

# LifeCycles

Christian transformation in community

## CYCLE I

### UNIT 1

# Encountering our Story

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# LifeCycles

**A process of spiritual formation and ministry development  
being created collaboratively by the LifeCycles community**

*LifeCycles* arises out of the experience of the Episcopal dioceses of Northern Michigan, Wyoming and Nevada over the past 30+ years of work and education in the area of mutual ministry. It is enriched by the experiences of the Diocese of Vermont and other New England Dioceses through the Harvesters project and the contributions of the Episcopal Divinity School.

*LifeCycles* is a spiritual formation and ministry development process – not a program. It is being created and continues to be created – so it is constantly changing. This creation process is collaborative and involves many more people than those named here – you are invited into the creation process. Those who began this journey and continue to shepherd it are listed below.

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# LifeCycles

*UNIT 1*

## Encountering Our Story

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this unit is to help participants experience the power of our faith story through telling of personal stories, listening to scriptural stories, learning stories of the saints, and wrestling with how our faith story calls us forth to restore God's creation.

#### **Sessions**

1. *Telling Our Stories* helps participants identify the importance of story in their lives and begin to see how story shapes them and shapes the Christian community.
2. *The Community Tells Its Stories of Creation: Genesis* helps participants explore the meaning of the creation stories for themselves and the Church.
3. *Stories of Loving in John* introduces participants to different concepts of love and the ways in which love shapes Christian relationships.
4. *Being Set Free* explores the concepts of fear/imprisonment and freedom and introduces participants to modern-day saints Absalom Jones and Dorothy Day.
5. *Creating Our Story of Restorative Justice* introduces participants to the ethical concepts of justice and enables them to explore the meaning of restorative justice and its place and role in Christianity.
6. *Review and Celebrate* provides a time for group members to reflect on their learning and grow personally and as a group.

#### **Discover**

Participants are introduced to:

- *The Inclusive Hebrew Bible* (quoted in material)
- *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (quoted in material; one copy for the group may be helpful)
- *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (quoted in material; one copy for the group may be helpful)
- *Gather Comprehensive Hymnal* (copy needed for each participant if using or copyright permission needed if photocopying the selection).

# ◆ Rule of Life ◆

Participants are asked to undertake three personal spiritual disciplines which they will do between sessions as part of their rule of life. While most people will find a daily discipline helpful, others may find another rhythm more suitable. The ongoing formation of a Christian includes regular prayer, Bible reading and reflection on one's life and ministry. The three *LifeCycles* disciplines are:

**1) Read and reflect on the Scriptures.** You may choose whatever method of reading that fits your needs and desires. Some options:

- **The Daily Office Lectionary.** The *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 936-1001) or as found in *Forward Day by Day* (Forward Movement, 800-543-1813 or available online at [www.forwardmovement.org](http://www.forwardmovement.org)) or some other lectionary that schedules passages for each day. You can purchase a liturgical calendar or use a website such as <http://satucket.com/lectionary> or go to <http://www.pitts.emory.edu/trinity/preaching/lectionary.html> which lists several websites that cover both the Episcopal and the Revised Common Lectionary.
- **LifeCycles Bible Reading Schedule.** *LifeCycles* has designed a format for reading the books of the scriptures along with each Unit. These readings are NOT correlated with the session but divide the Bible and non-canonical readings into roughly equal weekly reading pieces. The fourth Cycle will suggest readings from the sacred writing of other faith groups. This reading schedule is at the end of these introductory materials, as well as available online.
- **Read the entire Bible in course.** You can just start at the beginning and read chapter by chapter as best fits your schedule or inclination.
- **Calendar or Meditation Guide.** Choose a calendar or meditation guide that includes a daily reading. Find something that includes more than just one or two verses so you have a substantive passage to "chew on" during the day and that will give you a broad exposure to most of the Bible over time.

**2) Daily Prayer.** You will experience a broad range of prayer styles if you use the prayer experience introduced in each unit.

**3) Reflecting on your relationship with God and others, your ministry in daily life** and how *LifeCycles*, your Scripture reading, prayer, etc. is impacting you by keeping a journal or other method of reflection.

## RULE OF LIFE

"While most people go through life without thinking of it, we all have a rule of life, a pattern for our days reflecting our deepest beliefs."

- What are the unconscious "rules" that order your life?
- What are the daily patterns of your life?

