Witness and Hope

Goal for the Session
Heeding Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, adults will consider contemporary ways to speak truth to power grounded in God’s promised future.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION


WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Leslie J. Hoppe
Luke places the lament over Jerusalem at the end of a collection of parables (13:1–30), all of which are calls for repentance. This is very likely a key to how Luke understands its significance. Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem is less a final judgment on the city and more a call to repentance. The touching metaphor by which Jesus asserts that it is God’s will to protect Jerusalem through him is evidence that Jesus is predicting not the city’s destruction but its salvation. Both Isaiah (60:4) and Zechariah (10:6–10) use the image of the scattered children of Jerusalem being gathered together to speak of God’s unwavering love for Israel.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Daniel G. Defenbaugh
Jesus is brooding over the face of the deep, as it were, lamenting the excesses of this city’s past and anxious about the birth pangs (cf. Rom. 8:22) that he must soon endure there. In the new kingdom of God, the blessed will not be those who come in the name of power and of strength, but rather those who come in the name of the humble and faithful Lord of creation. It is to this end that Jesus must proceed, even amid such inconsequential obstacles to God’s will as Herod and Rome.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodney Clapp
If Jesus expects scorn and violence in Jerusalem, he does not return that hateful rage with rage of his own. The opening words of his speech could easily lead to a revolutionary diatribe: Instead, his oration veers into a motherly lament: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen huddles her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 34). At these words, Jesus’ original hearers could not have helped but pick up echoes of frequent Old Testament references to the God of Israel as the one “under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12; see also Pss. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4).

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael B. Curry
For Jesus, God’s passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God’s human children closer and closer in God’s embrace and love. That mission and commitment are at the center of Jesus’ work. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God’s children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself.
Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults have experienced abuses of power in their daily lives. A supervisor at work engages in unethical behavior. A patriarch or matriarch in the family abuses his or her privileged standing. A prominent leader in your congregation oversteps her or his authority. How should one respond? Keep silence, fearful of possible consequences? Lash out at them in kind? Or speak the truth and hope for the best? Today’s Scripture considers how Jesus dealt with abuse of power and provokes ideas for participants to do the same.

What is the word, what is the work, you would bring to me for the leading and then living of this session, O God? May I hear, that I may do. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

In advance of the session, place the purple cloth on the table or bench. Place the large Bible in the center, opened to Luke 13:31–35. Also, write the four assignments for the initial Exploring activity on a board or sheet of newsprint.

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Invite adults to recall a situation involving conflict where they wanted to speak out but did not do so. For silent reflection: what kept you from speaking out? Next, have adults recall a situation of conflict where they took the risk of speaking out. For silent reflection: what motivated you to speak?

Without disclosing the particular incidents, invite adults comfortable doing so to briefly identify what moved them to keep silent or speak out.

Today we will consider a Gospel story where Jesus spoke and set out on a path undeterred by conflict with powerful individuals and institutions.

Offer this prayer or one of your choosing:

Speak to us, O God, through the words of today’s passage, through this community you have gathered: that we, in turn, may speak your truth and live your hope. Amen.

EXPLORING

Set the passage’s context by inviting participants to briefly review the stories in Luke 13 that precede it by looking at the subheads of those passages in study Bibles. Note that these stories of repentance, conflict, and transformation are set in the midst of a much longer section (Luke 13:10–17:10) that weaves those same themes into Jesus’ teaching by word and example.
The so-called “Travel Narrative” (Luke 9:51–19:48) sets the course of Jesus’ ministry to Jerusalem by providing extensive teaching (in word and example) on how disciples can follow Jesus’ example.

At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem (which literally means “foundation of Salem,” a Canaanite god) contained the seats of power of both Jewish religion (Temple rebuilt by Herod the Great) and Roman occupation (fortress Antonia presided over by Pilate).

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Call attention to the prominence of “Jerusalem” in this passage. Invite adults to brainstorm all that they know about or associate with Jerusalem. Write these responses on a board or newsprint sheet. Underscore Jerusalem’s identity as the religious and political center of Judaism (and Rome’s occupation of that region). Invite adults to imagine themselves the leaders of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. Ask:

- What does Jesus seem to be saying, explicitly or implicitly, about your authority?
- How would you respond to your city, and power, being linked to the killing of prophets?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 13:31–35). Read and discuss the “Where?” excerpt. Focus your conversation on the sentence there that begins “In the new kingdom of God . . .” Ask adults:

- What does it mean for Jesus to say his ministry will not be dissuaded by those like Herod (and later Pilate) who flaunt their possession of power?

Shift the conversation by substituting “the church” for “Jesus” in that previous question:

- What does it mean for Jesus to say his ministry will not be dissuaded by the powers that be in his day?

Raise the same question, substituting the church and its ministry for Jesus and his ministry.
RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Truth, Mission, and Power**  Jesus’ dismissal of Herod’s threat for the sake of ministry empowers the church’s witness in the midst of contemporary authorities that might otherwise stifle our mission. Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Talk about dreams and hopes that people have today that are threatened by powers that do not welcome them. Identify ways in which the church might speak truth about such power for the sake of the “mission and commitment at the center of Jesus’ work.” Commit as individuals, and as a group, to one such missional act of speaking truth.

2. **Hope That Empowers**  Jesus grounds his courage to defy Herod in the hope asserted in verse 35. Have individuals recall the situation of conflict discussed in Gathering. Ask: How does hope, or its absence, play into these occasions where you spoke out, or refrained from doing so? Form small groups to explore ways in which hope empowers faithful speaking and living. Apply these insights to a conflict in your community (church or wider) today. How might hope transform what we say and do in its midst?

3. **Stories of Witness**  The church’s contemporary witness to powers stands on the shoulders of others who have borne such witness in the past. Read Resource Sheet 2 (Facing Power with Truth). Lift up the “truths” that inform the witness of each individual, the nature of powers encountered, and the risks taken. Identify a divisive issue in your community. Discuss how these stories might inform your congregation’s witness: in the truths that need to be upheld; in the powers that are in play; in the risks that are faced. Determine next steps for urging the church’s continuing witness in the face of this issue.

CLOSING

Read aloud Jesus’ words in verse 33: “Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way.” Invite the adults to silently consider the “ways” that our calling in Christ, as individuals and as congregation, requires that we be on. Imagine the forces arrayed both in favor and opposition to those ways. Thinking now of the conversations and activities in this session, ask adults to call out the truths that need to be affirmed and the hopes that sustain us on that way.

Offer this paraphrase of a portion of today’s psalm (27:1) for a commissioning on our way:

> God is your light and salvation: whom shall you fear?
> God is the stronghold of your life: of whom shall you be afraid?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 3, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week, so that they have adequate time to reflect on the Scripture passages and the excerpts throughout the coming week.

WHAT **is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Leslie J. Hoppe

Luke places the lament over Jerusalem at the end of a collection of parables (13:1–30), all of which are calls for repentance. This is very likely a key to how Luke understands its significance. Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem is less a final judgment on the city and more a call to repentance. The touching metaphor by which Jesus asserts that it is God’s will to protect Jerusalem through him is evidence that Jesus is predicting not the city’s destruction but its salvation. Both Isaiah (60:4) and Zechariah (10:6–10) use the image of the scattered children of Jerusalem being gathered together to speak of God’s unwavering love for Israel.

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SO WHAT **does this mean for our lives?** — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodney Clapp

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NOW WHAT **is God’s word calling us to do?** — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael B. Curry

For Jesus, God’s passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God’s human children closer and closer in God’s embrace and love. That mission and commitment are at the center of Jesus’ work. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God’s children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself.
Martin Luther
Three years after posting a series of debate propositions on the church door at Wittenberg, the German monk Martin Luther was summoned to an imperial assembly (“diet”) in the city of Worms. Luther had already been excommunicated by the church and branded as a heretic. The assembly was convened to grant Luther a hearing, and consider whether the appropriate punishment for heresy, being burned at the stake, was in order. At the assembly, Luther was given the opportunity to recant his writings. He asked for time to reflect on the choice. The next morning, speaking to this gathering of religious and political authorities, Luther declared: “Unless I am convicted by the Scriptures and plain reason . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.” —Christendom, vol. 1, Roland Bainton, Harper and Row, New York, 1964, p. 21.

Rosa Parks
On December 1, 1955, an African-American department store worker was asked to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, so that a white person could have her seat. She refused. When the driver asked why she didn’t move, Rosa Parks simply replied: “I don’t think I should have to stand up.” The bus driver called the police and an officer responded. As she was led away to jail, Ms. Parks asked the officer: “Why do you push us around?” Her arrest sparked a bus boycott organized by a 26-year-old named Martin Luther King Jr. Within a year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Alabama’s state and local laws establishing segregation on buses were unconstitutional.

Kefa Sempangi
Kefa Sempangi was a Ugandan pastor during the reign of Idi Amin. In his book, A Distant Grief, he tells the following story. At the conclusion of an Easter worship service he led, a death squad entered the church with orders to kill Rev. Sempangi. When asked if he had any final words, he said: “I am a dead man already. My life is dead and hidden in Christ. It is your lives that are in danger. . . I will pray for you.” —A Distant Grief, Kefa Sempangi, Regal Books, Glendale, CA, 1979, pp. 115–121.
God’s Dependable Promises

Goal for the Session

In the light of God’s dependable promises proclaimed by Isaiah, adults will respond in repentance, praise, and witness.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Isaiah 55:1–9

WHAT is important to know?

Isaiah 55 is a central passage in a series of passages proclaiming hope and salvation to the exiles. The central message to be proclaimed is the extraordinary nature and dependability of God’s promises. Even in the strangeness of a faraway land and in the face of the power of our foes, God promises a restoration and renewal beyond our previous condition. While we may not be able to see the possibility or understand the way, God’s word will accomplish its purpose.

WHERE is God in these words?

Here we find a divine paradox: although our thoughts are not God’s thoughts and our ways are not her ways, although her righteousness is as high above our sinfulness as heaven is above the earth, God is still near! God loves us and is eager and ready to bless us. During this Lenten season, as we relinquish indulgences in order to please God, let us first focus on being with God, spending time with God, drinking the milk and wine he gives us—eating the bread of life. Let us praise him above all the earth so everyone around us will be drawn to the joy and glory of God. In so doing we will be supremely satisfied.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

Lent challenges us to consider the reality of our own sinfulness and our need for repentance. We may not be immediately aware of how we have wandered away from God—how life has lost its meaning in pursuit of a promotion or raise, how we have gotten buried under the demands of economic and social status. Isaiah’s words help us to hear the truth so that we can recommit ourselves to God’s offer of steadfast love and covenant relationship as the true way for our lives.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

The words of this passage find some correspondence to modern-day words of invitation at the communion table. In this Lenten text we find words for the broken in spirit deeply reminiscent of King David’s invitation to Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9), anticipating Jesus’ call to guests to a great banquet (Luke 14:15–24). More profoundly, Isaiah’s “Come . . . . I will make with you an everlasting covenant” appears to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’ summoning his disciples to his Last Supper just prior to his crucifixion. Proclamation may focus on God’s grace-giving word to us, that in God’s storage house nothing is lacking.
Focus on Your Teaching

Through advertisements, newspapers, television, the Internet, and social networks, we are inundated with offers of consumer goods that promise satisfaction in life. Today’s focus text invites reflection on what ultimately satisfies. Many of your participants who are practicing Lenten disciplines of giving up foods or taking on spiritual habits may find the text helpful in offering a vision of what is truly important and where God promises to be present.

Help me to rejoice and trust in your promises, O God. Work through my teaching so that group members also may hear and trust in your promises and respond faithfully to you. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare a worship center with purple cloth and a Bible open to Isaiah 55:1–9. On the board or newsprint, write the questions for group discussion in Exploring. If you are planning to use option 3 in Responding, print the questions on newsprint.

As participants arrive, greet them by name. Invite the group to make a mental list of three or four things that give them most satisfaction in life. After a minute, ask them to prioritize these things in rough order of importance. Form pairs and have each person spend no more than one minute telling their top two items to their partner. When all have spoken, come back together as a whole group and ask for a few examples of things that give satisfaction.

Tell the group that today we will consider God’s promises that are intended to satisfy our needs.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Gracious God, you shower us with promises of love, forgiveness, and renewal. In this Lenten season, open our ears to hear your promises, to trust them completely, and to share them with those around us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

EXPLORING

From a Bible atlas, Bible, or the Internet show a map of the ancient Middle East that includes Israel and Babylon. Indicate that Babylon was located in modern Iraq.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Exile), and ask the group to read it silently. When all have finished, ask the group to imagine they are the exiles. Then have a volunteer read Isaiah 55:1–9.
Isaiah 55 is the conclusion of a collection of exilic prophecies (chs. 40–55) from the time of Cyrus the Persian’s rise to power that presaged the end of the Babylonian empire and opened the way for the return of the exiles to their homeland.

Lent is often considered a season when we “give up” things. While there is nothing wrong with this discipline, there is much to be said for adopting more positive disciplines, such as today’s “responding” options—making promises, praying, and witnessing.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 55:1–9). Invite participants to read the “What?” excerpt silently. Form small groups to discuss the following questions (listed on board or newsprint):

- If you were an exile, how would you respond to the prophet’s message?
- What is God promising?
- What is involved in turning back to God (vv.6–7)?
- What points in the passage call the people to praise God (vv.1–9)?
- How will Israel be a witness (vv.4–5)?

Regroup as a whole. Use Resource Sheet 1 excerpts to begin the transition from Exploring to Responding. First, have a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask the group to discuss in what ways God’s promises in the text call us to praise and witness. List examples on the board or newsprint. Then have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt. Ask: In what ways does the focus text challenge us today to repent and recommit ourselves to God? List ideas on the board or newsprint.

Lead into Responding by having participants read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: How might God’s promises make a difference to your observance of Lent this year?

**RESPONDING**

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Lenten Promises** Distribute pens and paper and ask each person to write one or more promises to God that will be a discipline for Lent—that is, something they will do throughout the rest of the Lenten season in response to God’s dependable promises. Suggest that promises include repentance, praise, and/or witness. Tell participants that they will take these very personal promises home for Lenten meditation. They do not need to be shared with the group.

2. **Lenten Prayers** Distribute pens and paper. Have each person write three prayers for use in their daily Lenten devotions in the coming week—a prayer of praise for God’s promises, a prayer of repentance, and a prayer that asks God for help in witnessing to others. If anyone needs help in getting started, suggest that they use psalms. A prayer of praise could be based on Psalm 63:1–8 (the psalm for today’s lectionary). Psalm 51:1–4 may give ideas for a prayer of repentance. Psalm 26:6–7 may engender ideas for a prayer of telling about the good things that God has done for us. (Write these psalm references on the board or newsprint.)

   Indicate that volunteers may use their prayers in Closing.
3. **Lenten Witness Strategy** As a group, plan a Lenten (that is, a short-term) outreach strategy to the unchurched in your community. Post the following questions where all can see them:

- How will you tell the community what God has done for you/your congregation?
- How will you invite people to hear the dependable promises of God?
- Which of God’s promises may connect most clearly with their lives?
- Is there anything you need to change (repent of) in the congregation that could hinder your witness to the community?

Have someone take detailed notes on the plans; ask the note-taker to send copies of the plans to participants during the week.

Plan to follow up next session, to check how the strategy is coming along.

**CLOSING**

Gather at the worship center.

Invite a few volunteers to each call out one insight about God’s dependable promises that they have gained in the session.

Together say or sing a hymn of praise or of repentance. Some possibilities follow (YouTube videos of the songs are at the Internet addresses indicated):

- “Standing on the Promises” (youtube.com/watch?v=PyrbWS8-ZGU);
- “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” (youtube.com/watch?v=K-kWrnNe9kY&feature=related);
- “Just as I Am, Without One Plea”;
- “All Your Promises Are True.”

