; he was not only called, but he was also transformed; then he diligently used his gift of preaching in his mission to the Gentiles.

Into the Lesson

Mortality and Immortality

According to 1 Corinthians, the Christians in Corinth had various problems such as waywardness, immorality, and divisions, along with competition over spiritual gifts. Moreover, Paul was faced with people in Corinth who were denying the resurrection of the dead (see 1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Paul explains that Jesus was a mortal, but God raised him from the dead, which made him immortal (15:1-4). According to Paul, Jesus was resurrected in an imperishable body—that is, one that could not rot or decay—and Jesus appeared to his disciples, specifically to Peter, James, others, and even to Paul himself (later in his vision).

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (verse 10). Paul reminds us that God's grace enables us to both receive salvation and respond through dedicated service.

Paul often used death and life imagery symbolically in his letters. For example,

when he said, "I die every day!" in 15:31, Paul considered that his mission was difficult and full of affliction, especially in Asia Minor, which is present-day Turkey (see 2 Corinthians 1:8-11). Even though Paul faced some opposition, knowing that Jesus was resurrected helped Paul persistently work hard proclaiming the gospel. Today, our churches, especially immigrant churches, are facing so many problems in the United States, such as political right- and left-wing schisms, theological conservatism and liberalism, and cultural and linguistic adjustments.

To become our best selves in the church and society, each of us needs to be transformed by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, who transformed Paul from being a persecutor of the church to proclaiming the gospel of the Lord. The more we live into the power of Christ's resurrection, the more we are able to abandon the attitudes, prejudices, and polarizations that pit us against each other. Living into Christ's resurrection helps us reflect the light and love of Christ in all that we do and to everyone we meet, despite whatever differences we may have.

Work Together

Since there were so many types of divisions among the believers in Corinth, Paul tried to find the common ground to reunite these diverse believers. Paul knew that it was impossible to work alone in any kind of work, and especially his mission to the Gentiles. Paul needed his followers—he called them "brothers" and "sisters"—to work together to proclaim the gospel. Since each one had different spiritual gifts, each person needed another person to work together. Before chapter 15's mention of the resurrected Christ, Paul gave an example of unity of the believers as one body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

Since each one had different spiritual gifts, each person needed another person to work together. Paul's vision of the church as the body of Christ emphasizes how our diverse gifts must function in harmony rather than competition.

Even when Jesus was sent into the world to do God's mission, he could not do it alone. Jesus still needed the help and support of others to work for God's mission; thus, he had his close twelve disciples, and eventually many followers, male and female alike. Paul's recounting of Jesus' appearances is not all-inclusive because he does not mention Jesus first appearing to women (see Mark 16:9-14; Matthew 28:9-10). But together, the Gospels and Paul's letter mention that in his resurrection, Jesus appeared to many people. As Paul recounted, he appeared not only to Cephas, known as Peter, but also to many others, including his own brother James. Subsequently, these people were given the task of proclaiming the gospel to others.

By Jesus appearing to so many after his resurrection, he strengthened the start of the early church by having so many people see him in the flesh before his ascension. His followers would need to draw strength from their knowledge of his immortality; it would be used as a cornerstone of their faith as they worked together to carry out the mission of the church, especially when they faced persecution. Regardless of the diversity of those who saw Christ, their shared experience of seeing him risen from the dead (alive) would be the catalyst that would bind them together as the body of believers and unite them in carrying out the Great Commission.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:10a).

Into Discipleship

Grace as Gifts

Grace is a gift. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, interpreted that the grace of God covers the corruption of human beings; thus, humans' actions do not make them worthy of salvation. Luther created the doctrine of *sola fide*, "justification by faith alone." According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10, grace is a gift, to which we can respond. Paul said that by the grace of God in him, Paul worked harder; therefore, the grace in him had not been in vain. In addition to the notion of "justification by faith alone," Paul teaches us that we are saved through faith and can go on to do good works as an expression of our gratitude.

God's grace can also give us gifts to use to bless others. Noah found "favor" in the sight of God, which is a grace of God; thus, he was granted a gift of knowing how to make an ark to save all the animals in pairs, as well as his whole family. Like Noah, Abraham also found favor in the eyes of three strangers, so he was granted to give his gift of hospitality to these strange visitors. According to 1 Corinthians, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul, and Paul was transformed by a vision into being a person with a vision—from persecuting churches to preaching the gospel to Gentiles. Paul received the grace of God, which is the gift of preaching, and thus worked harder than ever before.

Spreading the Gospel

There are differences between going out to spread the gospel and trying to convert someone's religion to Christianity. Conversion is beyond a human's duty. Looking at Paul's life, God has God's own time to convert human beings. However, spreading the gospel is the duty for everyone who has faith and belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When everyone performs this mission, the gospel will go out to all the world. Each of us will come to believe that the gospel is for everyone. Galatians 3:28 reads, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Regardless of our backgrounds—ethnic, social, or gender identities—when the gospel reaches us, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Qamar Zia was born in India under British rule in 1929; she was born into a Muslim family. She attended a government school, but at age 17, she moved to a convent school in India. Her teacher talked about Jesus and the gospel. She began to read the Bible and was quite inspired by the Book of Isaiah. Qamar welcomed Jesus into her heart, but she kept it a secret. In 1947, Zia's family migrated to Pakistan, which had recently become an Islamic country at that time. She continued to study the Bible secretly at home. Seven years later, she ran away from home because she was afraid that her family would arrange marriage with a Muslim man.

She changed her name to Esther John. She took a job at an orphanage and later worked in a mission hospital. She rode her bike to the villages around her where she taught women to read. She told them about Jesus and the gospel wherever she went. Spreading the gospel can be a very difficult thing to do depending on our circumstances. However, when the gospel reaches us, we must accept the duty of spreading it to our community and society.

Working Together with God

When we start saying that God is in control, we must reflect on how much we all work together with God in God's saving action. We who believe in God through Jesus Christ must work harder with God in God's saving action. We must work together with God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for transforming us through your resurrection power and equipping us with gifts to serve together in love and unity. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **First Corinthians 15:3-11 portrays the parallel picture of the resurrection of Jesus and the conversion of Paul. As a baptized Christian, will you be able to identify yourself with the resurrected Jesus and the converted Paul?**
- **Reflect on what kind of gift is in you that you have received by the grace of God, such as the gift of caring for people, animals, and nature, the gift of preaching, the gift of singing and playing a musical instrument, or the gift of praying in public. How often do you use the gift to build the kingdom of God on the earth?**
- **Are we spreading the gospel into our community and society? If so, what is the outcome we achieve from it? In what way we can consider that we work together with God in God's saving action?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Personal Grace Gifts Inventory

Take time to identify your own grace gifts by completing this structured reflection exercise. First, list three to five activities that you enjoy doing and feel you do well. Next, ask for input from two or three trusted friends about what they see as your gifts. Compare these lists. Then, reflect on these questions: When have you felt most fulfilled in serving others? What areas of service have others affirmed in your life? How might these gifts be used more effectively in your church or community? Share your insights with a partner or small group; then create a simple plan for putting at least one of your identified gifts into more active service in the coming month.