"It is not enough to live by an unconscious rule. For Christians, there are predictable components related to prayer and worship. A typical "bare bones" rule of life would deal with such questions as, how and when do I pray? What are my rhythms of corporate and solitary prayer? What is the place of the sacraments in my life? How often do I join in the celebration of the Eucharist? If it is a part of my tradition, how often do I avail myself of the sacrament of reconciliation?"

I think a good rule would go beyond and build upon these bare essentials, for they are essentials. It would include:"

- a commitment to the guidance and companionship of spiritual direction or spiritual friendship
- the cultivation of simplicity
- a commitment to generosity
- attention to self-care

"...The purpose of the rule is to keep us clear and attentive, to enable us to live contemplatively in the midst of activity. The temptation, of course, is to be overambitious and to set ourselves impossible goals—and then to fail. There is also the danger that the structure will become an end in itself, so that our spirituality becomes joyless, life-denying, and self-centered. Particularly in regard to "spiritual disciplines," less is frequently more. A good rule can set us free to be our true and best selves. It is a working document, a kind of spiritual budget, not carved in stone but subject to regular review and revision. It should support us, but never constrict us."

Margaret Guenther, *Toward Holy Ground*, Cowley Publications

## Your Rule of Life

Sometime during or after this first unit, set aside a session to do the session on developing a personal and, if desired, group rule of life (see Special Sessions: *Rule of Life*). Some people may already have personal spiritual disciplines that work for them. Others may choose additional disciplines beyond those recommended for *LifeCycles*. In Session Six of each unit, you are encouraged to review your rule of life and make adjustments. Sometimes those adjustments will be because you have discovered that the Rule you adopted isn't working for you. Other times it will be because you have changed and a different Rule is now more appropriate. Still other times, life will have changed! Do not assume that the rule of life you adopt at this stage in your life is the one you keep forever – or that not keeping to your disciplines is failure. A rule of life is something you review regularly – it is a way to take a “temperature check” on your well-being as a Christian and you make adjustments as needed.

If you are cycling through the *LifeCycles* sessions a second or third + time, you will, undoubtedly, already have developed a rule of life years ago and be quite experienced with using it. You might still want to revisit the rule of life session, this time choosing to go deeper by doing some in depth research on a rule of life and talking about adopting a broader Rule or talk about how you can engage your partner/family in a corporate rule of life. If this is a special passion for you or your group, consider reading one of the following:

- *Rule of Society of St. John the Divine*, Cowley Publications
- *Rule of St. Benedict* (several versions available)
- *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* by [Joan D. Chittister](#), Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series
- *A Mother's Rule of Life: How to Bring Order to Your Home and Peace to Your Soul* by Holly Pierlot (by a Roman Catholic mother...who makes it practical)
- Check out websites of various monastic communities, the national church and some dioceses and parishes which have information about a rule of life:
  - [www.spiritualityhealth.com/newsh/items/article/item\\_2893.html](http://www.spiritualityhealth.com/newsh/items/article/item_2893.html)
  - [www.westtexasonline.org/spiritlife/liferules.htm](http://www.westtexasonline.org/spiritlife/liferules.htm)
  - <http://stpaulsparish.org/RuleOfLife.html>
  - [www.episcopalchurch.org/20966\\_49140\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/20966_49140_ENG_HTM.htm)

You might also consider using *Living in Community* (LeaderResources), an adult education program that leads a group through a study of Benedictine spirituality and the Rule of St. Benedict as it applies to the life of today's Christian.

## Pre-session Preparation

In the beginning of each unit in Cycle I, this overview will include *Tools of the Trade* – information, skills or suggestions related to your scripture reading – and *Spiritual Formation* – the prayer experience used in that unit. In addition, there are short (1-2 page) content pieces within each session outline that participants will read between sessions. These will be identified by the group at the end of the prior session.

It is important that both leader(s) and ALL participants prepare before each session. The impact of *LifeCycles* is significantly altered without the regular preparation for sessions and the daily Scripture reading, prayer and reflection. One of the goals of *LifeCycles* is to form small Christian communities that support individuals in their personal and spiritual growth. This requires more than just showing up for a session!

This introduction also includes *Leadership Skills* – suggestions for how the group leaders can practice and improve their skills and *Technical Skills* which will provide help with the use of technology. In Cycle III the introduction will add *Christian Practices* – ways in which groups of

Christians form their corporate lives and grow in faith as a community. Also, the content pieces in Cycle II and III will gradually increase in length and depth.