If you used option 2 in Responding (Lenten prayers), ask for volunteers to pray their prayers. If you did not use that option, or if no one volunteers, spend a few moments in silent prayer. Close by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 10, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Richard A. Puckett
Isaiah 55 is a central passage in a series of passages proclaiming hope and salvation to the exiles. The central message to be proclaimed is the extraordinary nature and dependability of God’s promises. Even in the strangeness of a faraway land and in the face of the power of our foes, God promises a restoration and renewal beyond our previous condition. While we may not be able to see the possibility or understand the way, God’s word will accomplish its purpose.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Darryl M. Trimiew
Here we find a divine paradox: although our thoughts are not God’s thoughts and our ways are not her ways, although her righteousness is as high above our sinfulness as heaven is above the earth, God is still near! God loves us and is eager and ready to bless us. During this Lenten season, as we relinquish indulgences in order to please God, let us first focus on being with God, spending time with God, drinking the milk and wine he gives us—eating the bread of life. Let us praise him above all the earth so everyone around us will be drawn to the joy and glory of God. In so doing we will be supremely satisfied.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Daniel M. Debevoise
Lent challenges us to consider the reality of our own sinfulness and our need for repentance. We may not be immediately aware of how we have wandered away from God—how life has lost its meaning in pursuit of a promotion or raise, how we have gotten buried under the demands of economic and social status. Isaiah’s words help us to hear the truth so that we can recommit ourselves to God’s offer of steadfast love and covenant relationship as the true way for our lives.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Kenyatta R. Gilbert
The words of this passage find some correspondence to modern-day words of invitation at the communion table. In this Lenten text we find words for the broken in spirit deeply reminiscent of King David’s invitation to Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9), anticipating Jesus’ call to guests to a great banquet (Luke 14:15–24). More profoundly, Isaiah’s “Come . . . . I will make with you an everlasting covenant” appears to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’ summoning his disciples to his Last Supper just prior to his crucifixion. Proclamation may focus on God’s grace-giving word to us, that in God’s storage house nothing is lacking.
Background
After King Jehoiakim of Judah rebelled, in 598 BCE Nebuchadnezzar sent armies to Judah. They carried off the king, queen mother, high officials, and leading citizens to Babylon. Major cities in Judah were destroyed and the economy was left in shambles. Weak Zedekiah became king in Judah, and more rebellious plots festered. Finally, in July 587 BCE the Babylonian army stormed Jerusalem, burned the city and the temple, and destroyed the walls. Other fortified cities were razed. Leading officers and citizens, including Zedekiah’s sons, were executed. An additional group—including Zedekiah himself, blinded and in chains—was deported to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar left in Judah only poor peasants who would not be capable of revolt.

In Exile
The culture and splendor of Babylon must have been eye-opening to the new arrivals. They lived in southern Mesopotamia in a community by themselves. They were allowed to build houses and to farm or otherwise earn a living. Many became traders and some grew wealthy. Strict observance of the covenant law, especially Sabbath observance, circumcision, and ritual cleanness, became the marks of the exiles, who no longer had the former visible symbols of their faith. The exiles codified cultic laws, and preserved traditions and prophetic sayings. Many were bitterly homesick and filled with hatred for the Babylonians.

Theological Questions
The exile resulted in a faith crisis. Did Yahweh, the God of Israel, not have the power over Babylon? Were Babylon’s gods more powerful than Yahweh? Were Yahweh’s promises not to be trusted? Had Yahweh in wrath cut off his people forever? How could they worship without a temple? Or (as Habakkuk believed) were the Babylonians the instruments of Yahweh’s discipline? Was exile a merited punishment? And was it only temporary? Would Yahweh eventually destroy Babylon and restore the chosen people to their own land?

Prophets
Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed that Judah’s predicament was the result of Yahweh’s righteous judgment; both prophets looked forward to a new community that Yahweh would eventually establish. They called the exiles to be loyal to Yahweh even in a faraway land that had no temple and none of the trappings of their religion. And, they said, God would one day bring the people back home, in a new act of deliverance and salvation.

Then . . .
With the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BCE, the Babylonian empire declined rapidly. Cyrus the Persian took over the Median empire and gained control of most of Asia Minor as well as lands to the east. A vast empire rose that could topple Babylon. The prophet we know as “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 40–55) proclaimed that Israel’s penance had been accepted. Yahweh would gather the people and return them to their homeland. Yahweh in fact was the only God, the Lord of heaven and earth, who would save the people and reestablish the covenant promises with Israel. Yahweh’s rule was recognized as universal, and Cyrus was recognized as Yahweh’s instrument.
The Holy Spirit Comes with Power

On Pentecost, participants will rejoice in the Holy Spirit’s work and tell about God’s deeds of power.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 2:1–21

WHAT is important to know?
Peter’s citation of Joel’s prophecy is eschatological, for it points to the end of the age in which Peter is speaking and Luke is writing. Luke affirms that on that particular Pentecost—when all Jesus’ followers, named and unnamed, women and men, young and old were given the power of the Spirit of God to bear witness in every language of the good news of Jesus Christ—the coming of the day of the Lord is beginning. While we do not yet see the fulfillment of that promise, as we retell the story of Pentecost one more time, we remember that, according to Luke, it will surely come.

WHERE is God in these words?
The Holy Spirit will come upon all of my servants. Again, no one is excluded. Freedom will come for all who serve; liberation and salvation are available for all who are disciples. As in that time, Joel’s words mean disciples of Jesus include all who believe in the Christ who promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, continuously adding to the church created by an awesome God. Those who believed Jesus was the Christ joined the church that day, for it was birthed by an incredible God.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?
Peter’s sermon reminds us of the promise of God—prophesied, envisioned, dreamed of, and longed for from long ages hence—that the Spirit, the living presence of the eternal God, would pour down upon all humanity, and “then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” in whatever languages they may use by whatever names they may be called. Peter conjures up Joel’s vision of the day that—he will soon tell this crowd—has already dawned in Jesus Christ, the same Christ whose Spirit blows through the house in which they are standing, whose fiery love created a community where only strangers stood before.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?
Those who sneered and said of the apostles, “They are filled with new wine” (v. 13), were right! They were! The consequences of that, described in Jesus’ parable about putting new wine into old wineskins (Luke 5:36–39), were not lost on those who heard that Pentecost “babble” any more than they were on those who crucified Jesus. The tongues were not unintelligible glossolalia, but a clear message that all heaven was bursting out singing for all the world to hear, that “in Christ there is no east or west”!

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Acts 2:1–21
Ps. 104:24–34, 35b
Rom. 8:14–17
John 14:8–17, (25–27)
Many Western churches use red at Pentecost to symbolize the tongues of fire that rested on the believers as they were filled with the Spirit. In some Orthodox traditions, the color for Pentecost is green, representing the new creation.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Acts 2:1–21

YOU WILL NEED
- Bibles
- map of the ancient Middle East
- red decorations (optional)
- copies of your church’s hymnal or songbook
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 26, 2013

For Responding
- option 1: pens and paper
- option 2: scissors, large markers, tape, construction paper, colored card stock, or poster board

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING
Before the session, consider decorating the meeting room in red, the liturgical color associated with Pentecost. Perhaps some red flowers or streamers could brighten the space. If you will use option 3 in Responding, arrange early in the week to have a visitor attend the session.

Welcome participants and introduce visitors.

In small groups, have participants tell of one occasion in which they were able to accomplish a task with someone with whom they could not communicate verbally. Perhaps neither spoke the same language or perhaps they were in a country where they could not communicate in that language.

After a few minutes gather together as a large group and tell participants that today’s focus text tells about the way God speaks through all languages and customs.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O Holy Spirit, speak to us today as you have spoken to our ancestors. Help us to hear your message in the Scriptures and to feel your presence with us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

EXPLORING

Spend a couple of minutes providing the context for today’s focus text. Remind participants that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two volumes of one work. That is, Acts 1 picks up immediately following the end of Luke. At the end of Luke readers have read the story of the resurrection (Luke 24:1–12), followed by post-resurrection appearances of Jesus (Luke 24:13–53). Those appearances are summarized in Acts 1:1–5, followed by accounts of the ascension (Acts 1:6–11), the election of Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:12–26), and...
then the story of Pentecost in today's focus text. Conclude this brief orientation by reading Acts 1:4–8—Jesus’ instruction to the disciples to remain in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 2:1–21 as a group, with each person reading a verse, followed by the person on their right. Tell participants not to worry about pronouncing the names of cities and regions correctly.

Show a map of the ancient Middle East and have the group find the various places from which the Jews had come for the festival. (You may find a map to print by going to Google Images and typing in “Pentecost nations.”) Note the large swath of the Roman Empire that stretches from northern Africa and Rome to modern-day Iran and Turkey.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 2:1–21). Form two groups and have each group prepare to retell the story of Pentecost in their own words, focusing on different aspects of the story. The first group will use the “What?” and the “Where?” excerpts for their focus. The second group will use the “So What?” excerpt as their focus.

After a few minutes, gather back together and let each group tell the story of Pentecost from their point of view. Have the whole group summarize what they have learned about the working and power of the Holy Spirit from the Pentecost story.

Have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt. Have the group discuss how the worldwide church today reflects the “clear message . . . that ‘in Christ there is no east or west.’”

RESPONDING

1. **The Languages We Speak** From the beginning people heard about God’s deeds in many languages. This activity will help participants practice speaking of God’s deeds in more than one modern idiom and hear the attempts of others to do so.

   As a large group name some of the languages spoken within driving distance of your church building. After citing formal languages such as Spanish or Creole, name other languages that may include the idioms of age levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic traditions, other religions, and nationalities.

   Form small groups and provide paper and pens to each group. Have them choose one of the languages named and write a paragraph about “God’s deeds of power” in a way that might be understood by people who speak that language.

   Gather together and have each group read their paragraph. As a group, discuss how it felt to “speak” in a different way about faith, and the challenges in doing so. Have each participant think of one way they will try to speak in a “new language” to someone in the coming week.
2. **Rejoicing in the Spirit**  Help others in your congregation rejoice in what your group has learned about the Holy Spirit!

   Place on a work table scissors, large markers, construction paper, colored card stock, or poster board.

   Cut 6" x 18" strips from construction paper, card stock, or poster board. On each strip, participants will print in large letters a message that communicates rejoicing in the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s work.

   Post the strips on a wall or bulletin board for worshipers to see.

3. **The Diverse Global Church**  Pentecost is a great opportunity to remember the vast breadth of God’s church. Today, more than 2 billion Christians in all parts of the globe worship in many ways and represent a myriad of cultures, nationalities, and languages. This option will help participants learn more about the church in another part of the world.

   Invite to the session someone who comes from another culture, has spent considerable time in another culture, or has participated in another culture in a particular way (such as a mission trip, volunteer work, a group visit to a “partner congregation” of your denomination, or the Peace Corps). Let the visitor briefly describe some of the customs of the church in that country/culture, and lead the group in an activity that engages them in an aspect of that culture (such as learning a song or practicing a ritual from the culture, praying for particular needs in that culture, or making plans to support a simple project through advocacy or other action).

**CLOSING**

Distribute hymnbooks and copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Prayers to the Holy Spirit).

Pray the litanies on Resource Sheet 2. Invite a volunteer to lead, with the rest of the group responding.

Sing or say a favorite Pentecost hymn together.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 26, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on Acts 2:1–21

**WHAT is important to know?**  
— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Margaret P. Aymer

Peter’s citation of Joel’s prophecy is eschatological, for it points to the end of the age in which Peter is speaking and Luke is writing. Luke affirms that on that particular Pentecost—when all Jesus’ followers, named and unnamed, women and men, young and old were given the power of the Spirit of God to bear witness in every language of the good news of Jesus Christ—the coming of the day of the Lord is beginning. While we do not yet see the fulfillment of that promise, as we retell the story of Pentecost one more time, we remember that, according to Luke, it will surely come.

**WHERE is God in these words?**  
— From “Theological Perspective,” Linda E. Thomsa

The Holy Spirit will come upon all of my servants. Again, no one is excluded. Freedom will come for all who serve; liberation and salvation are available for all who are disciples. As in that time, Joel’s words mean disciples of Jesus include all who believe in the Christ who promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, continuously adding to the church created by an awesome God. Those who believed Jesus was the Christ joined the church that day, for it was birthed by an incredible God.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**  
— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Michael Jinkins

Peter’s sermon reminds us of the promise of God—prophesied, envisioned, dreamed of, and longed for from long ages hence—that the Spirit, the living presence of the eternal God, would pour down upon all humanity, and “then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” in whatever languages they may use by whatever names they may be called. Peter conjures up Joel’s vision of the day that—he will soon tell this crowd—has already dawned in Jesus Christ, the same Christ whose Spirit blows through the house in which they are standing, whose fiery love created a community where only strangers stood before.

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**  
— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard L. Sheffield

Those who sneered and said of the apostles, “They are filled with new wine” (v. 13), were right! They were! The consequences of that, described in Jesus’ parable about putting new wine into old wineskins (Luke 5:36–39), were not lost on those who heard that Pentecost “babble” any more than they were on those who crucified Jesus. The tongues were not unintelligible glossolalia, but a clear message that all heaven was bursting out singing for all the world to hear, that “in Christ there is no east or west”!
Prayers to the Holy Spirit

(Responses in bold)

O Holy Spirit, with the Father and the Son you are God. We praise you.

O Holy Spirit, at Pentecost you brought good news to people from many places. We praise you.

O Holy Spirit, you walk with us and with your church daily. We praise you.

O Spirit of truth, you shine light on our darkness and reveal our sin. Have mercy and forgive us.

O Spirit of truth, we often fail to appreciate the great diversity in your world and in your church. Have mercy and forgive us.

O Spirit of truth, we neglect opportunities to serve you and our neighbor. Have mercy and forgive us.

O Spirit of God, make us holy day by day. Lord, make us the people you want us to be.

O Spirit of God, create in us faith through the Word. Lord, make us the people you want us to be.

O Spirit of God, guide your church, and especially this congregation. Lord, make us the people you want us to be. Amen.
Paul and Silas in Prison

Goal for the Session

Through the story of Paul and Silas, participants will give praise for God’s liberating work and will find ways to practice faith in difficult circumstances.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 16:16–34

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul W. Walaskay

Acts 16 is a very important chapter in Luke’s history of the early church. Our narrator has skillfully expanded Paul’s groundbreaking statement in Galatians 3:28 into an elegant story. “There is no longer Jew [Paul and Silas] or Greek [Lydia, the mantic, the jailer], there is no longer slave [the mantic] or free [Lydia, Paul], there is no longer male [Paul, Silas, the jailer] and female [Lydia, the mantic]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Amen!

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Ronald Cole-Turner

The secret is that Jesus Christ is saving us. Believing it means tuning in to the highest level of the story line of what is going on. It means becoming decisively aware that our small lives are swept up into a great drama, God’s story line. God is indeed reaching out to us in Jesus Christ, taking our lives into the gospel story of transformation and redemption. Trusting in this truth means that we give up efforts to save ourselves by solving our problems.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” David G. Forney

Until this point in the jailer’s life, he has derived all meaning from his profession; consequently, he plans to fall on his sword because of his failure to guard his prisoners. Yet oneness with God does not come from professional fanaticism but from Jesus Christ. Upon learning that the prisoners are still in their cells, he asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” to which the prisoners answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vv. 30–31). The irony is that those who seem to be in prison are actually free in Christ, and the jailer, who supposedly has the keys to freedom, is actually the one shackled by his duty.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard M. Landers

The worshipful posture of the prisoners suggests that they are not defeated by arrest and flogging. Prayer and hymns seem out of place for such a dire setting. We wonder why they are still awake singing at midnight. However, their praise (with other prisoners listening in) shakes the foundations of the prison—doors are opened and chains are unfastened. Just as the Gerasene demoniac was loosed from his chains by Jesus (Luke 8:35), and the young woman was freed from exploitation, all the prisoners, including Paul and Silas, are loosed. The work of the Spirit brings freedom to all who are captive.
Focus on Your Teaching

Some of the adults in your group may be in the midst of difficult circumstances. They may feel swamped by daily work, rules, paperwork, mortgages, finances, and parenting duties. They may be in a relationship that is a form of bondage. Many may find it difficult to praise God and to witness for Christ in such circumstances. Yet some may have experiences of God’s work in their lives in times of crisis. Others may find hope in hearing about God’s work in the lives of others when circumstances were difficult.

