



Bible top 40†

Bible Stories
Everyone Should Know



The Congregational Church
of New Canaan

Dear Church Family,

For most of Christian history, over the past two thousand or so years, the Christian Education of Children, Youth, and Adults was taught at home. Parents were the primary instructors in matters of faith for the family. Scripture reading around the dinner table, faith conversations around the fireplace, and hymn singing while doing chores were some of the ways our faith was communicated from one generation to the next. In the 1950's and 1960's there was a church building boom in our country, and a move to house Christian education in the Church in Church School Classrooms with teachers trained to instruct children in matters of faith. Moving Christian Education out of the home and into the church was a fine idea when people went to church each week, but now, in a culture where church attendance is infrequent, the ability to do comprehensive faith-formation within the church has been compromised. Kids don't spend enough time in church to learn, and families have lost the ability, comfort, and knowledge base to teach Christian faith principles and practices at home.

This year we are making an effort to help individuals and families make faith-formation a part of home life. We are making space and time on Sunday evenings from 5:30-7:00 [in between our MSYG and YG programs] for our church membership to share a meal in their homes while engaging some church stories everyone should know — the “Bible Top Forty,” if you will. This guide will allow you, as individuals and families, to take time to reflect on and discuss important stories in the Bible, so that your understanding of the Bible and your handle on your faith deepen and grow. Each story will be a focus in worship on the Sunday indicated, so if you attend worship, or your child attends church school, you will already have a bit of foundation for dinner table conversation. This guide includes scripture references for the complete stories [using a Sparks bible can help younger children to access and understand longer and more complex stories]. There is a focus verse highlighted, followed by a brief reflection that may, or may not be used as a basis for dinner conversation. This is followed by two fact-based questions, and two discussion questions that should allow people of all ages to participate in a discussion.

For years, our family has enjoyed a Sabbath Dinner each week. The pattern of our evening is simple, and it is loosely based on Jewish Shabbat practice. We prepare a meal together while listening to a Christian music playlist. We set the dining room table with candles set for everyone who will be eating with us. After the meal has been served, but before anyone eats, we each light a candle and say something we are thankful to God for. Then we take hands and one of us offers a prayer recognizing those individual expressions of gratitude we have just spoken.

We then enjoy our meal together. As we draw to the end of the meal we read a scripture and discuss it for a few moments — all questions are affirmed and not knowing an answer is all part of the mystery of our faith. We then take turns blowing out our candles — always the highlight for our children — saying again what we are thankful to God for. Then we take hands and pray the Lord's Prayer together. This has been a simple and effective way of sharing and teaching our Christian faith story within our own family, and this year we want to share our practice with you.

We live in a busy world, and we live hectic lives. Families do not get enough time together. Faith-formation takes a back seat to almost every other activity. We will need faith throughout our lives, and deep and abiding connections within our families and our community are among life's greatest blessings. This year we want to help you cultivate both. We hope this study guide will lead you, your family, and our church into deeper fellowship with one another, deeper connection with our Lord, and a deeper understanding of our faith.

Yours in Christ,

Chapin

September 9th

Creation

Read: Genesis 1:1—2:4

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . . God said, “Let there be light;” and there was light.

Genesis 1:1 & 3

In the beginning, as it is to this day, words bring forth life. The ancient and holy story of the first chapter of Genesis tells of the origins of creation. All things began with the spoken word. Light and darkness, sky and sea, earth and vegetation, animals and humankind were spoken into existence. God speaks, and life forms.

Words are powerful things. They can build up, or they can tear down. They can be used to heal or to hurt. They can bring peace or incite war. In the beginning, God spoke and goodness came into being. The same can happen with our words. A carefully timed compliment can lift spirits. A word of encouragement can give shape to a life. A loving word can lead to intimacy that literally gives birth to life.

Fact Questions

- Who created the heavens and the earth?
- What was created on the fourth day?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What part of God’s creation do you love?
- If words are life-giving, how can you use your words in encouraging ways?

Lord, you have spoken all things into being. I owe my own existence to your word. Your words are life-giving. Help me to choose my words carefully, so that when I speak, life abounds. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

September 16th

Adam and Eve

Read: Genesis 2:4b—3:24

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

Genesis 2:18

In the story of Adam and Eve, relationship is primary. We may not know the how of creation, but this ancient story attempts to explain the why that gave birth to the world and humankind. Man was created to be with God, and woman was created to be with man. God wanted company, and God wanted us to enjoy relationships as well. We were built, birthed, and created to be in union with others and with God. That is why Adam and Eve hiding from God is such a heartbreaking scene in this story. The God who wanted nothing more than companionship is abandoned by creation itself. After eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve hid in the bushes in an attempt to avoid God. Whatever the historicity of this ancient story is, the message is undeniably true. God created us for relationship, and yet, we so often hide ourselves from God and others. It was so from the very beginning, and God has been trying to find us ever since.

Fact Questions

- What is the name of the garden Adam and Eve lived in?
- What did the snake tempt Adam and Eve with?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why do you think God create Adam and Eve?
- Do you ever hide from or avoid God?

Lord, find my hiding place. Call me from out of the bushes. Deliver me from my shame, and forgive me so that I can once again delight in our relationship. Help me also to receive the relationships I have with others as gifts, worthy of my time, attention, and thanksgiving. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

September 23rd

Desert Provision

Read: Exodus 16:1-18

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. Exodus 16:13-14

The Israelites were complaining that they had no food to eat in the desert. They asked Moses why he had to lead them out of Egypt so that they could die in a wasteland. Moses countered saying that their quarrel was not with him but with God. In truth, Moses might have had some questions lurking in his own heart. How was he going to feed so great a multitude of people in the desert? The answer, of course, was that he was not. It was not Moses' job to feed the people – that was God's responsibility. What Moses and the Israelites needed to do was to trust that the God who had brought them out of Egypt and into freedom could provide meals for them in the desert. The wandering band of Hebrews needed to learn to trust in God's provision.

Lo and behold, the Israelites discovered that there was just enough quail and manna in the desert to meet their needs. That didn't mean they had all they wanted. Unfortunately, the complaints of the wandering Hebrews would continue, but they would not starve in the desert. Even in a place of desolation, God provides.

Fact Questions

- Where were the people when they became hungry?
- How much manna were they to collect each day?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you grumble about unfulfilled wants?
- Do you ask God for things? If so, what are they?

Lord, I know there are too many times when I doubt your provision. Even though you have faithfully provided for all my needs, when the next challenge I must face presents itself, I begin to worry and grumble about not being able to make it through. If I can't figure a situation out, if the resources I need are not readily at hand, if the obstacles before me appear greater than my ability to overcome them, I assume I am lost. Why don't I assume that in such situations you will provide? You always have. It's true that I have plenty of limitations – left on my own I would die in the desert. But I am not alone. You are with me. And you promised to provide. Help me to trust in that provision. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

September 30th

Noah and the Ark

Read: Genesis 6:1—9:17

So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created . . . for I am sorry that I have made them.”