Your group will need to decide how to use this introductory material. Many groups have, after considerable experience, learned to set aside an entire session just to review the introduction – to talk about and practices the various skills that are introduced here. This provides a time for people to ask questions and to learn a skill they might not be familiar with. Group members and the group’s Companion are encouraged to help each other in learning and practicing the skills. It is especially important that the group be a safe place where people can try new skills without worrying about being embarrassed or upset if it doesn’t go well. ....that’s one of the functions of a small group where the contract is that we all learn together.

## ◆ Tools of the Trade ◆

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### **The Bible Story**

Sometime during this first unit, perhaps even before you begin, we recommend that you spend a day (or at least an afternoon) doing an overview of the entire Biblical story. Before you panic, we think there are ways you can do this that can be fun and might even involve the entire congregation. Set a time – e.g., Sunday afternoon or Saturday 10-4 with lunch. Post broad categories (Pentateuch, Kings, Early Prophets, etc.) and let people select a team which will then quickly tell the key story or stories in that category. Encourage them to make it fun and interesting. Give each team about an hour to prepare and then do a quick run through the Bible. Most people have never gotten this kind of broad overview.

Here are some suggestions you might use to do this. It is probably best to organize this by having the stories featured in order of their appearance in the Bible.

Remember that the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) portray God as a covenant-making God, as one willing to bind God’s self to God’s people. Each covenant was made through verbal oath or symbolic action (sign). The Torah (first five books) describe three primary covenants:

- God’s unconditional covenant with Noah that “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9). The rainbow was the sign of this covenant.
- God’s unconditional promise to give Abraham and his descendants the Promised Land (Genesis 15 and 17). Male circumcision was the primary sign of this covenant.
- The conditional covenant between God and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-20) with the expectation that people would “keep God’s laws” in exchange for which God promises to be their God.

You will want to make sure you identify and tell the stories of these covenants.

You may want to remind people about how the Biblical story was shaped and the fact that the early stories were carried for hundreds of years by oral tradition. Since the Hebrew Scriptures repeat the same stories several times from different perspectives, consider how a story is formed and becomes part of our history and understanding of reality.

- Something happens
- People reflect on the event and draw significance from it;
- People repeat and repeat again the story in a way that reflects the significance of the event for them

- The story finds expression in liturgy, ballad, poetry, drama, music
- The story becomes central to world view and formalized beliefs

Because of this process, you will encounter several stories that are repeated. If you are going in order of appearance, you might just have someone pop up and remind people that this story happened before and is repeated here.

Here are some of the “headline” events you might highlight in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- Stories of beginnings and the concept of a “chosen people” in relationship with God are established (Genesis);
- God orchestrates the Exodus—perhaps the most pivotal event of Hebrew History (Exodus);
- God institutes the Sinai covenant, which established the identity-forming world view of the Jews (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy);
- the Hebrew people settle in Canaan (Joshua and Judges);
- they are ruled by judges (Judges); then by
- three great kings—Saul, David and Solomon (1 and 2 Samuel-1 Kings 11);
- the nation is divided into two parts and prophets reflect on the implications (1 Kings 12 through 2 Kings 17, Amos and Jeremiah);
- Jerusalem falls (for the first time) and the people are exiled (2 Kings and 2 Chronicles);
- they return from exile to partial restoration (Ezra and Nehemiah);
- they hope for a political messiah (Daniel) and full restoration in the future.

The Christian Scriptures were also formed out of stories told before being written—albeit for a much shorter period of time. The Christian story was formed and told in this way:

- the “core narrative” (story of Christ’s death and resurrection) was told at every celebration of the Eucharist and during Holy Week/Easter
- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and some of Paul’s Epistles expand the core narrative:
  - they establish Jesus’ lineage to King David (required for him to be “the Messiah”)
  - they describe how he was baptized and confirmed by God as “my beloved son”
  - after forty days of fasting in the wilderness (preparation for his public ministry), he was tempted by Satan and was victorious
  - Jesus launches a ministry of teaching (stories and parables), healing and miracles
  - his teachings challenge civic and religious leaders
  - he is arrested, tried and crucified
  - he rises from the dead
  - he appears to his disciples, who were transformed from a scattered group of followers into a people who proclaimed God’s new relationship with humanity with power and conviction; the disciples become “a people” – the Christian community
  - Christ ascends into heaven
  - the disciples spread the word; the Holy Spirit is powerfully given at Pentecost
  - deacons are selected and Stephen is stoned to death
  - Paul persecutes Christians, then is converted and joins in spreading the word in three missionary journeys before he is arrested and put in prison

- The later Epistles (e.g., 12 and 3 John, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter) demonstrate how the core narrative grew more formalized in creeds and show the Christian community becoming more organized
- Liturgy and songs (e.g., Songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon in Luke; Songs to the Lamb and of the Redeemed in Revelation) become part of the sacred story and the liturgical life of the church
- A vision of the future takes shape (Hebrews and Revelation of John).