O God, help me to study your Word faithfully and to teach it with joy.
Work in my life and my teaching so that others may have their faith strengthened. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING
Welcome members by name, and introduce newcomers and visitors.

Form pairs and have people think about a recent time of crisis in their lives. Have them tell what their prayer to God was in this circumstance (if they prayed about it) and how they think God was with them, if at all.

Conclude by saying that today we will reflect on believers who praised and witnessed to God in most unusual circumstances.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O God, give us your Spirit that we may have insight today as we study your Word and the great works you have done in the lives of believers.
Amen.

EXPLORING
Show a map of Paul’s second journey or have participants find the map in their Bibles. Locate Philippi on the map. Indicate that Paul and Silas were in Philippi in last week’s session on Lydia and that they are still in Philippi in today’s focus text.

The focus text, Acts 16:16–34, is lengthy. Assign volunteers to read the different roles in the story. You will need one or two narrators (verses 16–24, and 25–34), the slave-girl, Paul, the owners, and the jailer. Read the focus text.

Since modern prisons are somewhat different, describe a Roman prison (see sidebar; for more information, use the Internet or a book on first-century Rome).
Many Roman prisons were underground rock dungeons, noted for their darkness, chains, poor air quality, and filth. Prisoners often awaited trial for long periods. Guards kept a watchful eye, since they could be executed if a prisoner escaped.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 16:16–34) and invite someone to read the “What?” excerpt. The excerpt mentions the Lydia story from last week. If some are present who were not in attendance last week, summarize the Lydia narrative in a few sentences so all are brought up to date. Discuss in what ways today’s focus text reflects that “all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Have someone read the “Where?” excerpt aloud. Distribute pens and paper. Form three groups (or, if you have fewer than six participants, remain as a whole). Have each group focus on one of three characters—slave girl, prisoners, and jailer—and describe what the narrative tells about how that character was saved and what that tells us about God’s work. Have them write a testimony from their character’s point of view about what happened. Regroup as a whole and have the groups read the testimonies.

Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt that deals with the narrative. As a group discuss ways we might be shackled today. Then have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt, and have the group discuss how the Holy Spirit might free us from our shackles.

RESPONDING
Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. Practicing Faith in Tough Times  Paul and Silas praised God and witnessed in the most difficult of circumstances. Although we may not face such a predicament, we are challenged to practice faith in trying situations. The scenarios in Resource Sheet 2 (In Times Like These . . . ) are thought starters for discussing such challenges.

   Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2. Form pairs and assign a scenario to each pair. (If you have more than ten participants, form groups of three or more.) Each scenario has a situation and two questions for discussion.

   After a few minutes, gather as a whole group. Let each pair tell something they have learned about practicing faith when times are tough.

   Distribute pens and paper. Invite each participant to think of a tough time of their own and to write a prayer asking God for help and strength to practice faith in such a time. Indicate that they will take the prayer home for use in daily devotions in the coming week; it will not be seen by anyone else.

2. Liberation Symbol/Sketch  Telling a story of God’s work in our lives is a personal witness that can strengthen faith and hope in those who hear the story. Sometimes a simple symbol can be an aid in telling our faith story.

   Provide pencils, markers, paper, and a sheet of newsprint. Have each person draw a sketch or symbol that expresses thanks to God for liberation from something that shackled them.

   While they are so engaged, tape to the wall a large sheet of newsprint and print across the top Thank God for Liberation.

   When all have finished their sketches/symbols, have each person briefly explain the sketch/symbol to the group. Invite participants to tape their sketches/symbols to the sheet of newsprint to form a corporate poster that will be used in Closing.
3. **Breath Prayer**  Practicing meditative breath prayers can teach participants one way to give praise to God in difficult times they may face now or in the future. Have participants get comfortable in their seats and prepare for a brief time of quiet prayer. Invite them to pay attention to their breathing and to breathe comfortably but deeply. After they have taken a couple of deep breaths, tell them that breath prayers are simple, ancient, repetitive prayers one can say in just one breath over and over for a few minutes. Have them say silently as they breathe in, “In you, O Lord” and as they breathe out say, “I put my trust.” Now invite them to pray this breath prayer for a few minutes in silence.

After a few minutes close the time of prayer by gently saying, “Amen.” Invite a few participants to comment about the experience. Encourage them to take this practice with them and to use it especially in times of stress and crisis. Point out that there are a number of breath prayers, and one can easily find them on the Internet or in books on prayer.

**CLOSING**

If you did option 2 in Responding, gather around the poster and have each participant say one word that reflects his or her contribution. If you did another Responding option, ask participants to summarize what they have gleaned from the session.

Sing or say a hymn of praise together. Paul and Silas would likely have sung psalms, so particularly suitable would be a hymn based on a psalm, such as “I’ll Praise My Maker,” “From All That Dwell Below the Skies,” or “All People That on Earth Do Dwell.” (All are on YouTube.)

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

> O Holy Spirit, you inspired Paul and Silas to praise you and to witness in dire circumstances, and others were brought to faith through their testimony. We thank you for your presence with us in tough times. Help us to praise you and to practice faith in all circumstances of our lives. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 19, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul W. Walaskay

Acts 16 is a very important chapter in Luke’s history of the early church. Our narrator has skillfully expanded Paul’s groundbreaking statement in Galatians 3:28 into an elegant story. “There is no longer Jew [Paul and Silas] or Greek [Lydia, the mantic, the jailer], there is no longer slave [the mantic] or free [Lydia, Paul], there is no longer male [Paul, Silas, the jailer] and female [Lydia, the mantic]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Amen!

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SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” David G. Forney

Until this point in the jailer’s life, he has derived all meaning from his profession; consequently, he plans to fall on his sword because of his failure to guard his prisoners. Yet oneness with God does not come from professional fanaticism but from Jesus Christ. Upon learning that the prisoners are still in their cells, he asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” to which the prisoners answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vv. 30–31). The irony is that those who seem to be in prison are actually free in Christ, and the jailer, who supposedly has the keys to freedom, is actually the one shackled by his duty.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard M. Landers

The worshipful posture of the prisoners suggests that they are not defeated by arrest and flogging. Prayer and hymns seem out of place for such a dire setting. We wonder why they are still awake singing at midnight. However, their praise (with other prisoners listening in) shakes the foundations of the prison—doors are opened and chains are unfastened. Just as the Gerasene demoniac was loosed from his chains by Jesus (Luke 8:35), and the young woman was freed from exploitation, all the prisoners, including Paul and Silas, are loosed. The work of the Spirit brings freedom to all who are captive.
In Times Like These . . .

1. Carol’s grandfather, a pillar of the congregation, has died after a long illness. She and the family are meeting with the minister to plan the funeral. How might this be a place where she could praise God? How might it be a place where she could witness to God?

2. Sophie and Peter are furious because their son, Alec, has been beaten by the school bully. The family sits at the kitchen table, discussing options—go to the police? go to the school? go to the bully’s home and confront the parents? How might this be a situation in which they could praise God? How might it be a situation in which they could witness to God?

3. James is deeply hurt and resentful. He has always read the lessons at the Pentecost service, as far back as he can remember. But this year the minister has told him that other people need turns being lectors on major festival days. How might this be a situation in which he could praise God? How might it be a situation in which he could witness to God?

4. Dolores sits in the boardroom. Charges have been brought against a member of the executive staff who happens to be her best friend. The board will need to make a decision on whether to terminate the executive’s employment. Dolores finds it hard to believe that her friend is guilty. Yet the evidence strongly suggests that her friend is indeed culpable. How might this be a situation in which she could praise God? How might it be a situation in which she could witness to God?

5. Eva and Charles stand staring at the ruins of their beautiful church. The tornado lasted so short a time, but devastated the building and damaged the neighborhood. How might this be a place where they could praise God? How might it be a place where they could witness to God?
Goal for the Session

In studying the story of Paul and Lydia, participants will seek the Spirit’s leading and plan to practice hospitality.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 16:9–15

WHAT is important to know?

It is impossible to know the identity of the man in Paul’s vision. He was probably not Jesus (would Jesus plead to come “help us”?). The man might have been Luke inserting himself into the story. The pronouns of the very next verse switch from third person (“he/they”) to first person (“we/us”), and for the remainder of the narrative Paul’s travels are told from the perspective of an apparent eyewitness. At any rate, the man in the vision was effective in bringing Paul and Timothy to Greece, where they made their way to the town of Philippi.

WHERE is God in these words?

Lydia is decisive because she is discerning, able to see through the events on the surface to the deeper workings of God’s Spirit. She is discerning because God has opened her heart to a new level of perception. God has given her this ability to perceive because she comes to worship. She comes to worship because she is hungering for something more in life, something beyond the commercial success she has apparently achieved. She is hungering for more because that restless Spirit, who is surely in us all before we ever know it, has stirred up a holy longing in her soul. Every step of the way, the Spirit prompts and calls and blesses her and, through her, blesses us.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

We simply do not talk about our visions from God—and maybe for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God’s involvement in our lives, we could not control the plan, as we do in strategic planning. On the other hand, if we did share our visions from God, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us, even to the point of providing hospitality to foreigners and those just freed from prison.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

The personal plea of a man from Macedonia to “come over . . . and help us” (v. 9) diverts the apostles and provides the opportunity for them to meet Lydia. Authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community, not simply the missionary’s need to proclaim. Congregations and individual Christians looking for ways to engage in innovative ministry can look to this passage for examples of the transformative role of prayer and worship.
Focus on Your Teaching

Today we encounter people of many cultures and languages in our midst. Some find this enriching and exciting; some find it confusing or even threatening. From childhood, many are taught to avoid strangers. Your participants may represent such varieties of experience. Yet they may also have found that the very stranger who is different may be the person who brings us the gospel in new ways or who offers help in time of need. Many will enjoy exploring ways to welcome newcomers who venture through the doors of the church.

O Holy Spirit, help me to teach in ways that are fresh and bring the Scriptures to life. Let me communicate so that adults are brought to renewed faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, set out tea, coffee, juice, fruit, or cookies if possible, since one of the themes of the session is hospitality. If you will use option 2 in Responding, invite those responsible for welcoming visitors to join your session today. If you will use option 3, obtain a list of homebound members and addresses from the church office or pastor.

Welcome members of the group and visitors and serve refreshments (optional).

Have participants choose a partner and tell briefly about a time when they met a stranger who became a blessing to them. What happened?

Explain that today’s session deals with Paul’s encounter with a stranger who became a blessing to him, as he became a blessing to her.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O Christ, we thank you for strangers who have helped us. Help us to study your Word and to hear your message for us today. Amen.

EXPLORING

Remind participants that we studied Paul’s conversion three weeks ago (Acts 9:1–20). Have participants find a map of Paul’s journeys in their Bibles or show a map from a Bible atlas or the Internet. Identify Damascus, the scene of Paul’s conversion. Then note the extent of Paul’s travels from that time. Paul made three missionary journeys as well as a final voyage to Rome under guard following his arrest. Tell participants that today we will look at part of his second missionary journey.
Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled through Phrygia and Galatia, strengthening the churches. Paul had intended to go to Bithynia, a Roman province in northern Asia Minor. Instead, the Spirit led him to Troas and then Macedonia (Greece, today).

Lydia was an impressive woman. A Gentile attracted to Judaism, she was a businessperson, a dealer in the purple cloth worn by the elite, and the head of her household. When she converted to Christianity, she became the epitome of hospitality.

Refer to the map of Paul’s second journey. Indicate Troas, eastern Macedonia, and the city of Philippi.


Have a volunteer read Acts 16:11–12. Distribute copies Resource Sheet 2 (Philippi). Have the group read the sheet silently or have someone read it aloud. This information will give participants a glimpse of ancient Philippi, the setting of Lydia’s story.

Invite a volunteer to read Acts 16:13–15. Suggest that participants imagine the scene as the story is read. Slow reading will help the imaging process.

On the map, indicate the city of Thyatira, from which Lydia came.

Return to Resource Sheet 1. Invite a volunteer to read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask: In what way does the Spirit bless us through Lydia (as the excerpt states)?

Then ask:

Why do you think that Lydia invited Paul and his associates to stay at her home?

Encourage discussion of all possible answers—gratitude, desire to learn more of the gospel, desire to welcome travelers, delight to be in the presence of Christian friends, desire to ensure that the missionaries would not immediately leave Philippi, perhaps a sense of obligation as a wealthy homeowner with the means to entertain.

How is hospitality such as that seen in Acts 16:14–15 a gift both to the giver and the receiver?

As a lead-in to Responding, ask everyone to read silently the “So What?” and the “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: In what ways does today’s passage from Acts nudge us to deeper worship, mission, and hospitality?

**RESPONDING**

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Hospitality in Worship** Visitors to worship have many things to offer us, just as we have much to offer them. In the focus text Paul brings a message that changes Lydia’s life, and she in turn gives him hospitality.

   On the board or newprint, list ways that visitors may enrich our worship experience (for example, new ideas, better singing, opportunity to meet new people, the sheer encouragement of increased numbers, greetings from other congregations, potential membership). Encourage participants to tell briefly some blessings brought by visitors to your congregation.

   Then list ways to welcome visitors to worship in your congregation. Let the group brainstorm ideas, discuss the various options, and make plans to implement
them. (Ideas might include: keeping an eye out for visitors before and after worship each Sunday; greeting one visitor each week before rushing to talk to an old friend; identifying an upcoming congregational activity to which newcomers could be invited.) Some suggestions may need to be passed on to a committee for evangelism or worship. (Such suggestions might include ideas like adding an attractive book for visitors to sign and to write their address in; or placing cards in the pews that are passed to the end of the aisle and back during worship so those in the pew can greet newcomers in their aisle). If so, decide who will contact the committee chair.

2. **Hospitality to the Stranger**  Provide pens, paper, and envelopes.

   If your congregation has a leader or committee responsible for welcoming visitors, invite them to join your group today. If they cannot attend, discuss with them your plans beforehand and welcome their suggestions.

   Make welcome notes for visitors to your congregation. Include a Bible verse in each note. Insert each note in an envelope, labeled “Welcome, Visitor.” Singly or in pairs target visitors who attend worship in the next week or two, and deliver the notes personally after the service with a warm word of welcome. (Divide the task among participants so that each visitor is given only one note, not swamped with many!)

3. **Hospitality to the Homebound**  Provide pens, paper, envelopes, single flowers and ferns, cellophane, ribbon, scissors, and a list of homebound members and addresses from the church office or pastor.

   Being hospitable includes reaching out to those who are absent. Write personal messages to let the homebound and sick know they are not forgotten by your congregation. Insert each message in an envelope with the recipient’s name. Allot a single attractive flower and a sprig of fern for each homebound member. Wrap the stems in cellophane and tie with ribbon. Write a favorite Bible verse on a sliver of paper and tape the verse to the cellophane wrapping. Lead the group in praying that the Spirit will bless the participants and the recipients as the participants make the visits. Deliver the notes and flowers by hand as soon as possible after class.

**CLOSING**

Invite participants to say what they have garnered from the session.

Together sing or say an Easter hymn or a hymn of hospitality (“Help Us Accept Each Other,” “O for a World,” or “O Praise the Gracious Power”). Then pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

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   Lord Jesus, you have shown great hospitality to us on the cross and through your risen mercies. Give us grace by your Spirit to show hospitality to others in your name. Amen.
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Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 12, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on Acts 16:9–15

**WHAT is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul W. Walaskay

It is impossible to know the identity of the man in Paul’s vision. He was probably not Jesus (would Jesus plead to come “help us”?). The man might have been Luke inserting himself into the story. The pronouns of the very next verse switch from third person (“he/they”) to first person (“we/us”), and for the remainder of the narrative Paul’s travels are told from the perspective of an apparent eyewitness. At any rate, the man in the vision was effective in bringing Paul and Timothy to Greece, where they made their way to the town of Philippi.