Genesis 6:7

God gets angry. The Gospels attest that Jesus got angry. And that anger, according to the Bible, is often directed at us. As in the time of Noah, there must be moments when God laments ever birthing us into existence. There must be times when we frustrate God, and God’s temper is loosed on us. Now, the wrath and vengeance of God has been out of vogue for quite some time. We prefer to think of God as loving, nurturing, and unfailingly gracious. That may all be true, but even the most loving of parents get furiously angry with their children from time to time. Just because parental love is enduring doesn’t mean the anger isn’t real.

We want God to conform to our desires, just as we wanted our parents to bend to our wishes when we were growing up. We want the God we have come to know through Jesus Christ to be around for our wish fulfillment, but not for our rebuke. If we want a real relationship with God, however, we must embrace all of God—God’s love, God’s mercy, and even God’s anger. Perhaps it is time for us to stop being offended by divine anger and allow ourselves to be corrected by it. Through the story of Noah, we learn that God has promised never to blot humankind from the earth again—mercy and forgiveness are God’s rainbow covenant with us—however, God still has every right to get angry with us.

Fact Questions

- How many days and nights did it rain?
- After the storm, what did Noah do to check for dry land?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why was God angry with people? Why might God be angry with us?
- How do you feel when you see a rainbow?

Lord, I don’t like thinking about your wrath, probably because I know I deserve it. I do trust that in the end your love for me wins out, but there must be times when you become deeply frustrated with me. Forgive me when I choose a caricature of you, rather than the real you. What I want more than anything else is all of you in my life—your holy love, your holy anger, and your Holy Spirit. Forgive me and fill me . . . In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

October 7th

Ruth and Naomi

Read: Ruth 1–4

But Boaz answered Ruth, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.”

Ruth 2:11

We are all familiar with the touching and heartfelt vows that Ruth spoke to her mother-in-law, Naomi, on their return to Judah: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.” Ruth didn’t speak those words to impress anyone, she simply spoke them out of love and loyalty. Ruth chose to take care of her mother-in-law instead of tending to her own needs in life. This good and selfless act became known in Judah, and Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s, heard of Ruth’s fidelity and chose to provide for both women.

Some people give to get—they make an offering, hoping to receive something in return. In fact, there is much preaching and teaching in our Christian history that asserts that the more you give, the more God will provide you. But generosity that expects something in return is false generosity. When we freely provide for others, however—when we are truly generous with all that we have—that generosity tends to inspire the generosity of others. And when the world is filled with givers, everyone will be taken care of . . . including ourselves.

Fact Questions

- From which country did Ruth come?
- Who did Ruth marry?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you give in order to receive something in return?
- Why did Ruth give everything to her mother-in-law and promise to care for her?

Lord, help me to be more selfless in my daily living. Help me to think more of others than myself. Help me to put my needs on the back burner for a moment so that I can tend to the needs of others. Help me to be more like Ruth. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

October 14th

Call of Abram

Read: Genesis 12:1–9

Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.
Genesis 12:4c

The Bible does not support the traditional American ideal of retirement. The vision of a leisurely, carefree retirement at age sixty-five or younger, when you no longer work but spend your time playing golf or bridge or shopping could not be less biblical. One cannot retire from the work of ministry. God's call on our lives is a lifetime call. Even as we draw toward what we believe to be the end of our days, God might call us to make some great, life-changing journey of faith.

This reality is actually a great blessing. At the very age when too many people begin to feel useless and forgotten, just when the joy of retirement has evolved into aged loneliness, the Spirit of God speaks to us saying, "I am not done with you yet, get up, go—we have work to do!" How joyous it is to realize that God does not discriminate based on age—we are never too old to do important, world-transforming work.

Fact Questions

- What did God ask Abraham to do?
- What did Abram build east of Bethel?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Did you ever have to leave something familiar like a school or a town?
What is a pilgrim?
- What task might God be calling you to perform?
Why did God choose you?

Lord, there are days when I long to retire from the demands that life places on me. I want a steady enough stream of income to allow me to relax and do what I want with the rest of my life. However, I quickly realize that playing by my own rules and governed by my own timetable, I lack a sense of personal fulfillment, as if I am doing nothing of particular importance. Lord, call me out of retirement, or away from my dreams of retirement, and engage me in your kingdom work. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

October 21st

Eli

Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-9

Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.
1 Samuel 3:8

Samuel was a boy when the Lord called him into service. God called one night saying, “Samuel, Samuel.” But Samuel thought Eli, the chief priest of the tabernacle, was calling him, so he got up and rushed to Eli’s side. Two more times God called the boy, in each time Samuel went to Eli saying, “You called me.” Finally, Eli perceived that the Lord God was calling Samuel, and Eli instructed the boy how to respond to this divine conversation.

God calls to us every day, and yet often we are unable to hear God’s voice. Without hearing God’s voice, we risk living our lives apart from God’s will for us. That is why it is important for us to have an Eli – someone skilled in hearing and recognizing God’s voice in our lives. Going to church, having friends who are people of faith, and getting serious about our own faith education allows us the opportunity to be both found and led by an Eli. In time, when we have become seasoned in responding to God’s invitation in our lives, we might find that we become an Eli for someone else.

Fact Questions

- What was the relationship between Samuel and Eli?
- How was Eli’s eyesight?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Who might be an Eli, a guide or mentor, for you?
- Does God speak to people today, and how?

Lord, lead me to someone who can help me to hear your voice. I need an Eli. I need someone to help me recognize your subtle nudging in my life. You know I don’t like to ask for help, but I don’t want to miss out on what you are calling me to do. I want to make the most of my life, and I am going to need some Elis to help me on my way. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

October 28th

Jacob and Esau

Read: Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1—28:9; 32:3—33:17

Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. . . . Then Esau said, “Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.”

Genesis 33:4 & 12

As Esau marched toward Jacob with four hundred armed men, Jacob must have feared for his life and the safety of his family. After having dealt so treacherously with his brother Esau, by cunningly obtaining his birthright and stealing his blessing, Jacob knew he deserved nothing more than his brother’s wrath. After years of estrangement, Jacob met Esau on the fields of the Jordan Valley—to be embraced and kissed by his brother must have seemed nothing short of miraculous.

There is something about the passage of time and the richness of God’s blessing that can heal even the deepest of wounds. Esau had been injured by his younger brother, but during the years that followed God had generously blessed Esau. With enough time and with adequate recognition of God’s goodness to us, how can we hang on to old grudges? If God blesses and forgives sinners like us, how can we withhold our blessing and forgiveness of others? Because of all the grace and mercy Esau received from God, he could not help but offer the same grace and mercy to his brother Jacob. Forgiveness is a gift we can give, because it is a gift we have received.

Fact Questions

- What color was Esau when he was born?
- How did Jacob trick Esau?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What old hurt or lingering grudge do you need to forgive and forget?
- Why did Esau forgive Jacob?

Lord, you have blessed me so abundantly and for such a long time—and I know I deserve none of it. If I, as undeserving as I am, have been blessed and forgiven by you, how can I withhold those gifts from others? I should not, but I do. Grant me the courage and the resolve to rise above past injuries and current estrangements, to offer the love, mercy, and forgiveness you have so willingly offered me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

November 4th

Joseph and His Brothers

Read: Genesis 37

Joseph's brothers said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Genesis 37:19–20

There are so many disturbing elements to this story of Joseph and his brothers. There is a father loving one son more than the others, and a son who seemingly takes pleasure in boasting of dreams of dominion over his brothers, and brothers who plot and carry out harmful actions against their younger sibling. What is most shocking is that this is the very family the Bible tells us serves as the source of God's revelation in the world. Somehow, Jacob's dysfunctional family serves as God's ambassadors to the world. This might cause even the most faithful person to question God's better judgment.