From *The Doubleday Pocket Bible Guide*, with thanks to Joe Russell who first developed this schema.

### **Time Line**

Sometime during the first couple of units, your group will need to establish a way to build a time line to help you keep track of what is happening when. You can, of course, purchase one. But it is more fun and you will learn more if you build it as you go. We encourage you to find a roll of fairly heavy white plastic (8-12 feet, depending on the wall on which you might post it) that you can write on. Put a horizontal line the entire length, about a third of the way from the bottom. Put date markers along the line, using a standard Biblical time line. Below the line you can write non-Biblical and non-church events (Egyptian pharaohs, the Iron Age, World War II, etc.). Above the line write Biblical and church-related history as you discover it along the way. You might think about using different colored markers – e.g., one color for significant events, another for people, another for things (e.g., when a book of the Bible was recorded) and so on.

Post this time line in your meeting room. After it starts getting filled in, you might want to keep it up or at least display it occasionally for the rest of the church to see. Time lines can be interesting to create and a subtle teaching tool you can share with others.

## ◆ Spiritual Formation ◆

### **Prayer Experience: Daily Devotions**

Each participant is encouraged to adopt a daily prayer discipline. Some may find some other pattern works for them, but most people find a regular schedule to be most helpful. Each unit will introduce a different prayer experience which you are invited to “try out” during the six sessions of that unit. It takes at least that long to become familiar with a particular prayer experience. Over time, you will encounter most of the generally used ways to pray. Some may be familiar or immediately comfortable. Others may feel strange and uncomfortable. Some will work for you and some will not. The purpose of this experience is to help you identify which ways of praying best suit you at this point in your life (recognizing that this may change over

time). It also will give you a wide range of prayer experiences you can use with your family, a small group, your congregation or in other settings. The Christian tradition and other faith groups have an abundance of ways to pray but most Christians never encounter them. One of the goals of *LifeCycles* is to give people an opportunity to experience a broad spectrum of what is available.

This first unit begins with the basics – a short, simple prayer “service” designed for individuals or families. These daily devotions, which follow the same structure as Morning and Evening Prayer (which we will discuss further in Unit 2), can be found on pages 137-140 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Pick the one that fits the time of day you have chosen for your prayer time. If you are uncertain about when that might be, this is a good time to move it around a bit and see what seems to fit into your schedule best. You need a time that you can count on being available on a fairly regular basis. And you need a place where you can put your Prayer Book and Bible. Consider adding a candle or maybe an icon, a cross or something else to serve as a focal point. If you are living with others, select a place where you will be undisturbed and/or let others know that you will need a certain amount of solitude. Some of you may be doing *LifeCycles* as couples or may want to include your family. In this case, discuss these choices with everyone who will be participating.

The *Daily Devotions* section begins with a page of rubrics [ROO-bricks]. You will also find additional rubrics in italics in the services here and throughout the *Book of Common Prayer*. Read the rubrics on page 136 and within the service you selected. Notice that some rubrics are permissive; they use the word *may*. They generally offer you options or suggest what you could do at that point. Others are directive – they are written to communicate that the Celebrant *says* this or *does* that. For example, in the Eucharist (p. 365), “*A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung.*” makes it clear that you *may* start the service with a hymn – but it isn’t an essential part of the service. On the other hand, “*the Celebrant says*” indicates that this is what *will be said*. The salutation is the way we start the service. The collect at the bottom of that page is optional, but the collect at the top of page 357 is not.

<p><i>Rubrics</i> are directions that provide guidance on how to do things.</p>
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You will notice that all the rubrics in the *Daily Devotions* are permissive. They give you suggestions but you do not need to accept all or even any of them. If your time is short, you might read the opening Psalm, the reading, pause for your personal prayers and then end with the Lord’s Prayer and collect. If you have more time or want to explore more options, you can try some of the suggestions in the rubrics.