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Lydia is decisive because she is discerning, able to see through the events on the surface to the deeper workings of God’s Spirit. She is discerning because God has opened her heart to a new level of perception. God has given her this ability to perceive because she comes to worship. She comes to worship because she is hungering for something more in life, something beyond the commercial success she has apparently achieved. She is hungering for more because that restless Spirit, who is surely in us all before we ever know it, has stirred up a holy longing in her soul. Every step of the way, the Spirit prompts and calls and blesses her and, through her, blesses us.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?** — From “Pastoral Perspective,” David G. Forney

We simply do not talk about our visions from God—and maybe for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God’s involvement in our lives, we could not control the plan, as we do in strategic planning. On the other hand, if we *did* share our visions from God, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us, even to the point of providing hospitality to foreigners and those just freed from prison.

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?** — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard M. Landers

The personal plea of a man from Macedonia to “come over . . . and help us” (v. 9) diverts the apostles and provides the opportunity for them to meet Lydia. Authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community, not simply the missionary’s need to proclaim. Congregations and individual Christians looking for ways to engage in innovative ministry can look to this passage for examples of the transformative role of prayer and worship.
Luke accurately describes Philippi as “a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (v. 12). Ancient Greece was composed of two Roman provinces: Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south. Philippi was founded in 356 BCE by Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great), but remained an insignificant village until it was “rediscovered” by Emperor Augustus as an ideal place for retired army officers who had faithfully served him during the battle of Actium (31 BCE). Peter Oakes offers an excellent description of the social composition of the city with a population of about 15,000. Oakes approximates that the elite comprised 3 percent of the population; landowning farmers and pensioned colonists made up 25 percent; skilled workers, merchants, and service providers amounted to 45 percent; and the poor comprised the remaining 27 percent. Slaves (about 20 percent of the total population) were included in the households of the first three groups. (Elites, farmers, and colonists had several slaves for a variety of tasks; families in the service class might have had one or two slaves per household.) The church that eventually formed at Philippi probably had a modest membership of perhaps 75 to 100 people who mirrored the general population. Paul’s letter to the Philippian Christians also sheds light on this congregation. The tone of his letter is joyful (in spite of his imprisonment) and full of thanksgiving for the Philippians’ generosity toward him, which reflects a measure of their social and economic status.

This social schema is in the background of Luke’s narrative. He recounts that on the Sabbath “we went outside the gate by the river” looking for “a place of prayer.” It may be that Paul and his companions were searching for the local synagogue, a place Paul would typically visit on his first Sabbath in town. The reader is not told exactly where Paul was when he “sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” This sentence contains a couple of fascinating details. First, Paul sat down to speak—the typical posture of a teacher at work. Second, it is a bit of a surprise that this well-known Pharisee and teacher from Jerusalem would carry on a serious discussion with a group of women.


Goal for the Session

Through Revelation’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, adults will renew hope despite evil, death, and suffering.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Revelation 21:1–6

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Greg Carey
The new Jerusalem needs neither temple nor illumination, since God and the Lamb provide both its holiness and its light. Bright water and a variety of fruits suggest the lushness of this new reality. The detailed, almost architectural, description of the heavenly city recalls Ezekiel’s lengthy account of the restored temple and revived Israel (chaps. 40–48). This sort of eschatological poetry invites an audience to take an imaginary stroll in such a spectacular and blessed setting.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Erik M. Heen
The Apocalypse reveals that the pain that comes with life as we know it is acknowledged by a God who, once mortally wounded by our sin, continues to stand in solidarity with us in the midst of the suffering experienced by all of creation (21:3). Revelation also informs us that it is only when God’s word is spoken over this deeply troubled creation—yet once again—that evil is banished, hope is restored, and all things are made new, including our understanding of the immutability of heaven itself.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Dana Ferguson
“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (v. 6). These are words that matter at the very heart of life, where we ask who we are, who God is, and what is the value of the Christian pursuit. They tell us that there will be a new day when we live face to face with God. All that has hindered, hurt, and hampered us will be gone. What will be left is a life with God, filled with relationships of joy and strength with God’s people.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael Pasquarello III
The center of this story is Jesus Christ—his life, suffering, death and resurrection, and promised return in glory—the focal point on which the destiny of the universe turns. Apart from God’s gracious Word and gift of self-giving love through him, we could never know these things on our own, since our minds are so deeply colored by the world’s heart-breaking news. “Behold, I am making all things new!” We need imaginations nourished by the word and sanctified by the Spirit to connect what is visible and invisible—the reconciliation of heaven and earth—seeing the past, present, and future of all things through the light of God’s glory in Christ.
Focus on Your Teaching

Adults approach death and suffering in many ways—with denial, fear, curiosity, concern, and sometimes, in the case of death, even with relief and welcome. Some view suffering and in some cases death as the work of personified evil in the form of the devil; others see such personification as out-of-date superstition. You may have all of these views in your class today. Be sensitive to participants who have had a recent bereavement. Let them express their feelings. Some may feel relief or blessing; others may express hurt, anger, or bitterness.

\[O \text{ Lamb of God, Alpha and Omega, give me wisdom and pastoral insight so that I may teach with compassion and witness to my own faith and hope in you. Amen.}\]

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, set out copies of magazines, newspapers, glue, scissors, markers, and large sheets of paper in a work area. If you intend to use option 3 in Responding, get from the minister or church office the names of members who are ill.

Welcome arriving participants. Invite them to search the newspapers and magazines for pictures or stories about world or local disasters, wars, suffering, and evil. Have them cut out the items and glue them onto large sheets of paper. Participants may print additional words or phrases of events that are not mentioned in the media sources (for example, 9/11, earthquakes, particular wars). Attach the papers to the wall.

Gather the group where everyone can see the papers, and ask: What emotions are evoked by suffering and disasters like these?

Keep the papers displayed for reference in Closing and explain that today we will look at a Bible passage that was written at a time when Christians were facing particular suffering, evil, and death.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

\[O \text{ risen Lord, you know the many ills in the world and the fears represented in this room. Be present with us in this session and help us to hear a message of comfort and strength in your Word. Amen.}\]
Eschatology is a branch of theology focusing on the last days. Eschatological poetry deals with such topics as God’s future kingdom, Christ’s second coming, the final judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

**EXPLORING**

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Revelation) and have participants read it in silence. Then have a volunteer read Revelation 21:1–6. Form pairs and have them discuss this question:

> What good news do you think the original readers would have heard in this passage?

After a few minutes, gather as a whole group and have a few volunteers offer responses to the question discussed in pairs.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Revelation 21:1–6) and invite a volunteer to read the “What?” excerpt. Discuss:

> What good news do you hear in the message of the new Jerusalem?
> Why is it appropriate to read about the new Jerusalem in the Easter season?

Now have a volunteer read Revelation 21:4, and then another read the “Where?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask:

> How do verse 4 and the “Where?” excerpt relate to the issues that were raised in Gathering?
> How do verse 4 and the “Where?” excerpt relate to your own experiences?

**RESPONDING**

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Litany**

   Provide pens, paper, boards or newsprint, and markers.

   Have participants read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1 and underline the phrases they hear as good news in the excerpts.

   Form pairs or groups of three. Each group will write a short litany that will be used in Closing. Encourage members to use some of the phrases they underlined in the excerpts or phrases from the focus text that mean most to them. As they work, participants may well talk about their own experience with grief or about their hopes.

   If necessary, explain that a litany is a prayer in which a leader prays a series of petitions, pausing after each petition for the group to answer with a repeated response. Suggest that it may be easiest to begin by deciding on the response (for example, “For these things we thank you, Lord” or “You give us hope, O Christ” or “We praise you, Lamb of God” or “Have mercy, O Lord”). Then the petitions can be developed accordingly.

   Each group should decide which person will lead the prayer in Closing. Have the group print the response on a board or newsprint so all can join in easily.
2. **Bookmarks of Hope**  Provide construction paper or colored card stock, scissors, rulers, and thin markers. Optional: small stickers, glitter, or other decorative materials.

   Read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Focusing on Jesus and the promise to make all things new, make Bible bookmarks that will be a daily reminder of the good news in the focus text.

   Have each participant cut a thin strip suitable for a bookmark and decorate it with a favorite verse from the focus text. Encourage them to choose a verse that will be of real comfort to them in time of need or distress.

3. **Comfort in Need**  Many people do not know what to say in time of need. This activity will enable them to develop practical ideas and to hear those of others. It will also enable them to hear and share a word of hope and faith.

   Provide pens and paper and have participants imagine that they are ill, perhaps in a hospital, and that a friend from church comes to visit. Have them write down some words of comfort and hope they hope that person will say. Form pairs and compare what each wrote. As a larger group discuss best practices that people who have visited others in nursing homes and hospitals have learned.

   Invite each person to take the name of someone who is ill and make a commitment to visit them in the coming week. Suggest that they call the hospital or home beforehand, to check that visits are appropriate.

**CLOSING**

While focusing on the pictures posted in Gathering, have each person say one phrase or sentence that summarizes what they have gleaned from the session.

If the group developed litanies in option 1 in Responding, use them now. Ask the leader(s) to indicate the response for the particular litany. Display the response where all can see it. It should be removed as the next response is posted.

If you did not develop litanies, pray a prayer that acknowledges the lordship of the Lamb and that expresses trust and hope in God's final triumph over evil and death.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 5, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on Revelation 21:1–6

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Greg Carey

The new Jerusalem needs neither temple nor illumination, since God and the Lamb provide both its holiness and its light. Bright water and a variety of fruits suggest the lushness of this new reality. The detailed, almost architectural, description of the heavenly city recalls Ezekiel’s lengthy account of the restored temple and revived Israel (chaps. 40–48). This sort of eschatological poetry invites an audience to take an imaginary stroll in such a spectacular and blessed setting.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Erik M. Heen

The Apocalypse reveals that the pain that comes with life as we know it is acknowledged by a God who, once mortally wounded by our sin, continues to stand in solidarity with us in the midst of the suffering experienced by all of creation (21:3). Revelation also informs us that it is only when God’s word is spoken over this deeply troubled creation—yet once again—that evil is banished, hope is restored, and all things are made new, including our understanding of the immutability of heaven itself.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Dana Ferguson

“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (v. 6). These are words that matter at the very heart of life, where we ask who we are, who God is, and what is the value of the Christian pursuit. They tell us that there will be a new day when we live face to face with God. All that has hindered, hurt, and hampered us will be gone. What will be left is a life with God, filled with relationships of joy and strength with God’s people.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael Pasquarello III

The center of this story is Jesus Christ—his life, suffering, death and resurrection, and promised return in glory—the focal point on which the destiny of the universe turns. Apart from God’s gracious Word and gift of self-giving love through him, we could never know these things on our own, since our minds are so deeply colored by the world’s heart-breaking news. “Behold, I am making all things new!” We need imaginations nourished by the word and sanctified by the Spirit to connect what is visible and invisible—the reconciliation of heaven and earth—seeing the past, present, and future of all things through the light of God’s glory in Christ.
There are few things as inspiring as the writings of those who, in the face of grave danger, firmly and joyfully proclaim their faith. Revelation is such a book. From 100 BC to 100 CE many Jewish and, later, Christian “apocalypses” (meaning “unveilings”) were written to encourage perseverance in faith in times of great stress. Such writings gave comfort to those who were persecuted. Revelation was probably written in the last years of the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE). Domitian believed in his own divinity and began a fierce persecution of Christians who refused to engage in emperor-worship.

Experts are not sure who wrote the book, other than that his name was John. Patmos, where John was imprisoned, is off the coast of Asia Minor. In the book of Revelation, it is clear that John not only understands his readers’ predicament of persecution but also shares in it. He looks forward to the overthrow of the Roman Empire and the coming of the reign of Christ. John is convinced that God is in control of history and will ultimately destroy evil. Rome will fall and Christ will triumph. The Lamb who was slain will be worshiped and glorified. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

John cleverly disguises his message in images that would appear to be nonsense to a nonbeliever and would thus help the book survive detection. The book abounds in mythological creatures and odd symbolism, which first-century Christians would have understood. Unfortunately some people today take the apocalyptic imagery literally, and often come up with bizarre theories about the end of the world. It would be far better to take the poetic imagery for what it is, and to rejoice in the strong faith, encouragement, and comfort that are to be found in the book.

Revelation has three major parts: introduction and messages of Christ to the churches ( chapters 1–3), visions of judgment and the victory of the faithful ( chapters 4–20), and vision of God’s kingdom in terms of a new Jerusalem, a new heaven, and a new earth ( chapters 21–22). Today’s passage comes from the third section of the book. As we read Revelation’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, our faith and hope are renewed despite evil, death, and suffering in our lives.
I Shall Not Want

Goal for the Session

After reflecting on God as shepherd and host, participants will explore implications of following, trusting, and dwelling in God.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Psalm 23

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Petersen

Different though the two primary metaphors are (God as shepherd and God as host), they share one element: God providing nurture, especially to those in distress. To be near God is to be fed. Both Judaism and Christianity have recognized the importance of such divinely provided food. Jews celebrate the meal of Passover, whereas Christians experience the ultimate communal meal of the Eucharist.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” John B. Rogers

Psalm 23 has long provided a powerful witness in the worship of the Christian funeral. In death’s shadow and darkness, Christ accompanies us. Into the hell of God-forsakenness he descended, so that even when we make our beds in hell, we will not be without him. As the messenger at the empty tomb announced, “He is going ahead of you” (Mark 16:7), not only to prepare a dwelling place for us at the end of life, but also to prepare a table in the midst of life, with all its joys and sorrows, its hopes and fears. Christ has promised to remain with us as the good shepherd even to the end of time, so that in life and in death we can say with confidence and trust: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Catherine L. Kelsey

Psalm 23 is the most familiar of the many psalms that reassure us of God’s continuing presence, no matter what is happening to our bodies, our relationships, our community, or our world. It is easy in the midst of trauma to give our confidence over to doctors or leaders as if they hold everything in their hands. They do not. Psalm 23 helps us retain perspective in the midst of trauma, perspective that retains our agency in relation to those who intend to help us. Psalm 23 helps restore us to our selves; we are active as ones who trust in God. Through it all, God and God alone is our true safety, our true shepherd.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” William F. Brosend

We keep faith with Psalm 23 if we remain present and personal, but this does not mean ignoring the last, luminous line: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” What God has done for the psalmist is what the psalmist trusts God will continue to do. A sermon that invites the listener to share such trust, a sermon that is personal and present, responds well to the daunting task of preaching a text as familiar as Psalm 23.
Focus on Your Teaching

People today may have scant experience with shepherds. But all know about caring and nurturing, protection and guidance. All know about hosts who set a banquet before us and about plentiful cups brimming over. These experiences are pleasant. But not all memories related to today’s psalm will be pleasant—some members will associate the psalm with death, funerals, and suffering. Be sensitive to the varied emotions that today’s lesson may evoke. What will be joyful comfort for one member may be a sad reminder for another.

Lord Jesus, I lift to you now the names of all those whom I teach (name them one by one). Give me understanding so that I may share their sorrows as well as their joys. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if you choose option 1 in Responding, print on a board or newsprint the sentences for completion.

Greet individuals warmly by name. When all have gathered, have participants think of a time when they were invited to a big dinner or party. Have each participant describe that situation to a partner and identify the ways their host showed hospitality to the guests.