And yet, this dark and troubling story is punctuated by a few pinpricks of light. There was Reuben, who convinced the others not to kill Joseph in the hope of rescuing him later. There was Judah, who lobbied his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery instead of letting him die in a pit. And there was Joseph himself, who fostered a belief that somehow God was still in control of the whole mess. Perhaps those little pinpricks of light in the darkness are all God needs to work powerfully in our world and in our lives.

Fact Questions

- Why did Israel (Jacob) love Joseph more than any other of his children?
- Why did his brothers want to kill Joseph?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What does it mean to be jealous? How did you cope with your jealousy?
- Do you remember your dreams? Why would God speak to people in dreams?

Lord, the story of your family—a story of which we are very much a part—is a story littered with malfeasance, treachery, and sin. It is amazing you choose to work with us. There are moments when we show glimmers of what we might be, but those hopeful moments seem as fleeting as a candle in the wind. And yet, you continue to walk with us, work with us, and love us in the hope that your light might be more fully and more consistently reflected in our own living. Let just such a light shine through me today. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

November 11th

Moses and the Burning Bush

Read: Exodus 3:1–15

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.”

Exodus 3:14

God refused to be controlled. The mysteries of God would not be explored and exposed by Moses’ turning aside to thoroughly inspect a burning bush in an attempt to explain it. Pharaoh would not keep God’s people bound when God chose to set them free. God’s name would not be made known just for the mere asking of it. God simply IS, and the only appropriate response to God’s awesome presence and power is worship.

This is not a comforting reality for those of us who like to be in control. We are proud people who don’t like to be told what to do. But for Moses, an alien in a foreign land, a murderer in hiding, and an unlikely leader in the making, the proclamation that God was in control must have been somewhat liberating. God IS, Pharaoh is not. The Promised Land was Israel’s future, Egypt was not. God was in control, Moses was not.

Fact Questions

- What did God want Moses to do?
- Why was Moses told to remove his sandals?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Did Moses think he was capable to lead?
- Do you prefer to lead or follow? What does it mean to allow God to lead?

Lord, I desire to domesticate you. I want to control you. I want to craft you in an image that is pleasing to me. I want to call you by your first name. But you rightly refuse my will by refusing my arrogant requests. Thank you for putting me in my place. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN

November 18th

The Ten Commandments and the Golden Calf

Read: Exodus 20:1–21; 32:1–20

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether it is in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” . . . Aaron took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

Exodus 20:4; 32:4

The Israelites must have gotten off on a technicality. Moses was up on Mount Sinai conversing with God while the Israelites were lamenting being left alone. God was giving Moses laws to live by, while Aaron was left to manage people who feared they would die in the desert. God said, “I am the jealous type. So, don’t make idols,” while Aaron was fashioning a golden calf for the people to worship. Only through Moses’ intercession were the Israelites saved from God’s wrath.

It is a painful story: as God was giving the law, the people were already breaking it. Their only defense was that they didn’t know any better—a technicality. Once they read the stone tablets they understood their offense. Which is not to say they behaved much better . . . nor do we. We still make and worship idols, and God still does not appreciate it. We worship wealth, success, beauty, and so much more! When will we learn?

Fact Questions

- What is the first commandment?
- Who made the Golden Calf?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What is an idol? What idol do you need to grind into dust and be rid of?
- What do you think about the fact that Moses changed God’s mind? Can our prayer change God?

Lord, when it comes to the many things we worship, we cannot claim that we don’t “know” any better. The plain truth is that we just don’t “do” any better. We know your laws, we know your requests of us, we even know when we break your heart . . . but that doesn’t change our behavior all that much. Forgive us, remain with us, and keep pointing us in a better direction. In Jesus’ name, I pray.
AMEN.

November 25th

Tower of Babel

Read: Genesis 11:1–9

And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; . . . nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”
Genesis 11:6

Many Bible stories are perplexing and disturbing. We know these are stories told by ancient people who were doing their best to express their understanding of God and the world they saw around them. The story of the Tower of Babel, which many of us remember from our childhood, strains our religious sensibilities. Why, according to this story, did God need to confuse and scatter the people? What were they doing wrong? They were working together in harmony. They had a strong vision for their future. They were making impressive progress as a society. How could God be against that?

Unless, in the desire to make a name for themselves, they forgot the very purpose of their own creation. They had been created to be in relationship with God. They were not supposed to secure a place for themselves in the cosmos—they were supposed to adhere their lives to the presence of God. Independence and innovation were not to be their goals—dependence and cooperation with God were supposed to be their primary pursuit. All the progress in the world wasn't nearly as important as partnership with God. Towers fall, societies crumble, names are forgotten, but our relationship with God endures forever.

Fact Questions

- What were the people building and why?
- What did God do to the tower and the people?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why do you think God became angry with the building project?
- What is the difference between working for ourselves and working with and for God?

Lord, too often I try to make a name for myself. I suspect I do this because I do not really trust in your presence. I feel alone much of the time. I feel like a grain of sand amidst the great expanse of the cosmos. I desperately try to compensate for my smallness by doing more sizable works. However, I have this sneaking suspicion that my life and memory are ultimately bound to you . . . therefore, our partnership should be my first priority. Help me to get this straight. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

December 2nd

The Annunciation

Read: Luke 1:26–38

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:38

Mary said, “I accept.” An angel of the Lord told Mary she would become an unwed pregnant woman in a culture that often condemned such women to death. The angel didn’t say she had a choice in the matter, but Mary’s willingness to play whatever role was assigned to her is impressive all the same.

When we are given assignments, we often accept them grudgingly, and perhaps even approach them halfheartedly. Mary was given a heavy burden to carry—a daunting chore—and the hymn of praise she sings in the following chapter lets us know she embraced her role with enthusiasm and even joy.

Fact Questions

- What is the name of the angel in this story?
- What will Mary’s child be called?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What does it mean that “nothing will be impossible with God?”
- What do you know about angels?

Lord, the work you set before me often seems like a burden. And yet, I have this feeling that if I approach my duties with the right mindset, the work itself might be a blessing and a joy. Thank you for the productive work you will offer me today. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

December 9th

Joseph's Dream

Read: Matthew 1:18–25

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 1:20

It is one of the most frequently offered commands in the Bible, “Do not be afraid.” “Do not worry.” “Fear not!” It is as if God is continually speaking to children saying, “Everything will be all right, just trust me.” But we are creatures prone to worry and mistrust. And yet, we have uttered the same words to our own children countless times. When a child runs to us with tears in her eyes having skinned her knee, when our teenager experiences his first relational breakup, when the first grandparent dies—without a moment of hesitation we tell our children, “It’s all right, everything will be all right, trust me.” It is as if deep down at the very core of our being we understand and believe the deep truth God speaks to us throughout the Bible. We don’t know the why or how of it, but we can’t shake this feeling that in the end, everything will be all right. God can be trusted. We have nothing to fear.