Activity 2: "Living the Lesson" Application

- ***Grace Gratitude Journal:*** Create a daily or weekly gratitude journal specifically focused on highlighting God's grace in your life. Each day, write down at least one way you've experienced God's grace and how that grace has equipped you to serve others.
- ***Gift-sharing Activity:*** In small groups, discuss concrete ways in which you can share your spiritual gifts with someone this week. Make a specific commitment to

use your gift in service to others, whether through a formal ministry opportunity or an informal act of kindness and service.

- ***Collaborative Prayer Initiative:*** Form prayer partnerships where you regularly pray for each other to be strengthened to work with God in God's saving action. Develop a simple prayer calendar that identifies specific areas of ministry or service where you need God's strengthening grace.

Sources and Resources

- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Yale Bible)*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.
- "Esther John." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_John.

Scan for *To Live in God* by Walter Rauschenbusch

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 1/30/2022)
Week of February 1, 2026

Sunday, February 1
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6;
1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Monday, February 2
Psalm 56; 1 Kings 17:8-16;
1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Tuesday, February 3
Psalm 56; 2 Kings 5:1-14;
1 Corinthians 14:13-25

Wednesday, February 4
Psalm 56; Jeremiah 1:11-19; Luke 19:41-44
Presentation of the Lord: Malachi 3:1-4;
Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18;
Luke 2:22-40

Thursday, February 5
Psalm 138; Numbers 20:22-29; Acts 9:19b-25

Friday, February 6
Psalm 138; Numbers 27:12-23; Acts 9:26-31

Saturday, February 7
Psalm 138; Judges 3:7-11; Luke 4:42-44

TEACHABILITY

Adjusting Attitudes & Adopting Humility

> *They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.* (PSALM 1:3)

Teachers, foster parents, and daycare providers are all trained on discipline using intentional language. Specifically, we learn the difference between "you are bad" and "you did a bad thing." Kids can choose better behavior when they recognize that their actions don't lock them into a certain characteristic. In our passage today, we will wrestle with the roles of the righteous and wicked and how they are affected by God's redemption. Like a teacher, let's be intentional about our language as we dive into this passage.

Lesson Objectives

- To exercise humility by recognizing our own imperfections.
- To glorify the unparalleled goodness of God.
- To maintain a teachable heart and be surprised by Scripture, learn from fellow believers, and learn from nonbelievers.

Psalm 1 NRSV

1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that
sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the
LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. 3 They are like trees planted by
streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In
all that they do, they prosper. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind

drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Into the Scripture

The Book of Psalms is a gift to God's people. It is a gateway to holy moments with God. However, Psalms isn't only about music and worship; it provides wisdom and comfort knowing that God can handle any thoughts or feelings you express.

Set the Tone: It's important that we pay attention at the very beginning to set the correct tone for the rest of the passage. The Psalms are not only for worship or prayer, but they are also a resource for wisdom. We can use this book for worship, for adoration, and for instruction. Psalm 1 speaks of praising God's law (Torah) and those who follow God's law. Then the Book of Psalms unfolds into five books, which points the reader back to the five books of Moses (also Torah).

Potluck, Pitch-in, and Psalms: Psalms is like a carry-in church meal with many people involved to make it work. Two different groups helped to make the Psalms what we have today: contributors and compilers.

Contributors (psalmists or authors) are the individuals attributed with writing psalms. King David is the most famous psalmist; however, he is not the *only* psalmist. The text credits David for 73 of the psalms, but the remaining 77 are divided among other authors (28) and anonymous contributors (49). Psalm 1, in particular, is anonymous.

Compilers are those who gathered up and organized the Psalms into a cohesive book. Some scholars believe that our introductory psalms and conclusion psalms were contributed by the compilers as part of the formatting of the book we have today.

Skeletal Structure: We can treat chapters 1 and 2 as the introduction to Psalms and chapters 146–150 as a conclusion. The content in Psalms 1 and 2 creates a structure of the Book of Psalms. The skeleton of the Psalms is the Torah, God's law and ways of righteous living. The rest of Psalms is divided into five books similar to the way the Torah is made up of five books. You know you are at a transition between books when you find the repeated phrase "May the Lord God of Israel be blessed forever, amen and amen."

What's with the 'Tude, Dude? Consider the Psalms as a temple for the diaspora Jew ("diaspora" meaning in exile dispersed throughout the world). The structure provides the reader a way to enter God's holy place amid a secular space away from Jerusalem. Worship, prayer, and instruction are all folded in to provide the reader a temple-like experience. Psalm 1 sets the attitude and learning atmosphere for the rest of the Psalms.

While this psalm is relatively short compared to other psalms (examples: Psalm 119 with 176 verses), it still packs a punch. Psalm 1 boasts six powerful verses of instruction on righteous living and praise of God's word.

A Flourishing Destiny: Our author starts this psalm with a comparison of the "happy" and the "wicked" (or "sinful"). Clearly, the "happy person" avoids wickedness, but the opening line isn't fully clear. Is the author boasting of avoiding bad people or bad behaviors?

We will read dramatically different psalms depending on how we interpret this verse. One leads to believing that humans are innately bad and their nature cannot be

changed so, therefore, they are automatically condemned. The other reads of a person's choosing bad but able to choose right and be redeemed. As the "happy person" is rejecting actions (CEB: *follow, stand, sit*) rather than individuals, we can hope for an interpretation that includes redemption.

The psalmist ends Psalm 1 with the same comparison ("the way of the righteous" versus "the way of the wicked"). The way of the wicked leads to destruction, but the way of the righteous is intimately known by God, implying a pathway to flourishing or even eternal life. The destiny of the "happy person," who is faithful to God's word, is sealed up with God's plans.

Into the Lesson

Key to Happiness: The "happy person" rejects "wicked" practices while practicing and meditating on God's law. The root of their happiness is in God's law and the "happy person" experiences bountiful fruits of their labor. These fruits last extensively or, as the text says, "shall not wither."