Indicate that today we will be reflecting on God as gracious host as well as caring shepherd and what that may mean for our lives. Pray:

O God, assure us of your presence, guidance, and providence at all times—when things are going well and also when we are most vulnerable. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

EXPLOREING

Have participants read Psalm 23 silently and identify phrases or words that have particular meaning for them. Invite them to discuss the phrases or words with a partner. For some the psalm will have joyful connotations; for others it may evoke memories of grief.

Now have participants examine the psalm to figure out where and how the two major metaphors for God are highlighted (shepherd, vv. 1–4, and host, vv. 5–6). Indicate that originally the Old Testament image of God as shepherd referred to God’s relationship with the covenant people. But here it is a personal relationship with the individual who has a childlike trust and a great sense of God’s blessings, presence, and guidance. The image of host indicates God’s steadfast goodness, including hospitality and refuge—abundant blessings, even when enemies are near.
Anointing was a symbolic act that set aside a person for a specific leadership function—such as priest, prophet, or king—in the community. The psalmist has been anointed—chosen and set apart, treated royally—by God.

Ask how the two images for God, as shepherd and host, complement each other. Some participants may previously have thought of the psalm primarily in terms of the shepherd image. Encourage them to spend time on the host image also. Have them identify the blessings (what God does) related to both images in the psalm, while a volunteer writes them on the board or newsprint. Then have members of the group call out contemporary equivalents to those blessings and write them also. (Keep the list for later.)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Psalm 23) and have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt. Ask: How does the author’s link to the communal meal of the Eucharist enrich the understanding of nurture in the psalm?

Then have a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Explain that scholars believe that Psalm 23 probably arose from the psalmist’s experience in worship, not a funeral. Ask: Why do many find Psalm 23 to be a helpful psalm at funerals?

Have a volunteer read John 10:11–15. Ask: How does this passage add to our understanding of God as shepherd? In what way is this the ultimate act of caring?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (God’s Goodness). Read the page silently or have a volunteer read it aloud. Discuss Calvin’s understanding of God’s initiative in the light of the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Ask: If God always takes the initiative, are there implications for how we follow and trust God?

Now make three headings on the board or newsprint—“shepherd,” “host,” “overflowing cup.” Have participants brainstorm two or three modern metaphors instead of “shepherd,” then two or three instead of “host,” and finally two or three for “overflowing cup.” (Today, an overflowing cup calls for a paper towel! Encourage new metaphors that convey superabundant blessings.) List the metaphors in the three columns on the board or newsprint.

Distribute pens and paper. Have participants work alone or in small groups and write a version of Psalm 23 using some of the new metaphors. Participants may wish to include some of the contemporary blessings listed earlier in the session. These contemporary versions of the psalm may be used in Closing.

Finish by reading together the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: What might it mean to say that God is the shepherd and host of our own congregation? (If you choose option 3 in Responding, omit this discussion and move directly into that activity.)

RESPONDING
Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. The Christian Life Tell participants: Now that we have spent time reflecting on God as shepherd and host, we will consider implications in our own lives of following God the shepherd and trusting in God the host who provides our needs.
Provide pens and paper and have participants finish the following sentences written on the board or newsprint prior to class:

- For me, following the Good Shepherd today means . . .
- For me, trusting the Good Host today means . . .
- For me, dwelling in God's house forever means . . .

When everyone has finished, discuss the responses in small groups or as one large group. Encourage participants to listen carefully to others' insights, which may enrich their own relationship with God.

2. **The Church in the Psalm** Read Psalm 23 in a new way. Substitute “the church,” “our congregation,” or “our” for “I,” “me,” and “my” throughout.

   Discuss how God is shepherd and host in the church today. How has God provided for and led your church? How has it been comforted in “the darkest valley”? How has it experienced God's goodness and mercy in the last year? How does God's protection and nurture call the church/congregation to follow, trust, and dwell in God?

   Distribute pens and paper. Have participants write prayers of thanksgiving for God's nurture of your church and/or prayers of intercession for the church as it seeks to follow and to trust in God. The prayers may be used in Closing.

3. **Exploring Faith through Simple Art** Provide pens, paper, and markers. Ask each member of the group to think of one or more colors or shapes to represent the image of God as shepherd, and then do the same for the image of God as host. Then ask them to think of a color and/or shape that inspires them to follow God. Do the same for trust in God, and then for dwelling in God.

   Now have each participant use markers to create a drawing, diagram, or other artwork, using the colors and/or shapes they have selected to depict their relationship to God.

   Show their work to the group and let them comment on it as they wish. Encourage participants to take their work home and to use it as a focus for their daily devotions in the coming week.

**CLOSING**

Read one or more of participants’ contemporary versions of the psalm from Exploring. If you have equipment to access YouTube, play John Rutter's "The Lord's My Shepherd." Search www.youtube.com for the author and title of song.

If you did option 2 in Responding, invite participants to pray their prayers now. If not, pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Gracious Host, you provide for our needs so that we can say with the psalmist, “I shall not want.” Give us faith to follow you and to rejoice in your generosity and protection all our lives. Let us dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 28, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants.
Focus on Psalm 23

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Petersen

Different though the two primary metaphors are (God as shepherd and God as host), they share one element: God providing nurture, especially to those in distress. To be near God is to be fed. Both Judaism and Christianity have recognized the importance of such divinely provided food. Jews celebrate the meal of Passover, whereas Christians experience the ultimate communal meal of the Eucharist.

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SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Catherine L. Kelsey

Psalm 23 is the most familiar of the many psalms that reassure us of God’s continuing presence, no matter what is happening to our bodies, our relationships, our community, or our world. It is easy in the midst of trauma to give our confidence over to doctors or leaders as if they hold everything in their hands. They do not. Psalm 23 helps us retain perspective in the midst of trauma, perspective that retains our agency in relation to those who intend to help us. Psalm 23 helps restore us to our selves; we are active as ones who trust in God. Through it all, God and God alone is our true safety, our true shepherd.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” William F. Brosend

We keep faith with Psalm 23 if we remain present and personal, but this does not mean ignoring the last, luminous line: “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” What God has done for the psalmist is what the psalmist trusts God will continue to do. A sermon that invites the listener to share such trust, a sermon that is personal and present, responds well to the daunting task of preaching a text as familiar as Psalm 23.
Of particular importance is the image in verse 6 of YHWH’s goodness and mercy pursuing the poet throughout his life, not waiting for him to seek or call. John Calvin saw in verse 6 an expression of God’s prevenient grace, which anticipates our unwillingness to turn to God and yet, like the “hound of heaven,” follows steadily, tirelessly after us and brings us home (cf. Luke 15:5). At stake theologically in this image is the conviction that even faith is a gift—the fruit of God’s grace at work in us—not an accomplishment for which we can take credit. We are justified by the gift of grace through the gift of faith. Both prepositions express God’s faithfulness in and for us and are crucial to the way we understand the doctrine of justification.

What might it do to our understanding of God, and to the way we live with life’s joys and sorrows, if we took seriously that God always takes the initiative with us—a shepherd leading us toward himself, following us in our wanderings so that we never get beyond the love that will not let us go?

God Changes a Life

Goal for the Session

In studying God’s work in the life of Paul, adults will reflect on God’s work in their own lives.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 9:1–20

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Robert W. Wall

The real climax of this story is not Saul’s conversion from moral morass to virtuous living or from Judaism to Christianity; nothing like this is found in Acts. Saul’s turn to Jesus rather rights him for a future scripted by God as “an instrument whom I have chosen to bring [Jesus’] name before Gentiles and . . . the people of Israel . . . [and to] suffer for the sake of my name” (9:15–16). The rest of Acts narrates the dramatic fulfillment of the Lord’s stunning prediction.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Lewis S. Mudge

We proceed immediately to what can only be described as an act of ordination. Ananias lays hands upon Saul and proclaims, in the name of the Lord Jesus, that he is to regain his sight and receive the Holy Spirit. “Something like scales” then fall from Saul’s eyes. Is Saul’s ability to see again intended as a metaphor for his ability now to see differently? We may conjecture so. Soon Paul is proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, saying that Jesus is the “Son of God” and, later, “proving that Jesus was the Messiah” (vv. 20, 22).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Joseph S. Harvard

Let us pray that God will open our eyes, as God opened Paul’s, to the new reality created by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The image of light is powerful in this story. It blinds Paul initially; then, when his sight is restored, he has a new way of seeing. It is this vision that he shares to bring others into the light of God’s love. Our religious experience is not a private affair. Whatever shape or form it takes, it is for spreading the gospel and building up the church.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Stephen D. Jones

Where was God in your conversion experience? Is God in the “business” of changing lives? It is often only in the past tense that we can identify the hand of God upon our lives. From that vantage, we can see the Spirit at work. For it is not the honest friend, the heroic child, or our soul’s vacancy that actually turns us around. It is a light that turns on within us—and it is our willingness to take the risk of seeing anew that makes the turnaround possible. We stood at a crossroads. We had a choice. We could have launched blindly forward, or tarried. We tarried, and that made all the difference. Many people experience God in those crucible moments: “Were it not for God, I cannot imagine how I could have made this transition.”
Focus on Your Teaching

Dramatic conversion is not likely the experience of many Christians. Even so, some feel inferior if their faith experience has been gradual from the time of birth and infant baptism; belonging to the church all of one’s life does not sound as exciting and spiritual as a sudden, dramatic turnaround. Yet millions of Christians can testify to the blessings of being brought up in a Christian family from birth. As you meet with the group today, be aware of a variety of faith journeys, none of which is “better” than another—just different. God works in many unique ways in human lives.

Thank you, O God, that you have worked in my life in many ways, when I could recognize your presence and even when I could not. Be present with me this week and guide my teaching. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare directions for the three activity centers in Exploring and for the centers you plan to use in Responding. Also, set up activity center areas for Exploring.

Welcome participants and introduce visitors to others.

Form pairs and have them tell briefly about an event or process that radically changed their daily life (car accident? marriage? job opportunity? long illness?). How did life change as a result?

Gather the group members together and ask them: How do you think that God brings change to people’s lives? Does God work suddenly and dramatically or slowly and gradually? Ideally, participants will respond that God works in both ways. This discussion will help to prepare participants for Exploring and Responding.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O risen Christ, meet with us and speak your Word to us this day. Give us ears to hear your Word, and obedient hearts to follow your direction.

Amen.

EXPLORING

Activity centers will be used for both Exploring and Responding (or, if you have fewer than four participants, just do these activities in order). Create a work space for each center sufficient for two or more people to work simultaneously. Set chairs at each work area if your participants prefer to sit.
At the outset, let everyone know they will be working independently throughout the session. They can choose where to start and can move from one center to the next as they wish. Indicate the amount of time they will have in the activity centers. (Allow about equal amounts of time in the session for Exploring and Responding.) Let them know you will give them a signal five minutes before the end of Exploring time.

**Writing Center**

Provide Bibles, copies of Resource Sheet 1, pens, and paper.

Place these directions in the center:
- Then read the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
- Imagine you are living in the first century. Write a letter to a relative in a nearby city describing what you have heard about Paul.
- Bring the letter to Closing.

**Art Center**

Provide Bibles, markers, paper, pens, pencils, colored pencils, and copies of Resource Sheet 1.

Place these directions in the center:
- Then read the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
- Draw a picture or make a sketch that communicates the message of Acts 9:1–20.
- Bring the sketch to Closing.

**Bible Research Center**

Provide pens, paper, and a map that includes Jerusalem and Damascus (from study Bibles, a Bible atlas, or the Internet).

Place these directions in the center:
- Locate Jerusalem and Damascus on a map (in a study Bible/atlas/from the Internet).
- Read the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
- Read about Paul’s background in Acts 7:59–8:3 and 2 Corinthians 11:6, 22.
- Write notes on how these passages enhance your understanding of Acts 9:1–20.
- Bring your notes to Closing.

At the end of Exploring, quickly place the new directions for Responding activities in each of the centers you will use.

**RESPONDING**

The following activity options can be done in the same centers as the activities in Exploring. However, you may choose to provide all three choices for your participants or select just one or two for them. Indicate the amount of time participants will have and the activities available.
Not everyone can tell exactly when God has been working in their lives. But many will attest that God has worked in various ways. Hearing how God has worked in the lives of others can strengthen our faith.

1. **Writing Center** Provide pens, copies of Resource Sheet 1, and copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Question Sheet).
   
   Place these directions in this center:
   - Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
   - Think about your own experiences.
   - Answer the questions on Resource Sheet 2 (Question Sheet). Take the sheet home.

2. **Art Center** Provide scissors, construction paper or other paper, glue, magazines, newspapers, and copies of Resource Sheet 1.
   
   Replace the directions in the center with new ones that say:
   - Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
   - Think about your own experiences.
   - Now make a montage of pictures and words that illustrates God’s work in your own life.
   - Bring the montage to Closing.

   If necessary, explain that a montage is a composite of several pictures. These can overlap and be placed at different angles. Words can be cut out and added to the composite.

3. **Bible Research Center** Provide Bibles, pens, paper, and copies of Resource Sheet 1.
   
   Replace the directions in the center with new ones that say:
   - Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1.
   - Think about your own experiences.
   - God draws people to himself in many ways. Read John 1:43, 2 Timothy 1:5, and Acts 16:25–34. What is similar and what is different in these experiences?
   - Write about the ways in which God has drawn you to the good news of Jesus (through baptism? through a loving Christian family? in a spectacular way like Paul’s? through sermons or Bible studies? Or . . . ).
   - Bring what you write to Closing.

**CLOSING**

Gather together. Let members choose one of their items (from either Exploring or Responding) to share with the group.

Invite a volunteer to lead in prayer, thanking God for what the members have learned about Paul and about God’s work in their lives.

If there is time, together sing or say a hymn about God’s work in our lives, such as “Loving Spirit,” “Open My Eyes That I May See,” or a favorite baptismal hymn.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 21, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on Acts 9:1–20

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Robert W. Wall
The real climax of this story is not Saul’s conversion from moral morass to virtuous living or from Judaism to Christianity; nothing like this is found in Acts. Saul’s turn to Jesus rather rights him for a future scripted by God as “an instrument whom I have chosen to bring [Jesus’] name before Gentiles and . . . the people of Israel . . . [and to] suffer for the sake of my name” (9:15–16). The rest of Acts narrates the dramatic fulfillment of the Lord’s stunning prediction.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Lewis S. Mudge
We proceed immediately to what can only be described as an act of ordination. Ananias lays hands upon Saul and proclaims, in the name of the Lord Jesus, that he is to regain his sight and receive the Holy Spirit. “Something like scales” then fall from Saul’s eyes. Is Saul’s ability to see again intended as a metaphor for his ability now to see differently? We may conjecture so. Soon Paul is proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, saying that Jesus is the “Son of God” and, later, “proving that Jesus was the Messiah” (vv. 20, 22).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Joseph S. Harvard
Let us pray that God will open our eyes, as God opened Paul’s, to the new reality created by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The image of light is powerful in this story. It blinds Paul initially; then, when his sight is restored, he has a new way of seeing. It is this vision that he shares to bring others into the light of God’s love. Our religious experience is not a private affair. Whatever shape or form it takes, it is for spreading the gospel and building up the church.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Stephen D. Jones
Where was God in your conversion experience? Is God in the “business” of changing lives? It is often only in the past tense that we can identify the hand of God upon our lives. From that vantage, we can see the Spirit at work. For it is not the honest friend, the heroic child, or our soul’s vacancy that actually turns us around. It is a light that turns on within us—and it is our willingness to take the risk of seeing anew that makes the turnaround possible. We stood at a crossroads. We had a choice. We could have launched blindly forward, or tarried. We tarried, and that made all the difference. Many people experience God in those crucible moments: “Were it not for God, I cannot imagine how I could have made this transition.”
Complete the answers.