Fact Questions

- What does the name “Emmanuel” mean?
- How did the angel of the Lord appear to Joseph?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why would Joseph be afraid to take Mary as his wife?
- Do you trust God?

Lord, I try not to show it to others, but I am a deeply fearful person. I am scared by what I know, and by that which remains unknown to me. The world you created seems a dangerous and uncertain place. Left on my own, I do not know that everything will be all right. But you do not wish me to live alone, you desire my life to be yoked to yours so that I can rest in the trust that you are in charge when I am not . . . and I can trust that with you all things will be well. Help me, please. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

December 16th

Journey to Bethlehem

Read: Luke 2:1–7

And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:7

There was no room for them in the inn. We know that part of the story. The baby Jesus was placed in a cattle trough as if it were a bassinet that first night, because there was no one willing to open their heart or home to the little family from Nazareth. Even as paying customers, the innkeeper refused to put the pregnant couple up for the night . . . what a mess to have a guest give birth in your hotel!

What we also know is that this initial exclusion foreshadows the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the beginning there was no room for Jesus at the inn, and by the end, there was no room for Jesus in the world. The powers and principalities of the world conspired to snuff Jesus out, because the world has little room for one who speaks truth and offers God's love to all. There was no room in the inn for Jesus, there was no room in the world for Jesus . . . the only question that remains is whether there is room for Jesus in us.

Fact Questions

- Who made the decree that all should be registered?
- What is a manger? Why did Mary lay her child in a manger?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- How can you make room for Jesus in your life?
- How would you feel if you were in the animal stable? What would you see, smell and feel?

Lord, I want to say "yes" to that question, but I don't know what I am in for if I do. Will life get messy for me? Will I get into trouble with the powers that be? Will I have to finally be honest with others and offer my love unreservedly? It would be so much easier to shut the door to all that uncomfortable uncertainty. But I desperately want to keep that door open. I want you in my life. I want to risk living in prophetic ways. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

December 23

Shepherds and Angels

Read: Luke 2:8–20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

Luke 2:8–9a

The shepherds were always the last to know everything. They picked up pieces of gossip and rumor now and then that they readily shared among themselves while leading their flocks across the countryside. When it came to official notifications, they were the ones last and least informed. Shepherds occupied, and occupy to this day, the lowest rung on the economic ladder. They have a job, but that job allows them no social clout whatsoever.

Therefore, angels appearing first to the shepherds to announce the birth of a king was something very unusual indeed. It was a birth announcement that put the world on notice. This new king would proclaim to the entire world that in the kingdom of God the first might be last and the last might find themselves first. Angels will appear to shepherds, and the wisest of men will bow to infants.

Fact Questions

- How did the shepherds feel when the angel stood before them?
- When the shepherds found Jesus where was he lying?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why do you think the angel announced the birth of Jesus to lowly shepherds?
- Who are the overlooked shepherds in your life?

Lord, you came to turn the world on its head. From the moment of your birth, it was clear that your values were going to be quite different from our own. To this day, we still have so much to learn. If we want to be attended by your angels, we might just have to take our place in line with your shepherds. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

December 30th

Flight to Egypt

Read: Matthew 2:13–23

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

Matthew 2:13

We often think that faith is about courageously standing our ground. When challenged, faith should be an unshakable foundation from which we will not be moved. Jesus didn't flinch when he was tested and tried, and neither should we.

We are told, however, that all creatures, ourselves included, have within us instincts that cause us to fight, as well as instincts toward flight. We seem genetically predisposed to choose between the two—sometimes it is appropriate to stand firm and other times it is best to run away. While it may fly in the face of the image of strength so many of us covet, our faith says that there may be times when fleeing is the most faithful act we can engage in. In the Bible, Abraham, Hagar, David, Elijah, Jesus, Paul, and many other faithful people encountered situations where they had to flee for their lives—and in running away, they were following God's will for them. Our faith can be about standing up for what we believe in, but it can also be about running for the hills.

Fact Questions

- How did Joseph know to flee to Egypt?
- Where did Joseph, Mary and Jesus finally make their home?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- How might we respond when people do horrible things to one another?
- When has running away been a faithful thing for you to do?

Lord, sometimes we must run away in order to save our skin. It may strike us as cowardice in the abstract, but when we come face to face with forces that threaten to destroy us, sometimes you prompt us to run for cover. Lord, this is all very confusing. Help me to know when to stand my ground, and when to head for the hills. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

January 6th

The Wise Men

Read: Matthew 2:1–12

Then Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

Matthew 2:8

According to this story, the wise men found Jesus, and Herod did not. Those who seek, find. Those who stand comfortably at a distance do not. The wise men left everything behind and followed a star, they held nothing back in their pursuit of a newborn king, and their investment was rewarded. Herod, who had evil intent, was interested in the Christ child, but unwilling to take the time to hunt for Jesus himself. We view this as good news, knowing that Herod’s interest was fueled by a desire to kill the infant. However, if Herod, like the Magi, had searched diligently for the child, perhaps he too would have returned home by a different road . . . his course forever altered.

Fact Questions

- Who was king when Jesus was born?
- What gifts did the Wise Men or Magi offer?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- If you were to give Jesus a gift, what would it be? Why?
- Are you curious about Jesus? What do you want to know about him?

Lord, often my faith is no more than a flirtation—a mere curiosity with you that I try to satisfy only when I feel I have the time to spare. I rarely go all-in in an attempt to reach out for you. Perhaps that is why my life of faith often feels barren and unsatisfied. Show me a star this year, and give me the resolve to follow it until I find you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

January 13th

David and Goliath

Read: 1 Samuel 17

David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

1 Samuel 17:26

We are told that Saul and the Israelite army were paralyzed with fear as the giant Goliath taunted them from the Philistine ranks. Goliath was huge. The Philistines’ iron swords were fearsome. For the Jewish army, the impending conflict seemed like mission impossible. However, what most saw as a daunting challenge, David saw as a wonderful opportunity. Upon seeing Goliath on the battlefield, the first thing David asked was what a man would receive if he killed Goliath. What was the reward for killing the Philistine?

So often in life, victory is claimed by people who see obstacles as opportunities for advancement. They believe that stumbling blocks are actually stepping-stones. In truth, challenges are always opportunities for growth and development. People who recognize this reality are the ones whose stories live on to inspire others.

Fact Questions

Goliath came with spear and shield. What did David come with?
What did David use to defeat Goliath?

Discussion Questions

What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
Do you ever feel you are too small for God to use?
What Goliath-sized opportunity is standing in front of you right now?

Lord, Goliath wants me to be scared. Goliath wants me to quake in my boots. Goliath wants me to take my little sling and handful of stones home in shame. I am tempted to do just that. I am scared when I think about stepping out onto the battlefield against such a formidable foe. I am afraid I will get killed. But what if staring down death is a pathway to life? What if facing down my fears is the key to my happiness? What if my battle with Goliath is the greatest opportunity I have to be all you created me to be? Give me courage to seize the opportunity in every challenge. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

January 20th

Daniel and the Lions' Den

Read: Daniel 6

Daniel continued . . . to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

Daniel 6:10

It has been said in jest that the lions could not eat Daniel because he was too big a meal for them. Daniel was too big—too full of God's Spirit—for the lions to consume him. We may not fully understand the how and why of the Daniel story, but we do know that the lions stayed away, and that Daniel was full of the Spirit of God. Daniel prayed three times a day. Daniel fasted. Daniel did not get caught up in the idolatry of his culture. Daniel is a larger than life character in the Bible, and the size and scope of his memory is directly related to his uncompromising faithfulness. The truth is, when we are full of God's Spirit and God's presence, nothing can devour us because we are already fully consumed with God.