You may choose to read your Scripture passages during this time or at a separate time. If you read them during your prayer time and you are reading the Bible “in course” (book by book) you may want to divide the book you are reading into sections. Your Bible may have convenient headings that break it into logical pieces or you can simply read a few chapters at a time. You can read it meditatively – read and then stop and reflect on what you read, replay the story in your mind or recall words, phrases or concepts that caught your attention. Or you can engage the Scriptures more fully by using a commentary or a Bible with extensive notes that enable you to learn more about the passage as you read it. Some people may want to do both – meditative reading during their prayer time and studying at another time. In the beginning, you may want to try different times and ways of reading the Scriptures until you find one that seems to work best

for you. The goal is to establish some pattern of daily Scripture reading, as it is by God's word that we are nourished.

## ◆ Leadership Skills ◆

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### Leadership Skill: Inclusion

Please read the section on Inclusion Methods in *Promoting Good Listening and Conversation*. During this unit and the rest of this cycle, we encourage the group leaders and participants to make a special effort to use these and other methods to ensure that all group members have a chance to speak, are heard and included in the group's process. Remember, you are practicing these skills here so you can use them in the congregation – and in your family, on your job, etc. – in the future. Try a method to see how it works. During the sixth session, talk about which methods would work in different situations you encounter in daily life. Some are more appropriate to certain types of groups, settings or topics. Others work pretty well with all groups. The goal is to experiment in a safe environment – your *LifeCycles* group – before you use them in another context. Also, a method that might originally feel “uncomfortable” can become more useful once it is familiar.

In addition to using *inclusion methods* it is important to develop *inclusion sensitivity*. Every good leader is somehow consciously or unconsciously aware of who is being included and who is being excluded. The methods help you ensure inclusion. But it is also important to develop a sensitivity to who is being excluded. During the session, draw back a bit and observe the group's dynamics. Do you notice someone who is being excluded? Someone who always seems to be interrupted or who starts speaking but is consistently “drowned out” by my eager contributors? Is there someone who speaks, but the rest of the group seems to just be waiting until he or she takes a breath before they move on to the next thing – hearing but not really listening to the person? Is there someone who always seems to command a great deal of attention – someone who has more power and authority than the others? How does the group honor its' quieter, less assertive members? How does it honor its' assertive members without letting them dominate?

Take time to practice inclusion sensitivity in other settings – your home, job or in the congregation. How are children treated? Older people? Secretaries, custodians or other service staff? A new employee or church member? You don't necessarily need to do anything now. Just observe and hone your abilities to notice and become aware of who is included and who is excluded – and how the group includes and excludes others. As you develop this sensitivity, you will be in a better position to act in ways that helps ensure that everyone is appropriately included.

# Cycle I Scripture readings **TORAH and GOSPELS**

## **Unit 1**

**Genesis (50 chapters, 55 pages)**

Session:

1. 1- 10
2. 11- 18:15
3. 18:16- 24
4. 25- 34
5. 35- 40
6. 41- 50

**Matthew (28 chapters, 38 pages)**

1. 1- 4
2. 5- 9
3. 10- 14
4. 15- 18
5. 19- 23
6. 24- 28

## **Unit 2**

**Exodus (40 chapters, 44 pages)**

Session:

1. 1- 5:21
2. 5:22 - 11
3. 12- 17
4. 18- 28
5. 29- 33
6. 34- 40

**Mark (16 chapters, 23 pp.);**

1. Mark 1- 3
2. 4 - 6
3. 7 - 9
4. 10 - 12
5. 12 - 14
6. 15 - 16

## **Unit 3**

**Leviticus (27 chapters, 33 pages)**

Session:

1. 1- 5
2. 6 - 10
3. 21- 15
4. 16 -19
5. 20 - 23
6. 24 - 27

**Luke (25 chapters, 41 pp.)**

1. 1- 4
2. 5 -9
3. 10 - 13
4. 14 - 17
5. 18 -21
6. 22 - 25

## **Unit 4**

**Numbers (36 chapters, 46 pages)**

Session:

1. Numbers 1 – 6
2. 7 – 12
3. 13 – 18
4. 19 – 25
5. 26 – 30
6. 31 – 36

**John (21 chapters, 29 pp.)**

1. John 1 – 4
2. 5 – 8
3. 9 – 12
4. 13 – 15
5. 16 - 18
6. 19 - 21

## **Unit 5**

**Deuteronomy (34 chapters, 41 pp.)**

Session:

1. 1 – 7
2. 6 – 16
3. 17 - 22
4. 23 – 27
5. 28 – 31
6. 32 – 34

**Gospel of Thomas ( the sayings of Jesus – 114)**

1. 1 -12
2. 13 – 24
3. 25 – 30
4. 31 – 36
5. 37 – 43
6. 44 - 54

## **Unit 6**

**Gospel of Thomas (continued)**

Session:

1. Thomas 55 – 64
2. 65 – 74
3. 75 – 84
4. 85 – 94
5. 95 – 104
6. 105 – 114

**Acts of the Apostles ( 28 chapters, 36 pp.)**

1. Acts 1 - 5
2. 6 - 10
3. 11 - 15
4. 16 - 20
5. 21 - 24
6. 25 - 28



# LifeCycles

## UNIT 1

## Encountering Our Story

### SESSION 1

# Telling Our Stories

**Purpose:** To help participants identify the importance of story in their lives and begin to see how story shapes them and shapes the Christian community

**Skills:** Learn how to participate in, lead and use Guided Meditation

**Discover:** New translation—*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures*

#### **Before this Session**

**Telling the Story** (below)

**Daily Scripture reading:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140)

#### **Materials Needed:**

- Magazine pictures if you are using the last activity
- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- The name, address, phone numbers and e-mail address of each participant (check for accuracy during Housekeeping)
- The candle, bowl, bread, salt, flower, etc. that you have chosen as your symbols
- Copies of the hymnal or hymn(s) (Note: If you choose to photocopy music you must have a license to do so or obtain copyright permission from the publisher before doing so.)<sup>1</sup>
- Copies of the *Guidelines for Promoting Good Listening and Conversation*. The group needs to agree to these guidelines as the basis for group discussion for the moment; you will review them at the end of the unit after you've had some experience with them
- A notebook for use as a journal (unless your group will not be doing that until Unit 2)

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<sup>1</sup> A license to reproduce many common songs is available from Christian Copyright Licensing, Inc., 17201 NE Sacramento St., Portland, OR 97230 (1-800-234-2446; email [support@ccli.com](mailto:support@ccli.com).) The license fee is based on congregational size and budget. To obtain permission to photocopy hymns from the *Hymnal 1982* or *Wonder, Love and Praise* send a fax or email to Church Publishing, Inc. (212-779-3392; [churchpublishing@cpg.org](mailto:churchpublishing@cpg.org)) at least three weeks prior to the date you plan to use the music.

# GATHERING

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Leader: We gather in the name of Christ.

All: *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

## Centering

The song leader may lead the group in the singing of a simple verse, or more, of a hymn or song. Below are three suggestions.

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Wonder Love and Praise* 831

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Gather Comprehensive* 408

“Dona nobis pacem,” *Hymnal* 712

## Praying

Prayer Leader:

As we spend these sessions encountering our story, we will experience together a form of prayer that draws upon a repeated refrain to help us settle quietly into Christ’s presence. Please find a comfortable position in which to sit – with your feet flat on the floor, hands laying gently on your lap, eyes closed. Listen with your heart as we move through the meditation. When we are finished, you will be invited to slowly open your eyes.

## Meditation

Be still and know that I am God.

(Leave about 20 seconds of silence for meditation.)

Be still and know that I am.

(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

Be still and know.

(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

Be still.

(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

Be.

(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

If you are unfamiliar with this type of meditation, use your watch! The most common problem new leaders encounter is that the silence feels like it is much longer than it actually is. If you estimate the time, you are likely to move after five seconds (or less!) because it will *feel like* 20 seconds!

Prayer Leader:

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.

(*Wait quietly until everyone’s eyes are open.*)

Let us pray together Psalm 46.

The leader begins with the first line; the group joins in on the second line.

1 God is our refuge and our strength  
*who from of old has helped us in our distress.*

2 *Therefore we fear nothing—  
 even if the earth should open up in front of us  
 and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea,*

3 *even if the earth's waters rage and foam  
 and the mountains tumble with its heaving.*

4 *There's a river whose streams gladden the city of God,  
 the holy dwelling of the Most High.*

5 *God is in its midst;  
 it will never fall—  
 God will help it at daybreak.*

6 *Though nations are in turmoil and empires crumble,  
 God's voice resounds, and it melts the earth.*

7 *Adonai Sabaoth is with us—  
 our stronghold is the God of Israel!*

8 *Come, see what Our God has done—  
 God makes the earth bounteous!*

9 *God has put an end to war,  
 from one end of the earth to the other,  
 breaking bows, splintering spears,  
 and setting chariots on fire.*

10 *"Be still, and know that I am God!  
 I will be exalted among the nations;  
 I will be exalted upon the earth."*

11 *Adonai Sabaoth is with us;  
 our stronghold is the God of Israel!*

Praying a Psalm is different from reading it for comprehension. Read it prayerfully, in an even tone without the expressiveness one would use to make a story captivating to the hearers. Join together in prayer rather than reading it to each other.