God's law leads to fruit and flourishing. Practicing God's law isn't easy, much like a healthy lifestyle isn't easy. Athletes, for example, experience tough exercise and diet regimens to see results on the track or field. Living a healthy lifestyle leads to a body and mind full of health and the possibility of living a longer life. God's law (Torah) leads to a better life of enriched creation and community.

No "Brownie Points": We are not faithful to God's plans so that we can receive God's favor or blessings. We don't earn "brownie points" for good behavior. Instead, let's shift our thinking: We experience blessings when faithful to God because God's way is fruitful. It's not about God's playing favorites, but about our joining in with God's good work.

We would not place our motivation to follow God's law on what we can get from God. Rather, knowledge of God's character and intentions for creation should compel us to follow suit. Simply knowing God's character should create a yearning inside of us. The Christian faith is not about what God can do for us—yet, it results in God's provision because God is good. The results are the same, but our attitude is different.

Problematic Prosperity: The psalmist says that "whatever they do succeeds" (verse 3b, CEB). this passage requires a mind shift away from the notion of God's blessings' being connected only with our choices because such would support the "prosperity gospel." The "prosperity gospel" states that if you are faithful to God, you will have health, wealth, and prosperity. Conversely, a sinful life leads to illness, poverty, and despair. A simple glance into Ecclesiastes, the parable of Job, or our own human experiences, will provide a contrasting image. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Regardless of potential rewards, we are called to honor God with our lives.

Whose side are you on? We must be careful not to assume that God is on our side, blessing everything we choose. Our faith in God does not guarantee our actions are honorable and God glorifying. It is imperative that we meditate on God's Word to be guided by God rather than our own inclinations.

In Luke 18:9-14, the parable of the tax collector and Pharisee in prayer shows a skewed view of worthiness. The Pharisee had arrogance believing Pharisees were righteous by status from living the letter of the Law. The tax collector thought that he was unworthy for God to even hear his prayer because of the letter of the Law. However, the Pharisee did not live by the essence of the Law. God's heart and intentions for creation are the essence. Scripture is our tool for interpreting Scripture. Arrogance

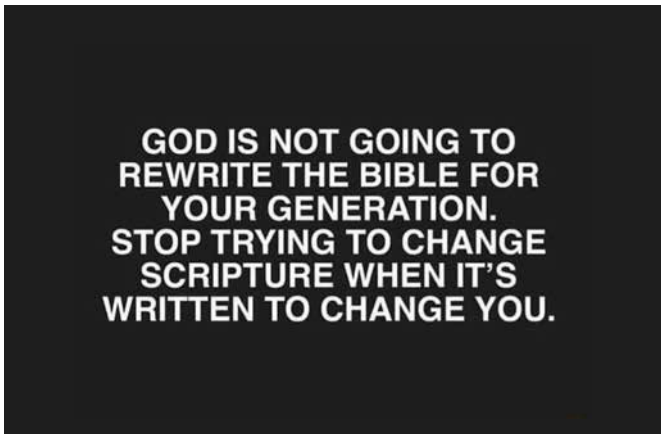
leads us to think that we're the righteous, but a glance at Romans 3:23 reminds us that all are condemned by the Law. Do we know the essence of God's law?

Roles Misconstrued: The struggle with our interpretation of this beautiful psalm is the potential to assume that we are the righteous ones. If we assume that we are the "good ones" then others are the "wicked who are destroyed." It is human nature to give ourselves or our loved ones the benefit of the doubt, allowing our own excuses when we fail God's law, while judging others harshly for their own failures or limitations.

America is in a season of "us versus them." We naturally assume that God is on our side and seldom stop to question if we are on God's side. I invite you to explore the Psalms and to see the wide array of voices, emotions, and stories that are told. I invite you to consider the different angles, perspectives, and cultures behind each of these psalms and consider how you could be surprised by God's word.

Renewing Reverence: If you were to venture not very far into social media you would find a graphic that depicts a Bible with a quote in bold letters suggesting that God's Scripture doesn't change to fit your desires but that you are to change to fit God's desires (example →). While the essence of this is true, the words imply something else. The implication of this graphic suggests that we understand the single correct interpretation of Scripture.

The photo above states that we comprehend the one right way to know God's Word and that there is no other form of interpretation. We assume we are the righteous and never consider the possibility that we are the ones misinterpreting God's law—like the religious leaders in the Gospels had done. When we assume we are right and have a correct interpretation of Scripture and the law, we close ourselves off to God's revealing new things to us.



Perhaps that graphic is exactly true, and that God's Word is unchanging—but the thing that needs to change is our interpretation or understanding of that Scripture. Perhaps we need to be open to the possibility that we do not always understand God's word. When was the last time you were surprised by the biblical text?

Reverence for Scripture is not demonstrated by placing our flag in the sand and claiming the "correct" interpretation and defending our claim. Reverence for Scripture is a willingness to study, pray, meditate, and expect to learn something new. Any other approach kills the living Word of God.

Reverence for Scripture is a willingness to study, pray, meditate, and expect to learn something new.

Into Discipleship

Interpreters of Intentions: If we zoom out a small amount from our own viewpoint, we can see that interpretation is a living and growing act practiced in our world today. A few examples include the following:

1. The U.S. Constitution has the Bill of Rights, Amendments, and Supreme Court

rulings to determine the intention behind language in the Constitution.
2. The Hebrew Scriptures have rabbinic traditions of Mishnah and Midrash. These rabbinic writings (or Mishnah) are oral traditions of interpreting Scripture. Midrash is a practice of reading the Torah for the current day. Jesus practiced Midrash in the Gospels.
3. We continue to pay scholars to research fields for the possibility of discovering new information or a new perspective to illuminate antiquated data. There is ongoing research in fields like archaeology, biology, medicine, and literature.

Do we give Scripture the same room to breathe and grow? Is it possible to see Scripture only as the inerrant or infallible Word of God without boxing it into one single interpretation? How often do we get stuck in a rut about Scripture by assuming we have concluded the meaning? Is it possible that God's Word can say something new?

By Jesus' Example: Jesus is an excellent example of how to give the Word new life and reach back to the essence of God's Word for interpretation. Jesus lived by the essence of the Law without trying to personally benefit. Jesus' life radiated love for neighbors and God. His ministry helps to interpret this psalm.

Jesus kept Judas, the betrayer and thief, in his company. Didn't verse 1 state that the "happy person" avoided the wicked? Is Jesus able to do things with sinners that we can't? Depending on how we interpreted the actions of the "happy person" in verse 1, we may think of Jesus as an exception rather than the rule. But turning to John 14:12 will challenge this interpretation again; in it, Jesus says that his followers will be able to do all the things he has done and more.