1. Check off all that are true for you, and add others:

   God has been working in my life through
   - the church
   - family members
   - friends
   - events
   - the Scriptures
   - the sacraments
   - inner convictions
   - and other ways such as: ________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________

2. Some people have sudden, life-changing experiences of God; others have gentle, gradual experiences of God. My own experiences have been ________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________

3. Think of the light turned on inside of you. Name some situation or decision in your life in which God may be calling you toward transition. What is your next step?
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
My Lord and My God

Goal for the Session
Believing with Thomas that Jesus is “my Lord and my God,” adults will explore Christ’s call to mission today.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on John 20:19–31

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Gregory A. Robbins
The empty tomb, the grave cloths, the presence of angels, Jesus’ exchange with Mary, the appearance on the evening of the first day of the week and, now, the revelation to Thomas—taken together—can demand only one response: christological confession, “My Lord and my God!” This is the most explicit one in the Gospels. Read within the context of John’s prologue, it is both the climax of the Gospel and its logical conclusion.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Martin E. Marty
This story marks our opening to new stages of faith and church life. Up until the story, faith came in the face of Jesus’ physical presence. Here, in the word to Thomas, the Jesus of this Gospel sets us up theologically for the experience of God not based solely on sight. Decades after these words were written, the last disciple died. Never again on earth would physical eyes or noses or tongues certify Jesus’ presence. Yes, Christians are still to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” but related to symbols. They could “taste” in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, but that was sacramental.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” John K. Stendahl
Jesus appears in the locked room of fear and speaks his word of peace. He displays the wounds in his flesh, and with his breath he explicitly gives his disciples the Holy Spirit; but thereby he also makes them his apostles, his sent ones—“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” His breath thus appears to be both equipment and investiture for that mission. Immediately Jesus elaborates what they are to do, the tasks for which they now have his breath. He empowers them to speak words of forgiveness and of judgment, words that will not be mere expressions of personal emotion but declarations of divine fact.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nancy Claire Pittman
In the Gospel of John, it is those who believe without seeing who are the true followers of Jesus. This is confirmed in the words that Jesus speaks, over the head of Thomas, to those readers who will not be able to see in the years ahead, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29). The only one who does this within John’s resurrection narrative is the Beloved Disciple, who runs to the tomb, sees absolutely nothing, and believes. It is he who verifies the truth of these written words at the end of the Gospel: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24).
Focus on Your Teaching

Everybody has doubts even as they have faith. Some Christians find it more difficult to believe than others. Some feel guilty that they ever have doubts. Some are quick to judge others who appear to have “weak faith.” In teaching, you will need to have patience with those who judge, and you will need to show understanding toward those who doubt. Yours is the word that will offer reassurance that God’s forgiveness extends to doubters, and that God’s Spirit strengthens faith.

_O Lord and God, I do believe. Help my unbelief. By your Spirit, give me trust in your Word and sureness of faith in your promise of forgiveness and salvation. Amen._

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

*Before participants arrive,* print on a board or newsprint the list found in the sidebar.

Also, if you use option 3 in Responding, contact your church’s national or local headquarters or Web site, or use other means to acquire statements about the church’s mission in the 21st century. Print the discussion questions on a board or newsprint.

Welcome participants by name, and introduce newcomers to other members.

Distribute pens and paper. Indicate the list of statements on the board or newsprint and ask participants to rank them (1 as most believable, 7 as least believable). Discuss the rankings. Ask why people ranked the statements as they did. Ask: What makes us believe something?

Tell participants that today we will be challenged by someone who found something difficult to believe. Pray:

_O God, give us your Spirit so that we may listen to what you have to say. Help us believe your Word and to take it to heart. In Jesus’ name, we pray._

_Amen._

EXPLORING

Tell the participants that the passage for today begins on the day of resurrection. Ask everyone to open their Bibles to John 20:19–31. Have a volunteer read aloud verses 19–23.

In these verses we have John’s account of the giving of the Holy Spirit and the sending of the disciples into mission. Bible scholar Gregory Robbins points out that the author of John’s Gospel compresses Easter and Pentecost into one story.
Creating a psalm from scratch is an opportunity to personalize participants’ expression of adoration and praise. This activity may be done individually, in pairs or threes, or as a whole group.

What does verse 19 tell us about the feelings of the disciples?
How did the disciples come to faith (v. 20)?
What call to mission and promises did Jesus give the disciples (vv. 21–23)?

Now have a volunteer read verses 24–31.

Form two teams for a written debate on the topic “Is it appropriate to call Thomas ‘Doubting Thomas’ as we often do?” (You do not have to use the rules of formal debate.) One side will take the “yes” answer and the other the “no.” Each team will write a summary of their argument. Get back together and read the arguments. A good case can be made for both points of view. For example, Thomas did refuse to believe unless he had tangible proof of Jesus’ resurrection. On the other hand, he then did believe.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on John 20:19–31).

Have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt.

Explain that the phrase “John’s prologue” refers to John 1:1–18. Ask a volunteer to read this passage slowly. Have the group discuss why Thomas’ confession (“My Lord and my God”) might be seen as the logical conclusion of John 1:1–18.

Then invite someone to read the “Where?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Discuss in what way Jesus’ words to the first-century believers (“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”) might also apply to us today.

Lead into Responding by reading the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: How are disciples today empowered “to speak words of forgiveness and of judgment”?

Then ask all to read the “Now What?” excerpt silently. Continue to reflect for a few moments on being a true follower of Jesus.

RESPONDING
Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. Writing a Psalm Explain that the Psalter (the Book of Psalms) was used in temple worship. We might think of it as a hymnbook. There were many psalms that were not included in the Psalter; some are found in prophetic writings and in other parts of the Scriptures. Psalms are rather easy to write, and are great ways to express adoration and praise.

   Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Writing a Psalm), pens, and paper. If you remain as a whole group, you may prefer to use a board or newsprint.

   Read aloud the directions on Resource Sheet 2, and make sure they are understood before members of the group begin to write. Explain that the “psalms” will be used in Closing, and they will be spoken, so no music will be needed. Reassure participants that no one outside the class will see the psalms, so it is fine if they are not polished. The point is to express our faith in Jesus.
Consider the option of working in pairs. One person can suggest the first part of a line, and the second person can finish the line.

2. **Mission in a Doubting World** Distribute pens and paper for note-taking. Form pairs.

Then have the group recall from the focus text Jesus’ call to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (v. 21). Also tell the group that the mission of the author of John’s Gospel was to write so that people would believe in Jesus and have life in his name (v. 31).

Indicate that Jesus’ call was not only for the apostles, but also for the church through the centuries. It is a call to us today. There are those in our neighborhoods and perhaps in our families who do not believe in the risen Christ. They need our witness, whether oral, in writing, or by other means.

Ask each pair to come up with one way in which we are called to witness today in a doubting world, and then come up with a means to do so in their family or community. Regroup and share the ideas.

3. **Church Mission Statements** Post the following questions:

   - How do the church’s statements remind you of Thomas’ statement of faith, “My Lord and my God”? How do they reflect Jesus’ call, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”?
   - How do the church’s statements call us to mission in today’s world?
   - How is the church’s mission expressed in our own congregation’s life and activities? What more might we do?

Distribute pens, paper, and copies of the church statements you obtained. If you have only a few copies, ask participants to form small groups and give one copy to each group. Invite participants to read the statements and to write answers to the questions. If you have time, regroup to share the notes.

**CLOSING**

If participants wrote psalms (option 1 in Responding), read them devotionally now. Or, if the whole group wrote a psalm together, read it as a group.

Sing or say a hymn of mission such as “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation” or “Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak.”

Pray the following prayer or another of your choice.

   _O Lord and God, Jesus Christ, we rejoice in your risen presence with us._
   _Give us your Spirit and send us out to join actively and fervently in the mission of your church in today’s doubting world. Amen._

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 14, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on John 20:19–31

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Gregory A. Robbins

The empty tomb, the grave cloths, the presence of angels, Jesus’ exchange with Mary, the appearance on the evening of the first day of the week and, now, the revelation to Thomas—taken together—can demand only one response: christological confession, “My Lord and my God!” This is the most explicit one in the Gospels. Read within the context of John’s prologue, it is both the climax of the Gospel and its logical conclusion.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Martin E. Marty

This story marks our opening to new stages of faith and church life. Up until the story, faith came in the face of Jesus’ physical presence. Here, in the word to Thomas, the Jesus of this Gospel sets us up theologically for the experience of God not based solely on sight. Decades after these words were written, the last disciple died. Never again on earth would physical eyes or noses or tongues certify Jesus’ presence. Yes, Christians are still to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” but related to symbols. They could “taste” in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, but that was sacramental.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” John K. Stendahl

Jesus appears in the locked room of fear and speaks his word of peace. He displays the wounds in his flesh, and with his breath he explicitly gives his disciples the Holy Spirit; but thereby he also makes them his apostles, his sent ones—“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” His breath thus appears to be both equipment and investiture for that mission. Immediately Jesus elaborates what they are to do, the tasks for which they now have his breath. He empowers them to speak words of forgiveness and of judgment, words that will not be mere expressions of personal emotion but declarations of divine fact.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nancy Claire Pittman

In the Gospel of John, it is those who believe without seeing who are the true followers of Jesus. This is confirmed in the words that Jesus speaks, over the head of Thomas, to those readers who will not be able to see in the years ahead, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29). The only one who does this within John’s resurrection narrative is the Beloved Disciple, who runs to the tomb, sees absolutely nothing, and believes. It is he who verifies the truth of these written words at the end of the Gospel: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24).
With Thomas we adore the risen Christ as “my Lord and my God.” Write a psalm of praise and adoration to Jesus as Lord and God! Say who you believe Jesus is.

The key to writing a psalm is “parallelism.” Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. Instead, each line is divided into two parts, the second of which repeats or expands on the thought of the first.

- Sometimes the idea is simply repeated (synonymous parallelism), as in Psalm 29:4.
- Sometimes the second idea is contrasted with the first (antithetical parallelism), as in Psalm 1:6.
- Sometimes the first idea is expressed in a metaphor or simile in the second part of the line (emblematic parallelism), as in Psalm 103:13.
- Sometimes the second part adds to the idea in the first part (stair-like parallelism), as in Psalm 29:1–2.

Think what you want to say.

Write down your first idea (line 1, part 1). Choose one of the forms of parallelism to form the second part of line 1.

Then write down your second idea (line 2, part 1). Choose one of the forms of parallelism to form the second part of line 2.

And so on. Your psalm can be as short or as long as you like.
Christ Has Risen Indeed!

Goal for the Session
Adults will rejoice in the resurrection and plan ways to share the Easter message with others in the community.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Luke 24:1–12

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Gregory A. Robbins
The editorial voice notes that the apostles received women’s word as “an idle tale.” The Greek word here, leprous, is usually reserved to describe the ranting of a person suffering from delirium. Seen against Luke’s larger narrative, one ought to relish in the irony. In 8:2 Mary Magdalene is described as one who was cured by Jesus, as one from whom seven demons had gone out. Mary Magdalene, who had at one time been truly beside herself, is now among those who convey the good news! This would fit it perfectly with one of Luke–Acts’s major themes: the unexpected reversal of fortune (cf. 1:46–55).

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Martin E. Marty
Amazingly, “many believed.” They believed not because someone produced and waved the Shroud of Turin, a cloth that some claimed “scientifically” to have been the burial cloth of Jesus. Had there been a cloth for the taking, and had the disciples taken it to Jerusalem and Asia Minor and said, “He is risen, and we can prove it scientifically. Here is his shroud,” who would have believed? Hearers did not look at such artifacts or wave cloths and claim proofs. What do witnesses do when they testify? They put their lives on the line.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” John K. Stendahl
Here in Luke’s narrative, it is the unique details as well as the barest outline of the story that speak the truth. (The classic analogy comes to mind: true as an arrow is true, for it hits the mark.) The preacher can thus speak with enthusiasm of the diversity of details among the various accounts, not to explain them away but to caress their different insights, focusing on the one at hand but celebrating them all, excitedly sharing the wonder that gave rise to them all, the glory refracted in each.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nancy Claire Pittman
The boundless gift of the empty tomb cannot be separated from the words and actions of Jesus. Resurrection, after all, is not some buoyant ideal, unconnected to the real world. It is an invitation to live as Jesus lived, a doorway to a life in which meals are shared with enemies, healing is offered to the hopeless, prophetic challenges are issued to the powerful. Only now it is not Jesus who does these things—it is we ourselves who see at last the subversive power of the resurrection in order to live it now.
Focus on Your Teaching

Adults may be busy today, with Easter baskets to fill, visitors to welcome, a big dinner to prepare, recipes to follow, flowers to arrange. All of these are distractions from the central meaning of the day, yet they are real in the lives of participants. Try to keep your own unwavering focus on the risen Lord, and help participants to keep their focus also. A prayerful and joyful atmosphere will be helpful.

(O God of life and resurrection, keep me focused today on your son Jesus, risen and glorious. Help me to give him all honor and praise, and so to teach that the group members will truly rejoice in the resurrection. Amen.)

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

On a DVD player or on YouTube, play Handel's “Messiah” in the background as participants arrive. Particularly appropriate would be the selections “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q0qho_hKEg), “The Trumpet Shall Sound” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiUmqvV664cI), “Since by Man Came Death” (youtube.com/watch?v=CbTxgCj1x-o), “Worthy Is the Lamb” (youtube.com/watch?v=OBdAL3vhNs4), or the “Hallelujah” chorus (www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3TUWU_yg4s&feature=related).

Greet each member with the traditional greeting, “Christ is risen! Alleluia!” Should they so greet you first, the traditional response is “He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Ask participants how they are celebrating Easter this year. Then ask them to think about the ways in which the church celebrates Easter. Ask: Which of these ways means most to you, and why?

Move to Exploring by saying that today’s session focuses on the risen Jesus and the message of the resurrection.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

(Help us to lay aside, O God, all the nonessential trappings of this day and to focus on Jesus, the Victor over sin and death, and the living One who reigns over us and will come in glory to claim all as his own. Amen.)
The Easter story is very familiar. By identifying with just one person in the story, participants may see the event from a fresh perspective.

EXPLORING
Before reading Luke 24:1–12, ask participants to choose a viewpoint through which to listen—will they be one of the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, or another) or will they be one of the disciples? Who will be Peter? Then invite a volunteer to read the passage.

After the reading, ask each person how they felt and what they thought about as they heard the Gospel from that particular viewpoint.


Read aloud the “Where?” excerpt. Discuss what Martin Marty (the writer) might mean about witnesses putting their lives on the line when they testify. What might this mean for the church today?

RESPONDING
Choose one or more of the following activities, depending on the length of your session. All of the activities are means of sharing the Easter message with others.

1. **What Easter Means to Me**  Have pens and paper available on a table or other writing surface.
   
   Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Resource Sheet 1. Tell the participants that today is a day to share the Easter message with the whole world. Often people expect the preacher to testify to the risen Lord, but each believer’s testimony is powerful. Remind participants that the first witness to the resurrection was Mary Magdalene. Ask each person to write a few sentences on “What Easter means to me.” Some of these might be put in the church newsletter or attached to a bulletin board to strengthen the faith of others and to encourage them in turn to be witnesses. Encourage people to write legibly if the messages will be read by others.

2. **Spring Plants and Notes**  Set up a work area with potted lilies or other spring plants, pens or thin markers, pastel paper, colored foil, scissors, and tape.
   
   Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Response Sheet 1. Tell the participants that today we want to share the Easter message with others. Explain that we will do this by wrapping the pot of each lily or plant in foil and attaching an Easter promise. These will be given to unchurched neighbors of our choice.

   Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Easter Good News). Each person will choose one of the biblical passages, write it legibly on a strip of paper, and tape it to a foil-wrapped pot. Early in the coming week, participants may hand-deliver the pots to neighbors who do not attend any church. Remind participants to keep the soil moist until delivery.
3. **Easter Good News Letters**  Place on a table or work area the sheets of note paper, envelopes, pens, stamps, list of inactive members and addresses, and map of the local area.

Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Response Sheet 1. Tell the participants that today we want to share the Easter message with those who no longer attend church. Explain that we will do this by writing Easter greeting letters to inactive members of the congregation. Each letter will include a Bible verse about the resurrection from Response Sheet 2 (Easter Good News). The letters will be addressed in class and mailed or hand-delivered to inactive members early in the coming week. Have participants choose prospective recipients from the list of inactive members. Identify a person to mail letters that will go through the postal service. Use the area map to identify the location of addresses for those who will hand-deliver letters, and remind participants to contact the pastor as soon as possible after any call in which an inactive member indicates that they desire a pastoral visit.

**CLOSING**

Gather together. Together sing or say one of the great Easter hymns such as “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” or “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.”

If you used option 1 in Responding, have a few volunteers read their statements aloud. Pause after each one, so that the witness of each testimony can be absorbed.

If you have not done so already, hand out copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Easter Good News). Together read aloud the Easter Good News verses. Pause after each passage for a moment of silence.

Then use the following prayer or another of your choice:

> O risen Lord, walk with us today and in the coming week. Open to us the Scriptures, and teach us more of the meaning of your death for sin and your triumph over the grave. Give us hope and faith and an urgent desire to share the good news of the resurrection with those we meet. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 7, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on Luke 24:1–12

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Gregory A. Robbins

The editorial voice notes that the apostles received women’s word as “an idle tale.” The Greek word here, λεγομενος, is usually reserved to describe the ranting of a person suffering from delirium. Seen against Luke’s larger narrative, one ought to relish in the irony. In 8:2 Mary Magdalene is described as one who was cured by Jesus, as one from whom seven demons had gone out. Mary Magdalene, who had at one time been truly beside herself, is now among those who convey the good news! This would fit it perfectly with one of Luke–Acts’s major themes: the unexpected reversal of fortune (cf. 1:46–55).

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Martin E. Marty

Amazingly, “many believed.” They believed not because someone produced and waved the Shroud of Turin, a cloth that some claimed “scientifically” to have been the burial cloth of Jesus. Had there been a cloth for the taking, and had the disciples taken it to Jerusalem and Asia Minor and said, “He is risen, and we can prove it scientifically. Here is his shroud,” who would have believed? Hearers did not look at such artifacts or wave cloths and claim proofs. What do witnesses do when they testify? They put their lives on the line.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” John K. Stendahl

Here in Luke’s narrative, it is the unique details as well as the barest outline of the story that speak the truth. (The classic analogy comes to mind: true as an arrow is true, for it hits the mark.) The preacher can thus speak with enthusiasm of the diversity of details among the various accounts, not to explain them away but to caress their different insights, focusing on the one at hand but celebrating them all, excitedly sharing the wonder that gave rise to them all, the glory refracted in each.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nancy Claire Pittman

The boundless gift of the empty tomb cannot be separated from the words and actions of Jesus. Resurrection, after all, is not some buoyant ideal, unconnected to the real world. It is an invitation to live as Jesus lived, a doorway to a life in which meals are shared with enemies, healing is offered to the hopeless, prophetic challenges are issued to the powerful. Only now it is not Jesus who does these things—it is we ourselves who see at last the subversive power of the resurrection in order to live it now.
Easter Good News

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and . . . he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3–4)

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:21–22)

Death has been swallowed up in victory. (1 Corinthians 15:54b)

But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” (Matthew 28:5–6)

The Lord has risen indeed! (Luke 24:34a) This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (Acts 2:32)
Jesus’ Triumphal Entry

Adults will identify with the crowds who shouted “hosanna” and will seek to honor Jesus by promoting peace.

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**Goal for the Session**

Adventures will identify with the crowds who shouted “hosanna” and will seek to honor Jesus by promoting peace.

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**PREPARING FOR THE SESSION**

**Focus on Luke 19:28–40; 23:1–49**

**WHAT is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Jae Won Lee

Jesus’ entrance follows the plot of Zechariah 9:9: Zion’s king comes to Jerusalem triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey. The disciples’ acclamation comes from Psalm 118:26: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” to which Luke adds an explicit reference to Jesus as king. However, Luke also adds a note about peace and glory. The praise of the multitude of angels in 2:14 is about peace on earth, and in fact Jesus bestows peace on earth (7:50; 8:48; 10:6). Further, the plot of Zechariah 9, which is so strongly played out in Jesus’ entry, anticipates God’s acts to establish peace for Jerusalem.

**WHERE is God in these words?** — From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup

The multitude’s praise and joy suddenly turn to great sorrow when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, because even though the multitude sings of peace and glory in heaven, it fails to recognize the price of true peace, “the things that make for peace!” (v. 42). The multitude sings of peace in heaven without recognizing that Jesus is not an example of some larger notion of peace. He is their peace. Indeed he is the peace of the world—not any peace, but the peace that only he can give—and that peace cannot be found apart from the journey that leads inexorably to Golgotha, both for him and for those that would be his disciples.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?** — From “Pastoral Perspective,” William G. Carter

Jesus rides no high horse, just a lowly colt. He chooses to enter a deadly situation without force or protection. He gives himself freely and without reservation. This is a prophetic act, a sign of God’s vulnerable love, which risks everything and promises to gain all. This is the means by which God creates peace. Sometimes we are clueless when it comes to peace. However, for those who continue to share the body and blood of Christ, it is common to say, “The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” How does each of us respond? With the words, “And also with you.”

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?** — From “Homiletical Perspective,” H. Stephen Shoemaker

What kind of king? So we have a clash of kingdoms: Caesar or Christ. Caesar’s kingdom is based on domination and ruthless power, the kind of kingship Jesus refused when tempted in the wilderness. The kingdom of God Jesus preached is based on justice, mercy, and the love of God (Luke 11:42 and Matt. 23:23). So we have our choice: Pax Christi or Pax Romana. Our challenge is to show how the gospel of the kingdom has political implications but transcends our everyday political loyalties.

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**March 24, 2013**

**Palm/Passion Sunday**

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**Isa. 50:4–9a**

**Pss. 118:1–2, 19–29; 31:9–16**

**Phil. 2:5–11**

Focus on Your Teaching

Adults recognize that the focus of Holy Week rightly is on Jesus. They enjoy the celebrations of Palm Sunday and Easter. Some will be anticipating family get-togethers, meals, or out-of-town visitors in the week ahead. Many will feel deep sadness as well as joy at the events of the days that culminate in the crucifixion and resurrection. Many will welcome the opportunity to move beyond their personal plans and to reflect on today’s text and the world ramifications of the season.

O Lord Jesus, help me this week to focus on your death and resurrection. Help me to pray, to meditate, and to read your Word with understanding. Keep me mindful also of the world for which you died. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare the worship center with purple cloth and a Bible open to Luke 19. (This will be the last session for using the Lenten purple cloth.) If you will use option 1 in Responding, print the directions on the board or newsprint.

Greet participants as they arrive and distribute pens and paper.

Invite each person to write a list of the things that make for peace. (These could include components of the world, region, community, home life, workplace, church, or other settings.)

Then ask participants to read their lists aloud, and, as they do so, list the items on the board or newsprint; make a checkmark beside items that appear on more than one person’s list. Post the list where everyone will be able to see it.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

King of glory and of peace, help us to grasp the message of this holy day as we begin our journey into Holy Week. By your Spirit enable us to use this week as a time of preparation and reflection. In your name, we pray. Amen.

EXPLORING

Post or hold the map of Bethphage, Bethany, and Jerusalem where everyone can see it. Ask a volunteer to read Luke 19:28–40, and indicate on the map the towns that are mentioned. (Obtain maps from a study Bible, Bible atlas, or the Internet [bibleatlas.org/regional/bethphage.htm].)
If you have access to the Internet, show the modern annual Palm Sunday procession from Bethphage to Jerusalem (search: Palm Sunday Procession Jerusalem 2010 or 2011). Note the thousands of pilgrims, singing in various languages and waving palm branches. If any of your participants have been part of this life-changing experience, let them tell about it briefly.

From a study Bible or Bible atlas show a photo or picture of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. (Or, from the Internet, use Google Images; type in “old city Jerusalem Mount Olives.”)

Invite a volunteer to read Zechariah 9:9–10.


Discuss the understanding of “peace” as an important component of Palm Sunday. Take your time—this may be a new idea to many.

Invite a volunteer to read Luke 19:41–42 and another to then read the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1.

Ask: How do you think the disciples felt during the procession to Jerusalem? How do you think they felt as Jesus wept over the city? Discuss the contrasting emotions of the day.

Then lead into a discussion of Jesus the peace-bringer. Begin with participants reading silently 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 and Colossians 1:19–22, followed by Philippians 2:5–11. (Write the passages on the board or newsprint.) Invite participants to tell how they understand Christ’s death as a means to bring peace and reconciliation between ourselves and God, as well as between ourselves and others.

Prepare for Responding by distributing copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Two Processions). Have everyone read the excerpt aloud together. Then have someone read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1.

Ask:

Where do you see Christians acting like Jesus on the donkey today?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Hosanna and Peace Affirmations** Distribute paper and pens and post the following directions where all can see them:
   - Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1.
   - Read again the list of items that make for peace from Gathering.
   - Now complete the following brief affirmations (things that you believe):
     - I cry “Hosanna” to Jesus today because . . .
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday is a seesaw of emotions, from exultation to deep sorrow. Whatever your church’s emphasis (palm procession or passion) try to keep a blend of joy and serious reflection. An appropriate remembrance of this day includes both dimensions.

I think Christians are called to be peace-bringers because . . .
I plan to use one of the items that make for peace in the following way . . .

Encourage participants to take home their affirmations and to read them daily as part of their Holy Week devotions.

2. **Hosanna and Peace Posters** Make “Hosanna” and peace posters to hang on a bulletin board, a corridor wall, or other area where worshipers will see them. Place scissors, glue, poster board/chart paper, rulers, markers, and magazines on a large table or other work area. Pieces of palm may be added if available. Posters can be easily turned into banners by folding them slightly at the top and stapling to make a secure flap. Then insert a piece of dowel, and tie string or cord at each end of the dowel to hang.

Refer participants to the list of items that make for peace from Gathering. How might these items be incorporated into the posters?

3. **Assessment of the Lenten Witness Strategy** The Lenten witness strategy has concluded. Use this time to assess your strategy. Ask: What joys have you experienced? What might you have done differently? Have someone take notes. Someday you may want to engage in another short-term witness strategy; your experience will be invaluable for that purpose. Note whether parishioners are bringing visitors to Holy Week and Easter services. Encourage group members to welcome them to your congregation.

**CLOSING**

Gather at the worship center.

Together sing or say a Palm Sunday hymn, such as “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna,” “Ride on! Ride on in Majesty,” or another favorite. (All three songs are on YouTube, some with organ alone, some with choirs. Type in the hymn title.)

Remind the group that this is the beginning of Holy Week. Many churches celebrate this day as the Sunday of the Passion. So it is fitting now to move from the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal procession to his passion and death, the focus of the next five days.

Spend time in silent meditation about the cross and the peace that Jesus brought to the world.

Then pray:

> O God, help us to bring peace through our lives and actions, including . . . (read the list of items from Gathering). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 31, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Jae Won Lee
Jesus’ entrance follows the plot of Zechariah 9:9: Zion’s king comes to Jerusalem triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey. The disciples’ acclamation comes from Psalm 118:26: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” to which Luke adds an explicit reference to Jesus as king. However, Luke also adds a comment about peace and glory. The praise of the multitude of angels in 2:14 is about peace on earth, and in fact Jesus bestows peace on earth (7:50; 8:48; 10:6). Further, the plot of Zechariah 9, which is so strongly played out in Jesus’ entry, anticipates God’s acts to establish peace for Jerusalem.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup
The multitude’s praise and joy suddenly turn to great sorrow when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, because even though the multitude sings of peace and glory in heaven, it fails to recognize the price of true peace, “the things that make for peace!” (v. 42). The multitude sings of peace in heaven without recognizing that Jesus is not an example of some larger notion of peace. He is their peace. Indeed he is the peace of the world—not any peace, but the peace that only he can give—and that peace cannot be found apart from the journey that leads inexorably to Golgotha, both for him and for those that would be his disciples.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” William G. Carter
Jesus rides no high horse, just a lowly colt. He chooses to enter a deadly situation without force or protection. He gives himself freely and without reservation. This is a prophetic act, a sign of God’s vulnerable love, which risks everything and promises to gain all. This is the means by which God creates peace. Sometimes we are clueless when it comes to peace. However, for those who continue to share the body and blood of Christ, it is common to say, “The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” How does each of us respond? With the words, “And also with you.”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” H. Stephen Shoemaker
What kind of king? So we have a clash of kingdoms: Caesar or Christ. Caesar’s kingdom is based on domination and ruthless power, the kind of kingship Jesus refused when tempted in the wilderness. The kingdom of God Jesus preached is based on justice, mercy, and the love of God (Luke 11:42 and Matt. 23:23). So we have our choice: Pax Christi or Pax Romana. Our challenge is to show how the gospel of the kingdom has political implications but transcends our everyday political loyalties.
Jesus scholars Borg and Crossan give us a riveting image with which to begin: there were the two processions that Passover week. From the west came Pilate draped in the gaudy glory of imperial power: horses, chariots, and gleaming armor. He moved in with the Roman army at the beginning of Passover week to make sure nothing got out of hand. Insurrection was in the air with the memory of God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

From the east came another procession: Jesus in ordinary robe riding on a young donkey. The careful preparations suggest that Jesus has planned a highly ritualized symbolic prophetic act. Luke has in mind the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9–10, the coming of a new kind of king, a king of peace who will dismantle the weaponry of war.

Goal for the Session

In exploring Mary’s act of devotion, adults will ponder Christ’s extravagant generosity and consider ways to serve those in need.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on John 12:1–8

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Jae Won Lee
Jesus’ interpretation of Mary’s action looks forward. He associates Mary’s anointing with his burial. She anticipates Jesus’ death as the council does in 11:53, but she is no collaborator. Mary’s anointing also anticipates Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. It evokes the anointing of Israel’s kings. Yet the enthusiasm of the crowd is motivated by their excitement about the sign Jesus had done with Lazarus (12:18). Mary’s anointing arouses complicated motivations and interests among different groups of people in understanding kingship and prepares for a different kind of kingship (18:36; 19:21; cf. 6:15).

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup
The Christian disciple is neither Mary nor Judas but a paradoxical combination of both. In the figure of Mary, Christian discipleship is an act of adoration of and gratitude to the one who alone is holy. In her silence Mary draws our attention not to herself but to the one she anoints. In the figure of Judas, Christian discipleship is God’s making righteous or “justification” of those who have rejected and betrayed Jesus. In John’s all-encompassing Gospel, Mary is not simply the righteous elect and Judas the unrighteous betrayer. The grace of Jesus Christ includes them both, both the faithful and the unfaithful. Both are included within the bright, transforming light the cross casts in a dark world.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” William G. Carter
Much of modern religion focuses only on what is useful, practical, and cost effective. Concern for austerity arises when resources seem slim. Yet when it comes to the life of faith, we may discover our hearts are diminished if the budget is our first concern. Should we live spendthrift lives? No. Can we justify the wasting of God’s gifts? Not really. However long before a gift can be wasted, it must first be received.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” H. Stephen Shoemaker
We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. So here is an invitation to daily companionship with Jesus, at the Table, in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, in moments of worship. All this in a world which lives by a mind-set of scarcity, rather than a mind-set of abundance, and so tempts us to close in and give little. All this in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day.
Focus on Your Teaching

In the church, members often choose where to spend their time, energy, and money, to the exclusion of other ministries. “Worship and retreats are my thing!” “Give me social ministry any day—I’m the active type!” Participants may need help in thinking practically about ways to combine devotional aspects of the Christian life with their responsibility to care for people in need in Christ’s name.