(AD-oh-nai SAB-ay-oth)

*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures. Volume III: The Writings*

Prayer Leader: Call us to you, Jesus  
 All: like Martha from her kitchen,  
 like Zacchaeus [Za-KEE-uhs] from the tree,  
 to hear and to do your will. Amen.

*A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612*

### Check-in

- Who is missing?
- Who will contact those who are missing?

The session leader initiates check-in using Mutual Invitation or another method that encourages full participation by all group members (see *Promoting Good Listening and Conversation*).

Check-in is a time for each group member to *briefly* say one or two things about his/her life, state of being, etc. The purpose of this time is to enable people to “let go of” whatever they may bring to the session with them, to alert group members to anything that might impact that member’s participation in this session and/or to share significant information. Examples of what might be said:

- “Had a great week but it was *really* hectic so I’m feeling distracted and tired tonight.”
- “I’ve been reading Job and I’m starting to feel like Job! Don’t know if this is a case of psychosomatic illness — read it and imagine you have it, or if it is just putting me in touch with how much is going wrong in my life right now.”
- “I just had an argument before showing up tonight so if you think I’m angry.....I am....but it has nothing to do with this group. I may just be a bit quieter than usual until I get over this!”
- “I just want everyone to know that my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer this week. I’m so glad I have you to pray for her and me.....I know I’m going to need your support in the days and weeks ahead.”

For the leader, the trick is to encourage people to be open and honest about where they are while discouraging them from making this last much more than five minutes total. The group needs to help manage this time as well as the leader. Very occasionally the group may need to respond to a concern a group member raises....e.g., if someone brings up something upsetting from the last session the group may want to pause and address that. Or if someone is going through an especially difficult time (e.g., death, partner walked out on them, child ran away, etc.) it would be appropriate to stop, discuss it a bit and offer prayers before going on.

### **About this first session**

Before you begin the first session, check to make sure each participant understands *LifeCycles* and has read or is given a copy of the overview, *About LifeCycles*. Review what will happen in each session and, if you have not already done so, decide on a meeting schedule. Spend some time establishing initial group norms (See *About LifeCycles*).

[If the group has many questions, needs significant time to review the *LifeCycles* program or needs more time to develop group norms, this may be as far as you go in the first meeting. If so, go to *Sending Forth* and finish the session. Return to this session the next time you meet.]

### **Boxes, little boxes...**

You will notice these boxes throughout the program. They do several things. They:

- Ask questions
  - Provide a balancing view to the main text
  - Provide pronunciations and definitions
  - Tell you about the people or topics in the text
- Use the boxes for your personal learning or reflection. Use them for group discussion.

You may want to know that many of these boxes are designed to keep you from being embarrassed or, alternatively, to make you look good!! This is especially true if you are talking with someone who likes to use technical terms and refers to names of, let’s say, major theologians. If you read the boxes and learn the concepts, definitions and people introduced to you there, you should be able to hold your own with the average seminary trained person. Don’t be intimidated by such persons – remember that we often tend to bluff or refer to things we vaguely remember from our seminary days but we often don’t know all that much about Bonhoffer’s theology or hermeneutics or panentheism, either!!

The boxes are here to “add to” the core materials – so you can ignore the boxes, agree that they will only be read by individuals as desired, etc. Some groups, however, discover that occasionally a box becomes an entire session. So, use the boxes in whatever way works best for your group.

# *TELLING THE STORY*

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## **Telling Our Stories**

There are many ways to begin telling our stories. Choose one or two from the suggestions below. It may be that your group finds itself wanting to spend more time telling their personal stories than is possible in a single session. In this case, it may be helpful and wise to spend an additional session telling our stories by using some of the explorations not used the first time around. This is especially helpful if your group members do not know each other well and do not have a close relationship with one another. The following suggestions are ways your group may wish to tell their stories:

Who first told you about God being a refuge in times of distress, and what did they tell you?