Fact Questions

How many a times a day did Daniel pray?

Why did God send an angel to shut the lion's mouths?

Discussion Questions

What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?

Have you ever experienced God's help when you were afraid?

How many times a day do you pray?

Lord, my faith is emaciated, if I am to be completely honest. I have not gotten my fill of you . . . in fact, more often than not, I skip meals entirely. As a result I am consumed by every passing worry, anxiety, and stress. Call me back to your table where I may feast on your presence. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

January 27th

Esther

Read: Esther 4:1–17

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.
Esther 4:14

The Bible tells us that Esther was the Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus. During Ahasuerus's reign there was a plot hatched to exterminate the Jewish people from the Persian Empire. The only chance the Jews had for survival was the advocacy of Queen Esther. But no one was supposed to approach the king unless summoned. The punishment for making an unrequested advance toward the king was death—even for a queen! Therefore, for Esther to save her people, she had to risk her own life. As Esther weighed the decision before her, her uncle Mordecai encouraged her with the thought that God might have made her queen “for just such a time as this.”

There are moments in life when we have the opportunity to be advocates for someone or something important, but that advocacy could somehow put us in a difficult or unpleasant situation. We would like to help, but we worry that the personal cost might be too high for us to bear. It is in moments like those when we must consider, as Esther did, that the position we hold we have for the very purpose of that advocacy. The only reason we may be where we are is to step up and step forward in a particular moment of trial. The challenge before you might be the very reason you are where you are. You have been positioned not for comfort but to face an important challenge that can define your life and the lives of others. It might be for such a time as this that you have been placed right where you are.

Fact Questions

- Why did Mordecai tear his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes?
- What was Esther's title?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Was there a time when only you could step up to help another or “save” a bad situation?

Lord, for some reason I believe that the positions I aspire to will allow me a degree of comfort and stability. I somehow think that the more authority I acquire will allow me greater ability to chart my own course and set my own agenda. But what if the position I have been afforded is not for my benefit but for the well-being

January 27th

Esther *Continued*

of others? What if I am where I am so that I can step forward and step into a particularly challenging situation that could use my advocacy and presence? What if my position in life has been orchestrated by you for the accomplishment of your will? As unsettling a prospect as that may be . . . it lines up well with the stories of the Bible. You place people where they will be needed, not where they will be comfortable. Help me to not shrink from that important reality. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

February 3rd

Job

Read: Job 2:1-6, 38

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.”

Job 38:1–4

Hard words. That is what Job received after lamenting his misfortune. Job had been as faithful as a person could be. His devotion to goodness and to God seemed to result in a life of blessing and abundance. But then his life was shattered. His family, his home, his possessions, and even the health of his body were taken away from him for no apparent reason. In the midst of his physical suffering and his personal anguish, Job asked that age-old question of those who have ever suffered needlessly: “Why?”

God’s answer to the suffering of people who are good or evil is less than comforting. Through the story of Job, we learn that we don’t even have the right to ask the question “Why?” We best not even try to contend with God, because we cannot even begin to count ourselves as equal with God. God’s will, God’s wisdom, and God’s work in the world are simply beyond our comprehension. Whether we like it or not, we are creatures who exist for no other reason than for the pleasure and purposes of God . . . and creatures have no right to question their Creator. Our best response to the good and bad of life should sound something like Job’s response to God’s challenge: “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.” The teaching is hard but true: rather than questioning God about our life, we should simply thank God for it.

Fact Questions

- With whom did God have a conversation concerning Job? Did Job curse God?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Can suffering be avoided? Do you blame God or someone else for the disappointments of life?

Lord, I don’t like this teaching in Job. I want to be in conversation with you. I want to share my pain and frustration with you. I know I cannot claim equality with you, but I don’t want to be an insignificant creature in your cosmic creation either. Perhaps, I should be satisfied with the fact that I exist, and you exist, and

February 3rd

Job *Continued*

whatever good or ill happens in life, we share in it together. Instead of complaining about misfortune, I can spend time giving you thanks for the life I have been given. Your words can be hard, Lord, but they help me to gain much-needed perspective. Thank you. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

February 10th

Jonah and the Whale

Read: Jonah 1–4

Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who did not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Jonah 4:10–11

The story of Jonah began with God’s call for Jonah to go to Nineveh, in the hope that the people of Nineveh would repent from their evil ways. God wanted to save the great city of Nineveh from itself. God’s central act in this story, however, was an effort to save Jonah from himself. Jonah was a lost prophet. He had lost his way, his perspective, and his appreciation of God’s mercy. The story ends with Jonah wishing he were dead and God making a case for love and mercy. While we have no final response from Jonah signaling a change in his perspective, we are drawn to recognize that God has the last word . . . and there is a lingering sense that the debate will continue until God’s point is taken to heart by Jonah.

When it comes to the business of saving souls, God’s ambition is boundless. God desires to save both great and small alike. God works as relentlessly to rescue an ill-tempered prophet as a thriving metropolis—in fact, even animals don’t escape God’s interest! It is as if God will not give up until everyone in the family is saved.

Fact Questions

- Where did God send Jonah?
- How many days did Jonah spend in the belly of the fish?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Was being swallowed by the fish a good thing or a bad thing for Jonah?
- Have you ever run from an important task?

Lord, when I think about “being saved,” images of pushy and pompously pious Christians come to mind. I am put off by the idea that there is an in-group and an out-group. But what if we are all part of the out-group: prophets, population centers, and pets alike? I may not like being told I need to be saved, but I know I need saving all the same. Save me . . . save us, I pray, in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

February 17th

Wisdom of Solomon

Read: 1 Kings 3:1–28

All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

1 Kings 3:28

It is a story that is familiar to many of us: God allowed Solomon to request anything the young king wanted in life, and Solomon requested wisdom to rule the Hebrew people. Solomon could have asked for anything in the world—anything and everything he might have desired for himself—but, instead, he asked for something that would benefit others, and God enthusiastically honored Solomon’s request.

Solomon’s request was deeply pleasing to God, because Solomon thought first of others when presented with the opportunity to have whatever his heart desired. As a result, Solomon’s wisdom became legendary, and God blessed Solomon’s life beyond measure. When we put others’ needs before our own, God is pleased, and out of that pleasure flows immense blessing.

Fact Questions

- What did God tell Solomon to do?
- For what did Solomon ask?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why did Solomon suggest dividing the woman’s child in two?
- If you could have anything in the world, what would you ask for?