Jesus hangs out with sinners—tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, thieves, and more. He meets people where they are, cares for their humanity, and then calls them to a deeper life. The goal with God's law is not removing ourselves from every sinner in our path. The goal is to provide spaces for transformation that is led by God's Word and God's Spirit.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, cultivate in us a teachable spirit and humble heart, that we may grow like trees by your living water and bear fruit in every season. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **For Adults:**
  - **Are sinners a lost cause?**
  - **Is the word "wicked" in verse 1 synonymous with "sinner"?**
  - **Discussion: How could you be taught by youth?**
- **For Teens through Adults:**
  - **Discussion: What could teens teach adults?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: "Scripture" Surprise Circle

Purpose: To cultivate a teachable spirit and openness to new insights from familiar Scripture.

Instructions:

1. Choose a short passage from Psalms (e.g., Psalm 1 or another from the devotional list).
2. Have each participant read the passage silently and write down one insight or question that surprised them.
3. Form a circle and invite each person to share their surprise or question.
4. After everyone shares, discuss how different interpretations can deepen understanding and challenge assumptions.
5. Close with a reflection on how being surprised by Scripture can lead to spiritual growth.

Materials Needed: Bibles or printed Scripture passages, pens, paper

Activity 2: Righteous Versus Wicked Role Reflection

Purpose: To explore the complexity of righteousness and avoid simplistic moral labeling.

Instructions:

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Give each group a scenario involving moral ambiguity (e.g., someone who breaks a law to help another, or a person who appears righteous but lacks compassion).
3. Ask groups to discuss the following:
   - Who might be considered "righteous" or "wicked" in the scenario?
   - How does Psalm 1 challenge or support their conclusions?
   - What role does humility play in interpreting these roles?
   - Groups present their reflections to the larger group.
   - Conclude with a discussion on how assumptions about righteousness can affect relationships and spiritual growth.

Materials Needed: Scenario cards or printed examples, discussion prompts.

Sources and Resources

- Enns, Peter. "The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More than Our 'Correct' Beliefs." *Goodreads*. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25816844-the-sin-of-certainty
- *Websites and videos:*
  - The Bible Project—"Psalms" Overview: https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/psalms/
  - The Bible Project—"How to Read the Bible" Series: https://bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible/

Scan for *Reclaimed* by Denise Janssen

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 2/6/2022)
Week of February 8, 2026

Sunday, February 8
Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13); Psalm 138;
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Monday, February 9
Psalm 120; 2 Kings 24:18-25:21;
1 Corinthians 15:20-34

Tuesday, February 10
Psalm 120; Ezra 1:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:12-19

Wednesday, February 11
Psalm 120; Jeremiah 22:11-17; Luke 11:37-52

Thursday, February 12
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 43:16-34;
Romans 8:1-11

Friday, February 13
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:1-17;
1 John 2:12-17

Saturday, February 14
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:18-34;
Luke 12:57-59

Possible route into Egypt after Joseph was sold into slavery

FORGIVENESS

Hope, Healing, and Harmony

> *"And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."* (GENESIS 45:5)

In this lesson, the reader will revisit the story about Joseph and his brothers. The brothers allowed their jealousy and anger to prompt them to take drastic measures that could have led to heartbreaking results. But only the saving grace and intervention of God changed what could have been a tragic ending to a happy one—or at least to where the family was reunited through love and reconciliation. In this lesson, the learner will understand how the themes of hope, harmony, and healing play out in this story and how they can be applied to their own lives.

Lesson Objectives

- Revisit how Joseph ended up in Egypt, working at Pharaoh's right hand.
- Recognize that forgiveness helps us as much as it does those we are forgiving.
- Think of ways to pursue reconciliation where needed in relationships.

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 NRSV

3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. 4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.'" . . . 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Into the Scripture

The Bible is full of wonderful stories. They include all the intrigue and drama we often see in our modern lives. Bible stories are so "real" that we can learn from their lessons because in them we can see ourselves, our families, and our predicaments. We may tend to relate the antagonist in a story to our enemies, whether they be strangers or kin. We sometimes prefer to see vengeance directed at those who cause the pain. But as life gives us unexpected twists, the story does not always end the way we expect it to end.

One of the greatest sagas comes to us in Genesis as we learn about sibling rivalry, God's providential care, and the ways that God can make a way out of no way. Sometimes it is hard to see the hand of God in action. Hindsight can be 20/20, but are we able to trust God in the heat of the battle when odds are stacked against us? The story of Joseph reminds us that God is always present, and God is always in control. There is much to learn from this narrative by putting yourself in the place of Joseph, his brothers, and Jacob. God is a promise keeper. What God had promised to Jacob and his lineage would be preserved even in the midst of what may have appeared as defeat.

Joseph said to his brothers, "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (verse 5). Joseph's words remind us that God can transform even our most painful experiences into instruments of divine purpose, offering us a path to forgiveness beyond human understanding.

The title of this lesson comes from an earlier passage in Genesis—Genesis 4:1-13—in which God asked Cain about the whereabouts of his brother Abel. Cain flippantly remarked that he did not know (yet he absolutely did) and then quipped, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). The teens that I teach would say that Cain made a "slick" remark to God. In other words, Cain was saying, *I shouldn't have to know the location of my brother and be responsible for him at all times.*

Leading up to the passage for today's lesson, Joseph's brothers also tried to "get rid of" their brother. Jealousy and envy once again moved brother(s) to take devastating

actions. Joseph's father, Jacob, favored Joseph and openly displayed his affection for him. Thus, it was no secret to Joseph or his brothers. The gift of a beautiful, long-sleeved robe was one such way Jacob blessed Joseph (see Genesis 37:3). But the sibling rivalry took a turn for the worst when Joseph shared a dream with his brothers that suggested that someday he would rule over them (see Genesis 37:9-11) . . . and that's when the drama began.

Back Story

When the other brothers saw Joseph while in Dothan, they plotted to kill him. The brothers decided to take his coat and push him into a well—using animal blood on the coat to trick Jacob into thinking that Joseph was dead. But as God would have it, Joseph was sold and taken to Egypt. He prospered working for Potiphar, who was a captain for Pharaoh. Living in Potiphar's house became dicey for Joseph—as the captain's wife made advances toward him. Upon refusing her, she lied against Joseph, which resulted in imprisonment. And it is from there that Joseph's ability to prophesy by analyzing his dreams became a prized gift.