O God, you gave the most extravagant gift to us in sending your Son for our salvation. Help me to worship you with a deep devotion, and at the same time remember those who are less fortunate than I. Help participants hear your Word through my teaching this week. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare the worship center with purple cloth and a Bible open to John 12:1–8. Arrange seats in a circle (or two concentric circles if the group is large) for the opening discussion.

Welcome participants by name as they arrive, and introduce anyone who is new.

Invite participants to sit in the circle, where all will be able to hear and participate easily in the discussion. Ask:

What is the most extravagant gift you have ever received? (Remember, there are various forms of extravagance, not all monetary.)

When the discussion begins to wane, ask: Why do people give extravagant gifts? (It is likely that a variety of motives will be mentioned. Not all extravagant gifts are given out of pure love and generosity.)

Tell the group that today we will discover an extravagant gift that was given to Jesus.

Invite the group to join you in a responsive prayer. Indicate to participants that when you say, “For your gracious gift,” their response will be “We thank you, God.” Lead the following prayer:

You created a wonderful world. For your gracious gift . . . You gave us life.
For your gracious gift . . .

You sent your Son for us. For your gracious gift . . .
You gave us your church, to which we belong. For your gracious gift . . .
You gave us the Scriptures. For your gracious gift . . . Amen.
EXPLORING

From a study Bible, a Bible atlas, or the Internet (search: Bethany, ancient Israel) show a map of Israel in New Testament times. Indicate Bethany and Jerusalem.

Invite the group to open their Bibles and silently read John 12:1–8. When all have finished, lay the Bibles aside and have volunteers role-play the passage from memory, using contemporary words—you will need at least Mary, Jesus, and Judas. If your group is larger, add Martha, Lazarus, and others at the table. After the role-playing:

- Ask “Mary” how it felt to have her beautiful tribute criticized—and how it felt to have it then defended by Jesus.
- Ask “Judas” how it felt to defend the poor—and how it felt to then be rebuked by Jesus.
- Ask the others how it felt when Jesus predicted his death. (“She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. . . . You do not always have me.”)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on John 12:1–8) and have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt. Have the group look up the biblical references cited in the paragraph; these will help in understanding the meaning of today’s passage.

Then have the group read the “Where?” excerpt aloud together. Ask:

- In what sense are we both Mary and Judas?

Hand out copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Costly Devotion). Have a volunteer read the section titled “Extravagant Acts.” Ask:

- How is Mary’s gift extravagant?
- How is Christ’s gift far more costly?

Now have a volunteer read the section titled “The Plight of People Who Are Poor.” Form pairs and discuss how these paragraphs help in understanding both the special act of Mary and our own responsibility to care for those in need.

While the pairs are engaged, print the following on the board or newsprint:

- How necessary is our service to those in need in today’s society?
- Should it be costly?
- What difference does Christ’s death make to the way we serve others?

Invite the pairs to move from their initial discussion to talk about the questions on the board/newsprint.

Regroup as a whole, and allow a few brief comments about the points made in pairs’ discussion. Now turn to Resource Sheet 1. Ask the group to read the “So What?” excerpt silently. Invite brief comments.

Conclude Exploring by having a volunteer read the excerpt “Now What?” If you will use option 2 in Responding, move directly to that activity now. If not, take a brief time to discuss how your church promotes a mindset of abundance in its worship and activities.
RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Giving to Christ and to Those in Need** Distribute pens and paper for participants to make an individual plan for prayer and for action. Ask them to think about the cross and Jesus’ incredibly costly gift for us. Then have each write one thing that they will give to Jesus (time? prayer? love? worship? study of the Scripture? a word of witness?) and one way that they will give to those in need in the coming week. If participants find it difficult to think of practical ways to give to others, you may need a brief discussion of local opportunities.

2. **Abundance in Worship** Distribute copies of your church’s worship bulletin, pens, paper, and copies of Resource Sheet 1. In the light of Resource Sheet 1 “Now What?” excerpt, examine your church’s worship bulletin. Have members jot down ways in which they experience abundant generosity expressed in worship. Then jot down ways in which your church’s worship is designed to meet the spiritual needs of people other than yourselves in your community. Discuss the ideas in the group. If your bulletin includes a list of weekly activities, examine those as expressions of generosity and as ways to meet human need. Is there more that can be done? Finally, have each person write down one way they intend to focus on Jesus’ extravagant generosity this Easter.

3. **Lenten Witness Strategy** This will be the last week that you will work actively on your Lenten witness strategy. Assess the experience so far. What still needs to be done? Make plans for the coming week to include the dimension of serving those in need in your neighborhood. Can you distribute Easter baskets of nutritious food? If your church has a “discretionary fund,” can you give restaurant gift cards to families in need (after consulting your minister for names)? Are there families with recent bereavement or illness who would appreciate an invitation to sit with you at Easter worship? Can you send Easter cards to people in nursing homes or visit them, to let them know that they are not forgotten at Easter? Be sure that someone takes notes and that roles are assigned so that the work will be carried through.

CLOSING

Invite participants to say one sentence about how they relate thanksgiving for Christ’s sacrifice to serving those in need.

Together sing or say “Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service.”

Ask if anyone has a request for prayer for themselves or for someone else. (Jot names.) Then begin, *O God, hear our prayers for . . .* and include the requests. Conclude with *Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 24, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.
Focus on John 12:1–8

**WHAT is important to know?**
— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Jae Won Lee

Jesus’ interpretation of Mary’s action looks forward. He associates Mary’s anointing with his burial. She anticipates Jesus’ death as the council does in 11:53, but she is no collaborator. Mary’s anointing also anticipates Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. It evokes the anointing of Israel’s kings. Yet the enthusiasm of the crowd is motivated by their excitement about the sign Jesus had done with Lazarus (12:18). Mary’s anointing arouses complicated motivations and interests among different groups of people in understanding kingship and prepares for a different kind of kingship (18:36; 19:21; cf. 6:15).

**WHERE is God in these words?**
— From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup

The Christian disciple is neither Mary nor Judas but a paradoxical combination of both. In the figure of Mary, Christian discipleship is an act of adoration of and gratitude to the one who alone is holy. In her silence Mary draws our attention not to herself but to the one she anoints. In the figure of Judas, Christian discipleship is God’s making righteous or “justification” of those who have rejected and betrayed Jesus. In John’s all-encompassing Gospel, Mary is not simply the righteous elect and Judas the unrighteous betrayer. The grace of Jesus Christ includes them both, both the faithful and the unfaithful. Both are included within the bright, transforming light the cross casts in a dark world.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**
— From “Pastoral Perspective,” William G. Carter

Much of modern religion focuses only on what is useful, practical, and cost effective. Concern for austerity arises when resources seem slim. Yet when it comes to the life of faith, we may discover our hearts are diminished if the budget is our first concern. Should we live spendthrift lives? No. Can we justify the wasting of God’s gifts? Not really. However long before a gift can be wasted, it must first be received.

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**
— From “Homiletical Perspective,” H. Stephen Shoemaker

We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. So here is an invitation to daily companionship with Jesus, at the Table, in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, in moments of worship. All this in a world which lives by a mind-set of scarcity, rather than a mind-set of abundance, and so tempts us to close in and give little. All this in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day.
Costly Devotion

**Extravagant Acts**
Mary serves as a model for Christian discipleship. At the beginning of John’s Gospel, John the Baptist witnesses to Jesus as the Christ when he announces, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! . . . And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (1:29, 34). Unlike John, Mary utters not a word, but her extravagant act, the use of costly fragrance to anoint Jesus’ feet, is no less a faithful witness to the even more costly and extravagant act that is about to occur. Jesus has already been anointed for his costly mission (his sending in 3:16) in his baptism by John, and now Mary anoints Jesus for his costly death with her pound of costly perfume. Like John, Mary is a witness and a disciple—not by what she says but by what she does.


**The Plight of People Who Are Poor**
Jesus then compares his impending absence with the plight of the poor: “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (12:8). Incredibly this has been interpreted to imply that nothing should be done for the poor. Jesus’ saying comes from Deuteronomy 15:11, which enjoins Israel to “open your hand to the poor” because “there will never cease to be some in need.” This actually means that something should be done because of reversals even when people struggle hard against poverty.

There is yet another dimension to Jesus’ saying. He describes the period before his departure as an extraordinary time that supersedes normal activities such as caring for the poor. Mary’s anointing expresses what cannot be put into words and makes the five days before Jesus’ execution extraordinary.

The Forgiving Father

Responding to God’s grace in Luke 15, participants will rejoice in divine forgiveness and heed Jesus’ call to forgive.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION


WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Leslie J. Hoppe

Chapter 15 begins with a complaint made by the Pharisees and scribes regarding Jesus’ willingness to welcome and eat with sinners. It ends with a father’s welcome to his erring younger son and a plea to the elder son to join his neighbors and his younger brother for a banquet, marking the restoration of proper relations among the members of the family and the wider community. The parable ends with an implicit question: will the Pharisees and scribes join Jesus in welcoming and eating with sinners?

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Daniel G. Defenbaugh

Grace lies at the heart of this parable—scandalous grace, grace that defies all earthly rules and conventions. Identifying too closely with the younger son, we risk neglecting the central point of the story: the extraordinary love of the father, who runs to greet his child “while he was still far off.” We get the sense here that the spurned parent was in fact keeping vigil, praying for the day his boy would return. Like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep or a woman rummaging for her misplaced coin, the father remained hopeful that the seeds he had once sown in love might yet be harvested in the return of his child.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodney Clapp

Behind Jesus’ parable lies profound and overwhelming truth about God and God’s kingdom. We humans, we all were lost, mired in sins of sensuality and greed and self-referential resentment, hip-deep in the pig slop of envy. Before we knew it, God reached out in the people Israel and then in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God raised us up and called us home. It is just not about you or me, or my sin or your sin, or my desserts or your desserts. It is about God and God’s life-giving love and mercy. Every time God’s active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael B. Curry

It is God’s dream to renew, reconcile, repair, and restore the creation; that is the magnetic power in the parable of the Prodigal Son pulling the prodigal back home. As the story unfolds, it is clear that the parable is more about the determined, compassionate, infinite providence of God than it is about the ways of God’s prodigal children. In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings.
Focus on Your Teaching

People give and receive forgiveness as part of daily life. Someone breaks in line or interrupts a conversation without waiting; forgiveness is given. Conditions may or may not be placed on the forgiveness given or received by your participants, depending on a host of factors and the gravity of the offense. Today’s focus text is one of the most well-known and powerful stories of God’s forgiveness in the Bible, offering a chance to consider how God forgives us and how we might better forgive others.

O God, even though I don’t deserve it, you always welcome me with open arms when I return to you. Grant me forgiveness this day, and give me grace in teaching to show forgiveness and generosity. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Leading the Session

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare the worship center with purple cloth and a Bible open to Luke 15. Also, on board or newsprint print the following:

- Forgiving a child for stealing a quarter
- Forgiving a drunk driver who killed your relative
- Forgiving a pastor who failed to visit you in the hospital
- Forgiving a spouse for infidelity
- Forgiving a friend who lied to you
- Forgiving a spouse for abusing you
- Forgiving a church member for stealing from the offering plate

If you choose option 2 in Responding, prepare a chart with ideas for writing a hymn.

Greet participants as they arrive. Introduce visitors to other members.

Call attention to the list of forgiving instances prepared before class on board or newsprint. Ask participants to work alone for a few minutes and to rank the items from 1 to 7, with 1 being the most difficult situation for them. Then have participants compare answers in pairs. There is no right or wrong ranking—the point is to have participants wrestle with the difficulty of human forgiveness. Tell participants that today we will explore forgiveness, human and divine.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Lord, we often find it hard to forgive others—or even to know when to forgive. You are the great forgiver; in Christ Jesus we hear your word of forgiveness for us. Teach us to forgive as you do. Amen.
EXPLORING

Ask for volunteers to take parts as they read the focus text, Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32. You will need a narrator, father, prodigal son, and older son. Read the text.

Distribute paper and pens. Form groups of three, or if the group has fewer than nine people, remain in one large group. Invite groups to list things they learned from this familiar text. Have someone in each group take notes.

Regroup and have the note-takers list their group’s insights. Have a volunteer write the ideas on newsprint, placing checkmarks beside ideas that appear more than once.


- How might the Pharisees and scribes have felt as they listened to the parable?
- Which son do you think they might identify with? Why?

Request that a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Invite participants to call out a one-word description of God’s “scandalous grace,” and list the responses on board or newsprint. Ask: Would this be a good Bible passage to read on Good Friday? Why?

Have a volunteer read the “So What?” and the “Now What?” excerpts.

If there is a good level of trust in the group, have participants form pairs and create a modern-day story, real or imagined, of someone who is forgiven by God that illustrates lessons from today’s parable. Suggest they make notes so they can tell the story to the whole group. Regroup and tell the stories.

If the group does not know each other well, invite participants to draw an image that describes God’s forgiveness, using some of the adjectives describing God’s love in the “So What?” excerpt.

Conclude by asking: How does the parable call us to forgive others?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. Receiving and Practicing Forgiveness Give each participant a pen and a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Where Am I in the Parable?). Invite participants to complete the sheet. Let them know they will not reveal their responses to others—this is between God and them. They can take the sheets home for Lenten reflection.
2. **Writing a Hymn about Forgiveness**  Distribute pens and paper. Have participants work in groups of three or four and write a hymn about God’s forgiveness or about Jesus’ call to forgive others.

   Many of your participants may never have written a hymn. Post a chart of ideas as follows:
   
   - Think of any simple, short, well-known hymn tune or common song melody. (Refer to your church’s hymnal or songbook for ideas if necessary.)
   - Tap out and write down the number of syllables in each line.
   - Write down the main idea that you want to sing about—either God’s forgiveness or our call to forgive others.
   - If you wish the lines to rhyme (they don’t have to), write down some simple rhyming words you might use (e.g., love-above; be-me-see-free; need-feed-freed; night-might-fright-height-sight-light; son-done-won; forgive-live-give; and so on).
   - Now see if your group can come up with a song! Print it on the board or newsprint, so that everyone can say or sing it in Closing.

3. **Lenten Witness Strategy**  Provide paper and pens for taking notes. Remind the group of the goal chosen last week—to execute a strategy for outreach to the unchurched in your community. Discuss: How is the strategy progressing? Can you invite those people to the Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter services? Is there someone in the community you need to forgive? If so, invite them to come with you to church on Good Friday.

   More ideas that can be planned in class and followed through at home: Write a brief article for the local newspaper inviting people to Holy Week services. Prepare flyers or signs for public display (decide who will distribute them). Write a church bulletin notice asking worshipers to invite a friend to church during Holy Week.

**CLOSING**

Gather at the worship center. Ask participants to each say one sentence about what they have learned about God’s gracious forgiveness.

If you wrote hymns in option 2 in Responding, sing or say them now. If not, sing or say “Amazing Grace” together.

Read Psalm 32:1–7 (today’s lectionary psalm). Say the following prayer:

*Thank you, O God, for your super-extravagant love and forgiveness. In this Lenten season keep before us the cross, reminding us of your promise and of the cost of our forgiveness. Give us your Spirit so that we may be generous to others and share the good news of your forgiving love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 17, 2013, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

**WHAT is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Leslie J. Hoppe
Chapter 15 begins with a complaint made by the Pharisees and scribes regarding Jesus’ willingness to welcome and eat with sinners. It ends with a father’s welcome to his erring younger son and a plea to the elder son to join his neighbors and his younger brother for a banquet, marking the restoration of proper relations among the members of the family and the wider community. The parable ends with an implicit question: will the Pharisees and scribes join Jesus in welcoming and eating with sinners?

**WHERE is God in these words?** — From “Theological Perspective,” Daniel G. Defenbaugh
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Where Am I in the Parable?

One way in which I am like the younger son is . . .

One way in which I am like the older son is . . .

One way in Lent that I will respond to God’s extravagant grace and mercy to me is . . .

One thing for which I need forgiveness or for which I need to forgive another is . . .

One way in which I can practice forgiveness in the coming week is . . .