Lord, I don’t like to admit this . . . but I am in the habit of thinking first of myself. When I do think of others, it is only when I have carefully weighed and considered the cost to myself. This is not the way you want life to be—it is not the way I want my life to be. Grant me wisdom, for I need it dearly. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

February 24th

The Fiery Furnace

Read: Daniel 3

Nebuchadnezzar replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”

Daniel 3:25

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego got burned, figuratively, not literally. They were required to bow down to a golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had erected, and they refused. Even though they had, up until that time, been trusted advisors and administrators of the king, they got thrown into a fiery furnace as punishment. It was both cruel and unfair, like so much of life. They got burned for holding on to their faith.

However, in the furnace, they were accompanied by someone who had “the appearance of a god.” They were not alone.

There are so many times when life seems to throw us into the fire. We get burned—at work, at home, in relationships. It happens, and it hurts. But we are told throughout the Bible that we are not alone in the flames. Jesus is with us, and Jesus is well acquainted with the furnace. Jesus made it through, and he intends for us to make it through, as well!

Fact Questions

- Why did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego get thrown into the furnace?
- Who was the fourth person that appeared in the furnace?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Are you willing to disappoint others in order to be faithful to God?
- Do you remember a time when you were “getting burned,” only to discover that you were not alone?

Lord, there are times in my life when the heat gets turned up, when I get into hot water, and when it feels as if I might get burned. You do not promise me that I won’t get thrown in the furnace, but you do promise to be with me whenever flames threaten to engulf my life. Thank you for being there! In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

March 3rd

Boy Jesus in the Temple

Read: Luke 2:41–52

Jesus said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Luke 2:49

The story of Jesus in the temple as a boy is fascinating, because at one moment the account conveys an image of a child far wiser than his years, while in the next it demonstrates a youth’s careless disregard for his parents. As a boy Jesus was wise, but he was still very much a boy. From a young age we are told that Jesus appeared both human and divine. He understood that there were more expansive definitions of family than the ones traditionally held, while at the same time he callously worried his immediate family of origin.

This brief story ends with a hint of repentance. It says that after disappearing from the family caravan and causing his mother and father to frantically search Jerusalem for him, Jesus become obedient. He chose to follow the instruction of his earthly parents, and he grew in age and wisdom as well as divine and human favor. Jesus made a mistake, he needlessly frightened his parents, and he chose never to be that careless toward his family again. Jesus grew up.

Fact Questions

- For what festival did the parents of Jesus go to Jerusalem every year?
- How old was Jesus in this story?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What is the meaning of Passover and why is it still remembered?
- Have you felt that doing and acting in a mature way is part of growing? Are you there yet?

Lord, I have this image of a perfect Jesus—a Jesus who was divine from conception. Is it not possible that divinity is something he grew into . . . as you encourage us all to grow up and grow closer to you? So many aspects of faith confuse me, but imagining Jesus dealing with some of the same flaws I recognize in my own life encourages me to believe that I can learn to be more faithful too. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

March 10th

Jesus' Baptism

Read: Luke 3:21–22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.

Luke 3:21

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' baptism and heaven's pronouncement are more gradual than in the other Gospels. Matthew and Mark seem to indicate that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, the heavens were immediately torn open for all to see, and the voice of God bellowed forth for all to hear. Luke's account, however, is quieter and more personal. According to Luke, Jesus had been baptized and was off praying. Then, for a moment, it was as if the heavens opened, a dove seemed to descend, and Jesus sensed God's affirmation of his life.

There are some people for whom coming to faith is an unmistakable thunderclap experience. But for many, many others, the experience of the divine is more subtle, mistakable, and something that requires continued faith. If Jesus was entirely certain about his connection with God, if he did not have moments of doubt, if he had conclusive proof of who he was, then he is entirely unlike most human beings. If Jesus' own religious epiphany was a bit more nuanced, however, then he is a more than able guide and savior for those of us who are less than certain about most issues in heaven and on earth.

Fact Questions

- What was Jesus doing after his baptism?
- Whose voice came from heaven?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why was it important for God to affirm Jesus? When would God be most pleased with you?
- How does it feel when someone like a parent or a teacher praises you?

Lord, the great promise of our Christian faith is that you have walked the paths we walk, you have suffered the same fear and doubt and affliction that we endure, and you have grappled with the same questions and concerns that plague our own lives. Because you made your way through a life similar to ours, you have the power to lead us to a life that is similar to yours. Thank you for that gift and for your ever-present guidance. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

March 17th

The Temptation of Jesus

Read: Matthew 4:1–11

Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Matthew 4:2–3

The tempter appeared only after Jesus has fasted for forty days and forty nights, which means that the tempter might have chosen a time of particular weakness for Jesus. Can you imagine not eating for more than a month, only to be tempted by food? However, after forty days of fasting, Jesus wasn’t weak . . . he was strong. Think of the alcoholic who has been sober for forty days—day forty-one is much easier than day one. The tempter should have showed up when Jesus first entered the wilderness.

When we get serious about dealing with our addictions, our bad habits, and those private sins that are known only to us, we don’t get weaker as the days are added to our recovery—we get stronger. We are able to endure even more temptation that when we began. What is difficult for us on day one, is more manageable by day forty.

Fact Questions

- How long did Jesus fast in the desert?
- What happened after the devil left Jesus?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Why would God create wilderness places?
- Is there a little behavior or habit you wish you didn’t do? Can you work on breaking that habit?

Lord God, it almost sounds like an infomercial for a weight loss program—lose forty pounds in forty days. But it is true that the more committed we are, the longer we face our temptations the less tempting they become. Push me to face the temptations that rule my life so that I can turn leadership of my life over to you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

March 24th

Zacchaeus

Read: Luke 19:1 – 10

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Luke 19:8

When we hear the word repent we might cringe. The word conjures up images of holier than thou preachers who seem to be saying, “You better change, or else.” “You better become like us, or else.” The story of Zacchaeus is the story of one of the most disliked men in Jericho being recognized and befriended by Jesus. Thus, in that moment, Zacchaeus became the most popular man in Jericho. Jesus said, “I must stay at your house today,” and everything began to change for Zacchaeus – one gracious act of acceptance and the little tax collector’s life began to turn around. Zacchaeus repented.

However we might choose to respond to the idea of repentance, Zacchaeus responded to the invitation to turn his life around with unbridled generosity and joy. You can sense the key is his exuberance. “Look! Half my possessions, Lord. I will give to the poor!” Zacchaeus’s life had begun anew, and he leapt into it with generosity and enthusiasm. When we are lost, it is a joy to be found. When we are headed in the wrong direction, it is a blessing to have our course corrected. When we are not living as we should, it is a gift to repent.

Fact Questions

- In what town did Jesus encounter Zacchaeus?
- What kind of a tree did Zacchaeus climb?

Discussion Questions

- What part of the story is most important to you, and why?
- Is there anything you would like to change about your relationships with your family and friends?
- Is it enough to apologize for wronging someone or is it important to make amends?

Lord God, I know I am lost. I may not like someone telling me how I am headed in the wrong direction, but perhaps that is a form of defensiveness born of truth. I am not living as I should. I want to turn around. I imagine what a profound joy it would be to turn toward you. Please call me down from my perch. Invite yourself into my life so that I may be found in you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

March 31st

Mary and Martha

Read: Luke 10:38–42

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

Luke 10:40

Martha felt neglected. She had been the one who had opened her house to Jesus and his friends, she had been the one who was serving as the hostess of this event, and it looked like she would be the one to clean up the mess when the evening drew to an end. This might not have been quite so irksome if her sister Mary were helping her out, instead of doing what Martha would have preferred to do—sitting with and listening to Jesus as he taught. Martha fumed as she began to do the dishes, and she wondered if anyone noticed, let alone cared about all she was doing. She let her work and her disappointment get the best of her. In the end, we learn Jesus would have preferred to have Martha do less and enjoy the company of her guests more.