God allowed Joseph to begin interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. From this position, Joseph became an indispensable member of Pharaoh's inner circle. Through dream interpretation, Joseph was able to warn Pharaoh to prepare for the drought that was to come. God then moved Pharaoh to place Joseph in charge of the whole enterprise of having the people store grain. God allowed Joseph to serve at Pharaoh's right hand and have access and power at the very top of the government.

Around this juncture in the timeline is when Joseph's brothers entered back into the picture. Two years into the drought, Jacob sent his sons (except Benjamin, because Jacob feared that he would be harmed) to Egypt to buy grain. Once they arrived, the brothers would come face-to-face with their long-lost brother . . . though they did not know it was him at the time. This encounter would lead Joseph through an emotional process of deciding how he would handle this opportunity to expose his brothers and confront them for what they did. First, he treated them unkindly. He accused them of being spies and requested that they bring back their youngest brother, lest they die. Joseph had the power in the situation and used it to have his family jump through hoops coming and going. But eventually, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in a spirit of forgiveness. Joseph told them to not be upset at themselves because it was not them that sent him to Egypt, but God!

God allowed Joseph's long and circuitous route to Pharaoh's right side as a way that Jacob's family—and hence his lineage—could be saved in the time of famine. Joseph urged his brothers to get their father and their respective families and return so that they may live in Goshen. The reunion was filled with happy tears, and Joseph was able to provide for his family. Once the brothers returned home to collect Jacob and their families, their father was in disbelief. It is only after Jacob heard the full story and saw the carts that were sent to carry their belongings that he was convinced that what they said was true.

Into the Lesson

Hope

Hope and faith are similar, but there are some nuanced differences. When one looks at hope, one may think of a wish or something that they might want to happen or obtain. And it is our positive and upbeat outlook that helps us continue to do what

we need to do to attain that object or enjoy the event we want to experience. Hope is a motivator. As Christians, we can use the promises of God to keep us inspired, particularly when the going gets tough. Also having a vision of what you want or goals you want to achieve can act as roadmaps to keep you moving toward your destination. Sometimes, it is the desire for that thing that builds our hope and empowers us to put the necessary work in or make the necessary connections to bring it to fruition. Without hope, we are not motivated and can waste time letting our dreams pass us by.

We are reminded in Hebrews 11:1 (KJV) that faith is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." After the brothers "got rid of" Joseph, one brother felt some sense of remorse. Reuben intended to go back to save his brother . . . but when he returned, Joseph was gone! What Reuben did not know is that Joseph would eventually be sold and sent to Egypt. Because Joseph was never found, one might think that Reuben hoped that Joseph made it out of that predicament unscathed. We can only speculate about Reuben. But in our own lives there may be past situations left unfinished or broken or incomplete. God can give us the opportunity to fix what is broken if we are willing to return and face the circumstances. We can trust that God will always help us do the right thing—no matter how much time has passed.

Harmony

Before true healing can take place, harmony or reconciliation must happen. After all of the jealousy, envy, and attempted murder (sounds like a TV crime drama), Joseph's brothers had a lot for which to answer. Think of it! Ten brothers conspired to kill their younger brother because his father put him on a pedestal and made him a colorful coat. It may sound a little trivial, but Joseph's

brothers were angry and full of envy. But what they meant for bad, God meant for good! God works it out for good, even when we are unable to see God's hand in the situation.

When we seek God's help, God can help us rectify situations. Sometimes we need to forgive—and at other times we need to ask for forgiveness. Either way, we can seek peace by making amends where needed, and we can seek peace by letting go of the pain that someone has caused us. When we are willing to forgive, we are in effect offering ourselves release and healing. God can help us let go of the pain and move on with hope and faith.

Healing

As stated before, reconciliation must occur first before healing can take place. It was Joseph's eventual forgiveness of his brothers that was the first step. Next, he reassured his brothers who he was and that they must forgive themselves of what they did to him. How selfless! How reassuring! How inspiring! There will be many times in our own lives when we will be called to forgiveness—forgiveness of ourselves and others. Ephesians 4:32 reminds us that we should

be forgiving to each other, just as how in Christ, God forgave us.

As we approach Resurrection Sunday, the greatest example of forgiveness comes from Jesus—when, from the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34, KJV). The Roman soldiers had tortured and demoralized the Messiah, making him carry his own cross before nailing him to it. How humbling to think that in the moment of so much pain and agony, Jesus thought more of us than he did about himself! He died so that we might have eternal life!

What they meant for bad, God meant for good.

Into Discipleship

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a story that is applicable to our lives in many ways. The themes of hope, harmony, and healing are ideas that we can all use within our lives. If there is someone who has wronged you, take the time to pray and forgive that person. Yes, that is easier said than done. There are many counselors and scholars who speak on forgiveness; whether there are four steps or seven steps, here are some common threads:

- Recognize and acknowledge the pain. Understand the situation and admit that the event occurred in the first place. Sometimes this requires getting answers to unanswered questions involving the event. Understanding the space that others may have been in at the time can be helpful. Sometimes, misunderstandings are the foundation of the pain.
- Talk to someone you trust about the pain and let it out—whether it is a counselor, family member, or friend, it is important to tell someone how you are feeling and release your feelings about the situation; letting go is a process that takes time. But if you continue to let go, eventually the pain will leave. Be prayerful and patient with yourself.
- Forgiveness is not necessarily paired with forgetting. Forgive the party that hurt you with the understanding that "hurt people hurt people." Though you may absolve someone of the pain they caused, you do not necessarily have to forget what happened. However, you should move on. As believers, we are told that we should forgive each other as God forgives us. Knowing the event happened and dwelling on it are two different things. Sometimes, lessons are learned from our pain that we need not forget. But the forgiveness will help absolve the pain and allow us to move on in life with resiliency.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of mercy and restoration, help us to forgive as you forgive, that we may find healing, harmony, and hope in your divine plan. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **Consider the position of the different family members—Joseph, his brothers, and Jacob. Discuss the challenges each person would have in seeking forgiveness and restoration. Whom must they forgive? Who must they ask for forgiveness? What would be the implications of their not doing so?**
- **Is there someone in your life that you need to forgive or a past event for which you need to make amends? Write a letter to those involved. What would you want to say to them? What do you want them to understand about what happened and how you now feel? What are you asking as next steps in the relationship?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Family Reconciliation Role-play

Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a different character from the Joseph story (Joseph, Jacob, Reuben, the other brothers). Ask each group to discuss and then role-play how their character might have approached reconciliation. What would they say? What emotions would they express? How might they react to the others? After the role-play, discuss the following as a larger group:

- What was most challenging about taking on your character's perspective?
- What insights did you gain about the forgiveness process?
- How might this story have ended differently without forgiveness?
- What lessons can we apply to our own family conflicts?