Fact Questions

- How are Mary and Martha related?
- Which of the two was “worried and distracted by many things?”

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you and why?
- What do you think Mary was doing as she “sat at the Lord’s feet?”
- Have you ever missed out on the joy of company because you were distracted or you had to go to bed?

Dear Lord, if you were to come to my home, like Martha, I would have done all I could to prepare and provide for your visit. I’d clean the house, set the table, make the meal, serve the guests, . . . and when I saw my company enjoying themselves while I slaved away, I might get annoyed. Help me to enjoy providing for others, and if I can’t, grant me the resolve to let the dishes sit for a moment while I enjoy the party I chose to host. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

April 7th

The Raising of Lazarus

Read: John 11:1–44

Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard

that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

John 11:5–6

Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, but, according to this story, Jesus intentionally refrained from going to Lazarus’s bedside when he was gravely ill. Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus’s condition was to be used for God’s glory. Apparently, Lazarus’s death was intended as a staged display of God’s power. Lazarus would die, Jesus would raise him from the dead, and God would be glorified—all according to plan!

Whatever we make of this story, there is a terrible truth we need to grapple with. Our timetables and God’s timetable are different. What we want and how God responds to those desires can be wildly divergent. We don’t control Jesus; Jesus—and God—do as they please. However, the result of divine action is always good. We cannot know when God’s Spirit will move in our lives, but we can trust that when that Spirit does move we will experience blessing beyond our wildest dreams. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus had to endure delay and death, but in the end, all three experienced resurrection.

Fact Questions

- By the time Jesus arrived, how many days had Lazarus been in the tomb?
- What did Jesus cry with a loud voice?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Who or what people need to be “unbound” today?
- What kinds of things would you ask God for? Are your needs worthy of God’s attention?

Lord God, you will do what you will do, when you want to do it. You are in charge, I am not. My job is to try to be patient, trusting that when you do move, the dead will be raised, hope will be restored, and my sadness will be replaced with joy. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

April 14th

Jesus' Triumphant Entry

Read: Mark 11:1–11

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Mark 11:8–10

This story seems to be a most imprudent display of celebration. This is the ticker-tape parade before the championship has been won, it is the victory lap before victory has been had, it is the celebratory headline printed in the paper in anticipation of an accomplishment that has not yet been achieved. The people along the road were celebrating Jesus as if he were a conquering hero, even though he had neither conquered anyone nor done anything particularly heroic. This is the kind of display of enthusiasm that most prudent people would never allow themselves to get sucked into.

Those who followed Jesus, however, were anything but prudent. They were grateful. They were hopeful. They had an unquenchable sense that Jesus represented something new and different and wonderful entering the world. They felt that they were in the presence of a Lord, a Savior, a God who would change the course of history and establish heaven on earth. Right or wrong, they decided to celebrate the presence of Jesus in their midst.

Fact Questions

- What city were Jesus and his disciples approaching?
- What did the people spread on the road?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you know anyone who is humble? Are you humble?
- When have you felt that Jesus was with you in your life?

Dear Lord, I can't remember the last time I got excited about our relationship. I am sure there was a time, but it eludes my memory. I think about the people jammed along the roadside hoping to catch a glimpse of you, or hoping that you would catch a glimpse of them, and I can't help being a bit envious. I long for that kind of enthusiastic faith, but I have chosen a more placid spirituality. And, truthfully, I am bored . . . and I am not growing. I want to catch a glimpse of you that prompts me to throw my coat on the ground, wave palm branches in the air, and shout “Hosanna!” at the top of my lungs. Please, hear my prayer. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

April 21st

Mary at the Empty Tomb

Read: John 20:11–18

Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

John 20:14b & c

We are in the hunt to know and understand how the world was created. We want to know upon what foundation the world is built. We want to know how the world works and how it runs. We look deep into the created order—into the cosmic and subatomic universe. We look into a world of neutrinos that move faster than light and unwitnessed matter that we call “dark.” We desperately want to unravel the mystery of life in this world, never fully wanting to consider that the mystery has already been revealed to us.

The veil of mystery momentarily parted when Mary encountered—or was encountered by—Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning. Mary didn’t recognize all that had taken place at first. She thought Jesus was the gardener, and she thought a body had gone missing, because up until that point she had no evidence on which to base a belief in the resurrection of the dead. However, the veil of this life was parted for a moment in time, and what was revealed was eternity—eternal love, eternal life, and eternal relationships.

Fact Questions

- Why was Mary weeping?
- What did Mary Magdalene announce to the disciples?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you think of Jesus a figure from the past or a living presence?
- Can you accept the resurrection as a mystery?

Dear Lord, I want to believe in you. I want to believe that life and love and relationships are eternal. I want to believe that when I come to my end, life is just beginning for me. But I don’t really know. And I want to know. We all want to know. We don’t like mysteries where our lives and our future hang in the balance. However, mystery is what you offer us. You offer us a glimpse of a gardener, who underneath it all, turns out to be a Savior. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

April 28th

The Road to Emmaus

Read: Luke 24:13–35

While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. . . . When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened . . . ; and he vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:15–16 & 30–31

It is an audacious claim: a country preacher, who died in the big city, appeared after his death on a lonely road that led to the town of Emmaus. What makes the story all the more remarkable—or questionable—is that the two disciples did not recognize Jesus at first. When they finally saw Jesus for who he was, he vanished from their sight.

This would be an easy story to refute, if it were not for the fact that many people have caught glimpses of Jesus over the centuries. Most of the time we don't recognize him because he comes in a form that is unexpected. A nurse speaking tenderly to a patient, a teacher offering encouragement to a struggling student, a friend consoling another friend after a loss. Jesus is just as real and just as alive as the care and connection we share with others.

Fact Questions

- How far is Emmaus from Jerusalem?
- Following what event did the two travelers recognize Jesus?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you and why?
- What is the best part of sharing a meal with the whole family?
- Would you like it if your family said a prayer before meals?

Dear Lord, I want to see you at work in the world. But sometimes the image of who I think you should be obscures my view of who you really are and where you are. Open my eyes that I can see you, and open my heart so that I can serve you in those I meet on the road. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

May 5th

Doubting Thomas

Read: John 20:19–29

But Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”
John 20:25b & c

We understand Thomas’s doubt. He needed proof like we need proof. For us, “seeing is believing,” and that was all Thomas was asking for—a little evidence. Resurrection is a wildly outlandish claim, and it strains even the most robust imaginations. This incident, however, branded Thomas forever as the doubter, an unflattering title we all could be shouldered with. Doubter can sound a little harsh, so we refer to ourselves instead as critical or practical or rational thinkers. But Jesus wants us to be called believers, so he returns. Jesus didn’t desert Thomas because of his lack of faith, and he won’t desert us in the midst of our skepticism either. And Jesus doesn’t rest until we come to believe and exclaim as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God!”

Fact Questions

- Why were the disciples locked in a room?
- How did Thomas feel?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you doubt some stories in the Bible? Is it okay to doubt or question?
- What kind of proof do you need to trust that God loves you?

Lord, if I demand proof, then what I am really looking for is knowledge, not belief. You desire us to have faith in you. You want us to trust, even when every fiber of our being is prepared to doubt. My Lord and my God, return to me, until I fully believe in you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. AMEN.

May 12th

The Good Samaritan

Read: Luke 10:25–37

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

Luke 10:33

The hero of this story is a traveling Samaritan. Samaritans were not people held in high regard by Jesus' listening audience. Hebrew priests and Levites were the people who were granted honor and respect. However, in this familiar story, we are told that the professionally religious people could not be bothered to help someone in need.

Even today most ministry is done not by professional clergy but by lay people as they engage in their daily living. A traveling businessman offers to buy lunch for someone he meets who is in need of food. A doctor takes a few extra minutes to hear about the relational heartache one of her patients is experiencing. A teacher decides to mentor a student who is struggling with challenges at home. Ministry requires a whole host of good Samaritans.

Fact Questions

- What question prefaces the story of The Good Samaritan?
- To what city was the man in the story going?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Is there someone in your life who is not a true friend? Are there still things you like about the person?
- How do you do something nice for other people?

Lord, we fail so often in life. We fail in compassion. We fail in recognition of need. We fail in our commitment to serve others. Create in us a Samaritan spirit so that no matter where we are or when we see a need, we can be moved by pity and offer assistance. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

May 19th

Peter, Do You Love Me?

Read: John 21

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” . . . After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

John 21:18–19

Peter’s story ends much like it began. Peter had been a fisherman, an outspoken disciple of Jesus Christ, and an absolute failure when he denied ever knowing his teacher. The specter of the cross seemed to bring out the worst in all the disciples as they abandoned Jesus, leaving him to face his adversaries on his own. However, Peter stands alone as the disciple who boastfully promised never to leave Jesus’ side, only to entirely disavow Jesus when the going got too rough.

Most people are familiar with this story of profound forgiveness. Jesus allowed Peter a threefold opportunity to profess his love for Jesus, thus undoing the guilt and shame of Peter’s threefold denial. What we might fail to notice is that this was also a moment of new beginning. The very last command Jesus issued to Peter in this Gospel was also the very first command extended to Jesus’ disciples: “Follow me.” The end of this Gospel points back to the very beginning. Not only does Jesus forgive Peter, he also says, “Okay Peter, let’s try this all over again . . . Start by following me.” What a joy it is to know that our Lord doesn’t only allow us to retake the tests we have failed, but Jesus is willing to review the entire course of study—from the very first lesson!

Fact Questions

- What did Peter do before he jumped out of the boat into the sea?
- What did they have for breakfast?

Discussion Questions

- What’s the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Does God provide second chances? When have you given someone a second chance?
- Will Jesus forgive you now, or do you have to “do penance” first?

Dear Lord, thank you for your willingness to forgive us when we fail, and for allowing us to start all over again with the reassurance that you are still in the lead. In your name, I pray. AMEN.

May 26th

The Wedding at Cana

Read: John 2:1 – 12

When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from... Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:9 a & 11

During a wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine. It was his first miracle as recorded in the Gospel of John. It is a curious initial miracle, because it seems something akin to a first century beer run. The keg was kicked and Jesus was called upon to make sure that the party rolled on uninterrupted.

Hard or not, this first miracle suggested that Jesus' ministry was going to take place among ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. Jesus was not only a Savior but he was also a friend, a brother, and even a wedding guest. His ministry was also going to be a ministry of celebration. Jesus' ministry was about bringing good news, and, on occasion, it was about bringing good cheer. Jesus would challenge the world, but he could also be the life of the party.

Fact Questions

- Is the best wine served first or last?
- How many stone water jars were there?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What would it be like if Jesus planned a celebration, like a wedding or a baptism?
- When does your family celebrate?

Dear Lord, you dwelled with us, as one of us. You experience joy in sorrow, celebration and solemnity. You broke up some parties well encouraging others. Just like us, there are times when you seemed – and still seem – a confusing mix of contradictions. However, you do not ask us to understand you, simply to follow you... And that invitation is reason enough to celebrate. In your name, I pray.
AMEN.

June 2nd

The Prodigal Son

Read: Luke 15:11–32

Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Luke 15:31–32

It can be very difficult to be the good child. You can feel forgotten, as attention and concern is lavished on wayward siblings. When the will is read and the estate is divided evenly between the white and black sheep of the family, being the good child doesn't appear to have any benefits.

It must have irritated the Pharisees that Jesus focused so much of his attention on sinners, tax collectors, and people of ill repute. Why didn't Jesus take note of their good deeds? Why didn't they receive applause and recognition for their efforts? Why did the wayward siblings of the house of Israel capture so much of Jesus' interest and devotion? Is there no benefit in doing what is right and good and trying to live in ways that please God? Yes. Good sons and daughters never have to endure separation from their parent. They never find themselves groveling in a pigsty. They don't die with unresolved relational issues plaguing their heart. They may not get the big homecoming party thrown in their honor, but they do get to enjoy the love and embrace of family each and every day of their lives.

Fact Questions

- How many sons did the man have?
- What did they eat to celebrate the return of the prodigal son?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- Do you believe God will forgive you for something bad you've done?
- Would it be hard for you to celebrate someone who has done a bad thing?

Lord, I try to do what is good and right, and it irks me when I see undeserving people celebrated as if they are favorite sons and daughters. It just doesn't seem fair—somehow the more faithful the person, the bigger the party should be, in my opinion. But in my bitterness, I often forget that I am blessed to know your goodness every day of my life. I have not had to endure being lost, and I have not had to live separated from your love. As I begrudge your generosity toward others, I also forget that if anyone deserves a party thrown in their honor, it is you. Please forgive me for my hardness of heart. And thank you for allowing me to live by your side. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.

June 9th

Pentecost

Read: Acts 2

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Acts 2:6

When the Spirit of God breaks into the world, people become confused. When a successful businessperson chooses to leave their lucrative job to teach at an underperforming high school, the world doesn't understand. When a gifted doctor decides to leave a prestigious hospital to start a practice in a developing country, the world doesn't understand. When someone decides to cross a line of division to enter into community with a former adversary, the world does not understand. The ways of God are bewildering to those who are steeped in the ways of the world.

When God's Spirit is at work, disparate people come together in unity, people are prompted to learn and appreciate other languages and cultures, and old divisions give way to a new and wonderfully confusing world.

Fact Questions

- Why did the disciples seem confused?
- What special ability did the Holy Spirit give the disciples?

Discussion Questions

- What's the most important part of this story for you, and why?
- What special or unique abilities has God given you?
- Have you ever sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit? What might be signs or indications of it's presence?

Dear Lord, allow your Spirit to break into my life like the rush of a violent wind. Set me on fire. Blessedly bewilder me. Shake me up so that new possibilities and opportunities might unsettle and then resettle my life according to your will. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.



☪ The Congregational Church
of New Canaan

23 Park Street
New Canaan, CT 06840
203.966.2651

godsacre.org