Activity 2: "Steps to Forgiveness" Reflection

Provide participants with paper and writing materials. Ask them to reflect on the three steps of forgiveness outlined in the lesson:

- Recognizing and acknowledging the pain.
- Talking to someone trusted about the pain.
- Understanding that forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting.

Have participants write about a specific situation where they need to practice forgiveness (either forgiving someone else or seeking forgiveness). For each step, ask them to write concrete actions they could take. After individual reflection time, invite volunteers to share one action step they plan to implement in the coming week. Close with prayer for courage and strength to pursue reconciliation.

Sources and Resources

- A play by The Riverside Church about Joseph and his brothers

Scan for *Journey with Jesus Through Black History Month* by Glenn E. Porter

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 2/13/2022)
Week of February 15, 2026

Sunday, February 15
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1;
1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Monday, February 16
Psalm 120; 2 Kings 24:18–25:21;
1 Corinthians 15:20-34

Tuesday, February 17
Psalm 120; Ezra 1:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:12-19

Wednesday, February 18
Psalm 120; Jeremiah 22:11-17; Luke 11:37-52

Thursday, February 19
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 43:16-34;
Romans 8:1-11

Friday, February 20
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:1-17;
1 John 2:12-17

Saturday, February 21
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:18-34;
Luke 12:57-59

Portable icon with the Transfiguration of Christ, Byzantine artwork

TRANSFIGURATION

In All of His Glory

> *While [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.* (LUKE 9:29)

In this lesson, the reader will learn about the Transfiguration that took place when Jesus went to Mount Tabor to pray, accompanied by Peter, James, and John. The lesson will explore the actual Transfiguration event and how it bridges God's plans for humankind as represented in the Old and New Testaments. We will also consider what it means for us to be on our journeys of purpose as we see Jesus begin to have the disciples ponder the costs of discipleship.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand the poignant theological symbolism and meaning enraptured in the Transfiguration.
- To consider how Jesus came to fulfill the Law and usher in God's kingdom in the midst of opposition.
- To become more aware of how God moves us to new ground in pursuit of God's will.

Luke 9:28-36 NRSV

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John
and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the
appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly
they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and
were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.
32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had
stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they
were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make
three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what
he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they
were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that
said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36 When the voice had spoken,
Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the
things they had seen.

Into the Scripture

I Am Who I Am

In Luke's presentation of the Gospel, the narrative of Jesus' Galilean ministry culminates with the Transfiguration account. One of the primary themes throughout this Gospel centers around the identity of Jesus as Son of Man and Son of God. Beginning with the birth narrative, we welcome God incarnate—both human and divine—surrounded by those who come to bear witness of the only begotten of the Father. Angels and shepherds celebrated what God had done in bringing Jesus into the world, encouraging Mary and Joseph as the parental stewards of the One who would both bring and be God's salvation for one and all.

The identity and purpose of Jesus' life and calling continued to be established when, in the temple, Simeon and Anna gave testimony to Jesus' being Israel's salvation and indeed Savior of the Gentiles as well (see 2:25-38). Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, leading up to his baptism and the launching of his earthly ministry. And his notoriety spread as he performed miracles, taught, called disciples, and ushered in the kingdom of God. Chapters 4–9 summarize accounts of Jesus' ministry in Galilee with continued focus on his identity.

Luke's narrative moves swiftly from Jesus' Galilean "coming out" ministry to the focus on his ultimate goal of going to Jerusalem and all that entailed. Thus, we find the Transfiguration narrative as a poignant, pivotal account at that juncture of Luke's confirming who Jesus is and what he must do. In the events of chapter 9, the disciples witnessed Jesus' divine power in the feeding of the five thousand. Afterwards, we read about his asking, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (9:18). In response to the query, the disciples rehearsed the "chatter," including listing Elijah as one of the rumors to his identity. But then Peter

statedly announced Jesus as the Messiah. And with affirmation of that pronouncement, Jesus began to bring the disciples in on the next-level events to occur. With some degree of detail, Jesus foretold his suffering and death (see 9:21-22). He would do so several times leading up to Jerusalem.

Into the Lesson

A Journey to Knowing

Luke's literary positioning of the Mount Tabor Transfiguration account at the end of the Galilean ministry episodes is intended to be one of the "high points" of Luke's testimony of who Jesus is. Just as the reveal of who Jesus was escalated with each teaching and miracle, so too the disciples were on a journey of discovering and understanding for themselves the depth of the implications of Jesus' identity and purpose.

Sometimes, God has to take us on a journey of discovery to help us mature so that we can receive what God ultimately wants to impart to us. Sometimes, it is preparation for a new job; sometimes, it's preparation for a life transition. Sometimes, the pending blessing will increase what we have; sometimes, the change will cause us to have to let go of things that have been dear to us. God often has us on a journey of being and becoming to position us where God needs us to be to best use us and bless us. With every God-directed situation we experience, we become more aware of the unlimited power of God to transform and control circumstances to bring about God's will.

There are moments on our journeys when we are walking in God's will and times may become difficult. We may need special encouragement. God always sends us what we need and whom we need to speak that word of comfort and strength. God uses us to encourage one another. Sometimes, we have the very insight that someone needs to hear to complete the mission that God has given him or her.

A "Mountain" of Symbolism

It was based on their prior sharing—all Jesus' experiences with his new disciples from the point of their call to this moment—that Jesus took the inner circle (Peter, James, and John) with him up to Mount Tabor. This mountain experience harkens back to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Bible describes Jesus' appearance changing and his clothing that "became as bright as a flash of lightning." This is reminiscent of the brightness of Moses' face after he had been in the presence of God (see Exodus 34:29).

Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai, and Jesus prayed to God on Mount Tabor. Both men were spiritual leaders seeking to help the people of God move from where they were to the blessing that God intended for them. Moses was journeying to Canaan and Jesus to Jerusalem. Both men were on a godly mission for which they had been specifically called and prepared.

Moses and Elijah joined Jesus in conversation as Jesus reflected the glory of heaven. With Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together, we see the sacred display of Priest, Prophet, and King. Together, they were/are the fulfillment of God's will from the Law to the new covenant of grace that would be actuated by Jesus. And Christ in himself subsumes the fulfilling of all aspects of the Law as he represents all three sacred offices—a Prophet to the world, our High Priest for all eternity, and the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus was not in opposition to the Law; everything that he did was congruent to its teachings. Jesus simply writes the last and final chapter of what God had intended from the very beginning, a way for humanity to be fully in relationship with our Creator.

Had We Only Been There

One of the things I enjoy about biblical narratives are those incredible accounts where the supernatural takes place and the disciples are standing there speechless, or, rather, they should have chosen to remain speechless. Yes, we can count on impetuous Peter to put his foot in his mouth. And it is easy for us to fantasize that "had we only been there," we would be the consummate example of how to handle or respond to the situation. We often imagine that given the same situation, we would either do the right thing or know the right thing to say.

With all the weightiness of the scene, one can still perceive some of God's humor if you consider that Elijah was mentioned earlier in the "chatter" as to who Christ possibly was. Hence, we can see the three disciples looking at Jesus wrapped in his glory, deep in conversation, and the disciples thinking, *"Well, now we know he definitely ain't Elijah."* As Luke has documented anecdotes that account for who Jesus was, the Transfiguration climatically puts an exclamation point at the end of what was a question. From documenting the affirming voice of God at Jesus' baptism to this glorious cloud moment (reminiscent of God's presence during the Exodus), Luke confirms that Jesus is the Son of God—and, in doing so, Luke proves that One who later dies on the cross is fully human and fully divine: Jesus, the Son of God.

A Turning Point

While this mountaintop moment was a vital pitstop for Jesus as he turned his face like flint toward Jerusalem, the moment also symbolized a deepening reality for the disciples, one that Jesus worked hard at making clear in his conversations with them and subsequent teachings. Having given the inner circle a glimpse of the spiritual magnitude of his enterprise, having affirmed Peter's announcement that Jesus is the Messiah, and having begun to tell them repeatedly that he was going to die a horrible death, Jesus began to home in on the cost of discipleship. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the price that they would be asked to pay if they continued in ministry with him . . . and if they continued in ministry after him.

Sometimes, God has to take us on a journey of discovery to help us mature so that we can receive what God ultimately wants to impart to us.

While Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law, the religious leaders considered him a dangerous interloper who was about to undo the comfort of their elitist status quo. Jesus was going into Jerusalem with eyes wide open and wanted to have the disciples process their commitment to following his teachings. Knowing how the religious leaders would persecute and prosecute him, Jesus understood that some of his followers would endure no less while attempting to move the centuries-old Jewish religion into a new realm of being and becoming. Ultimately, the religious schism would result in two separate religions—Judaism and Christianity—and many would suffer on all sides as an antagonistic, emperor-worshipping government joined the conflict.

With every God-directed situation we experience, we become more aware of the unlimited power of God to transform and control circumstances to bring about God's will.

Into Discipleship

What does it mean for us to fully acknowledge our connectedness to the Creator God through Jesus Christ? We can be empowered and encouraged to live out authentic lives of discipleship because we know that we have ultimate victory through Christ. I believe that is what Christ wanted the inner circle to realize. Their being key leaders in the movement, he wanted them to be strong and persistent in their witness, knowing that what they believed was true and that God was always with them. Despite what persecution or hardship came their way, they could stay the course knowing that they were serving the living God and that their faith was of eternal importance. Their witness was of eternal importance.

Eventually, the three would share their account of the Transfiguration, and the church for years to come (like even in this moment) could draw inspiration from what the disciples experienced. Upon feeling the pressure to relinquish pursuit of Christ's mission and to, instead, acquiesce to the powers-that-be—whether they are religious or social forces—how can we avoid kowtowing to the status quo?

Because we believe in Christ, our authentically living out his teachings and applying his principles to all aspects of our situations can help us witness his love to a world in need of a hug . . . and salvation. Being an example of his love, peace, and grace is not always easy; however, if he suffered, we may be called to suffer likewise. As we have struggles, we have to remember to pray like Jesus prayed and spend time in God's presence.

Tasha Cobbs Leonard sings on her debut album, *Grace*, a song entitled "For Your Glory." In the song's chorus, she sings that "for your glory, I will do anything, / Just to see you, to behold You as my King." In songs like Leonard's and others that speak about being in God's presence, one can only imagine that once you have met, talked to, and communed with God, you would (1) be changed forever and (2) want to be able to be with God always. What a wonderful experience! It can be likened to situations when a person may not have actually seen or heard God but knew beyond a doubt that God was there in the midst! What an awesome experience!

CLOSING PRAYER

Radiant God, reveal your glory in our lives and strengthen us to follow Christ with courage, even when the path leads through sacrifice. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- **What will you do when you have an opportunity to be in the presence of God or know that you have been in God's presence? Will you deny God (as the disciples did), or will you continue to seek God's face?**
- **Has there ever been a time when you have been in the presence of God, Jesus, or God's angels? How did it change you?**

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Mountaintop Experience Sharing

Create a safe, contemplative space for participants to share their personal "mountaintop experiences" with God. Begin by playing soft instrumental music and dimming the lights (if possible). Invite participants to close their eyes and recall a moment when they felt especially close to God's presence, perhaps during prayer, worship, in nature, or during a life transition. After a few minutes of reflection, have participants share their experiences in small groups of 3-4 people. Encourage them to describe the following:

- The circumstances surrounding the experience.
- What they felt during the experience.
- How the experience changed them afterward.
- How the memory of that experience continues to impact their faith journey.

After small group sharing, invite volunteers to share highlights with the larger group. Close by discussing how these personal transfiguration moments help shape our understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Activity 2: Discipleship Cost Assessment

This activity helps participants think deeply about the cost of discipleship that Jesus wanted his followers to understand after the Transfiguration. Provide each person with paper divided into three columns:

- Column 1: "Comfort Zones"—List aspects of life where following Jesus might require stepping out of comfort zones.
- Column 2: "Potential Costs"—For each comfort zone, identify what might be lost or sacrificed.
- Column 3: "Kingdom Gains"—For each cost, identify the spiritual growth or kingdom benefit that might result.

After completing their individual assessments, invite participants to share one comfort zone that they feel God may be calling them to step beyond. As a group, pray for courage and strength for each person to follow where Christ leads, even when the path includes suffering or sacrifice.

Sources and Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Transfiguration" by Hillsong Worship: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLMtfq5epbw
- "I Know I've Been Changed" by LaShun Pace Rhodes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzMKZcoFTrM
- "For Your Glory" by Tasha Cobbs Leonard: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKetXJjMUZ0

Scan for *The Original African Heritage Study Bible*, King James Version

Devotional Scriptures

(Based on Year C Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany / Week of 2/20/2022)
Week of February 22, 2026

Sunday, February 22 ***(Transfiguration Sunday)***
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

Monday, February 23
Psalm 35:11-28; Exodus 35:1-29; Acts 10:9-23a

Tuesday, February 24
Psalm 35:11-28; Ezekiel 1:1; 2:1; Acts 10:23b-33

Wednesday, February 25 ***(Ash Wednesday)***
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Thursday, February 26
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Exodus 5:10-23; Acts 7:30-34

Friday, February 27
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Exodus 6:1-13; Acts 7:35-42

Saturday, February 28
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 12:27-36

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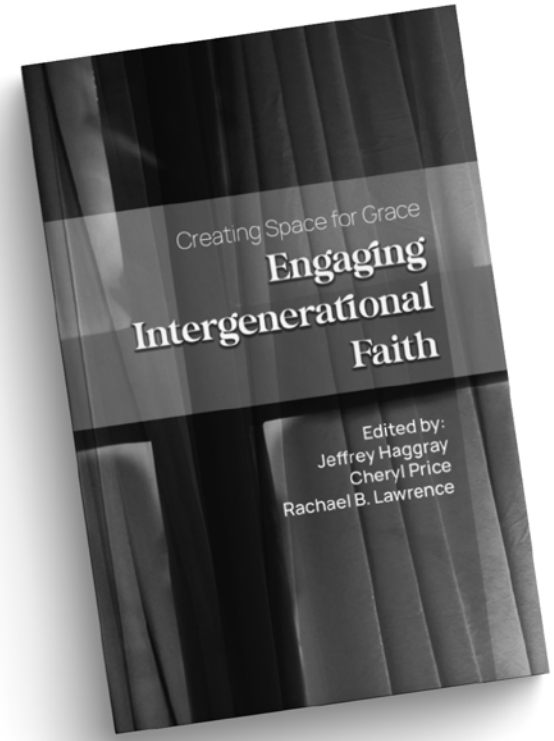

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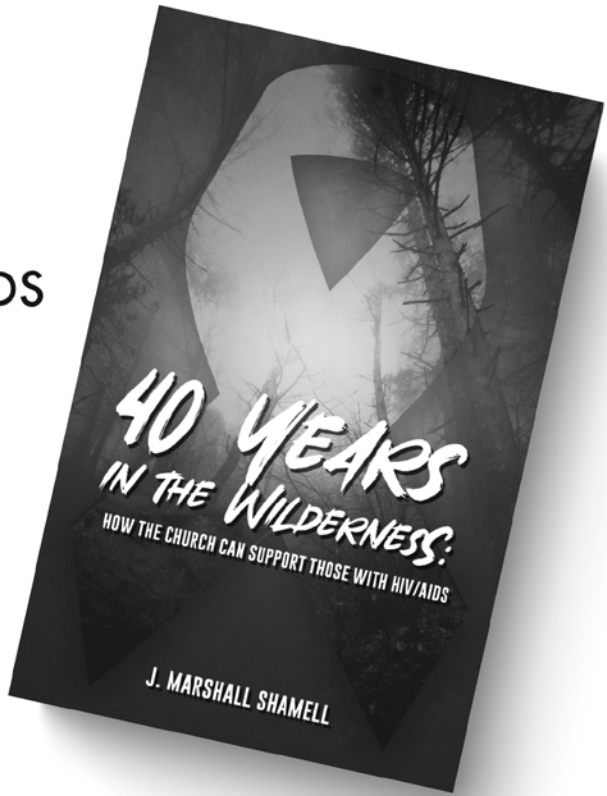

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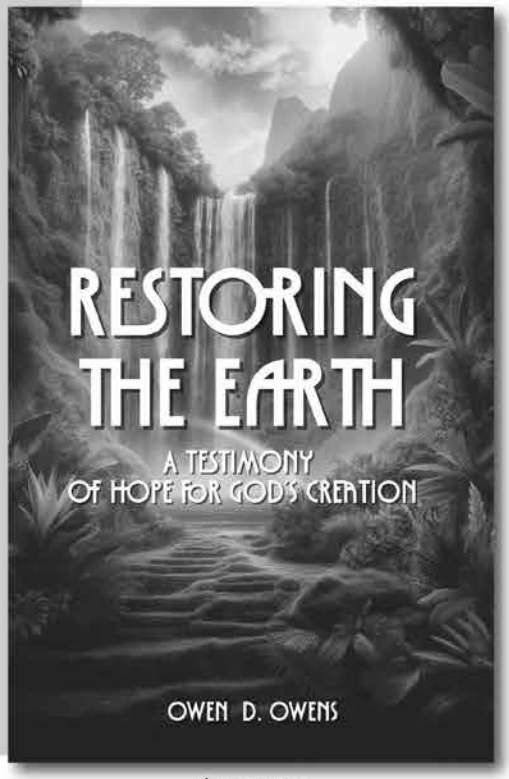
by Owen D. Owens

Owen Owens was a Christian leader committed to environmental and racial justice. In his last work, he offers reflective essays on hope for restoring the Earth and seeing God's promises while enduring life's hardships. Throughout the book, he invites readers to feel the loving light of our Creator, calling us into wholeness and healing. Owen writes passionately about the restoration of lands impacted by mountaintop removal mining and the healing of waterways, even as he faced his own end-of-life issues. *Restoring the Earth* will inspire you to pursue environmental wholeness and personal well-being that will sustain us and the planet.



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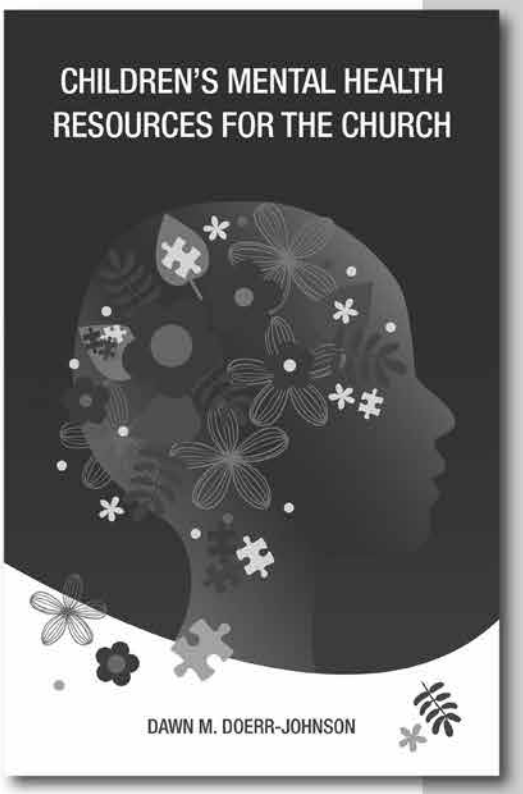

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Children's Mental Health Resources for the Church

by Dawn M. Doerr-Johnson

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