### **Activity: Chapters of Our Life Story**

Think about your life as a kind of story that has been unfolding in different stages over the years. It is common for stories to have chapters. Each chapter often has a title or heading, which describes the chapter's contents. If you were to imagine your life as a story still unfolding, how might you describe the chapters of your life, say, at the ages of 5, 10, 16, 21, 30, 40, 50, 65? Take about 10 minutes to write down what your chapter headings might be for these different ages in your life. Let your final chapter heading be a description of where you see your story being today. When you've finished writing your chapter headings, share them with each other.

OR

### **Activity: Our Home's Center of Warmth**

When we think back through the various homes we lived in – as children or adults – we generally can identify the center of warmth. It is the place where we have “warm memories.” It also can be a place that is literally warm, such as a cozy fireplace or warm kitchen. Where was the center of warmth in your home as a child? Where is the center of warmth in your home now or in favorite homes you've lived in over the years? What makes it a center of warmth for you? Have you consciously (or unconsciously) created centers of warmth?

OR

### **Activity: Story through Photo Language**

Sometimes images or photos can help us say more about our life's story than is possible through words alone. Scatter some magazine pictures and/or photos on a table. (They should vary widely in type and subject matter.) Invite participants to study the pictures quietly with this question in mind: “Which pictures/photos best capture how I felt or experienced myself as a child, a teenager, a young adult, etc.?” When everyone has chosen, invite people to share their stories.

## ***BREAKING BREAD***

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A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

# SENDING FORTH

## So What?

The group takes a few minutes for each person and the group as a whole to reflect on what difference this session, your conversation, reading or reflection makes. OK, so you've had this experience....so what? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do differently tomorrow? How are you going to be different?

How do you carry out Christ's ministry in the church and in the world?

## Housekeeping

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session:

- session leader(s)
- prayer leader(s)
- music leader(s)
- hospitality
- other

The leader begins with the first line; the group joins in on the second line.

## Preparing

The session leader reviews the daily scripture reading and prayer experience. From this point on, participants will be asked to read a portion of scripture between sessions.

- The scripture reading of your choice.
- For the prayer experience, use any of the Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140). Take a minute to point out the introduction that describes the spiritual disciplines and perhaps to look up the Daily Devotions so people can skim them and ask any questions they might have.
- Point out the *Telling the Story* in the next session to be read before the next meeting.

Encourage everyone to begin at least one or two of the daily spiritual disciplines — reading a scripture passage and/or prayer in particular. Explain that in Unit 2 we will be adding the discipline of reflection (e.g., writing in a journal) but, if they prefer, they can start that now.

For the next session, the prayer leader may ask someone to prepare a prayer during the week — such as the creation collect from Easter Vigil (printed in the next session or found on p. 288 of the BCP), or *The Creation* story written in the next session — as a dramatic reading/presentation for the group. Or, the group may pray the story with each person reading a paragraph. Or, the group may act out the parts.

## Praying

The prayer leader invites the group to center itself in silence and then respond as desired to the question: For whom or what would you like to pray as we go forth to celebrate and serve the reign of God this week? (Pause — so people can name their thanksgivings, petitions and concerns, silently or, preferably, aloud.)

Groups may wish to adopt the more formal "bidding" format in which one says: "I ask your prayers for..." or "I ask your thanksgiving for..." Or you may want to be more informal and just say, "Please pray for Jim" or even just "For Jim." Some may want to offer their petitions in silence. The purpose of this time is both to pray for these concerns and to make conscious commitment to remember these concerns in one's daily prayers during the week. Over time the group will develop its own rhythm of recalling these concerns.

The prayer leader leads the group in praying the following Canticle in unison.

## A Song of Wisdom

*Sapientia liberavit*

*Wisdom 10:15-19, 20b-21*

Wisdom freed from a nation of oppressors \*  
*a holy people and a blameless race.*  
*She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord, \**  
*withstood dread rulers with wonders and signs.*  
*To the saints she gave the reward of their labors, \**  
*and led them by a marvelous way;*  
*She was their shelter by day \**  
*and a blaze of stars by night.*  
*She brought them across the Red Sea, \**  
*she led them through mighty waters;*  
*But their enemies she swallowed in the waves \**  
*and spewed them out from the depths of the abyss.*  
*And then, Lord, the righteous sang hymns to your Name, \**  
*and praised with one voice your protecting hand;*  
*For Wisdom opened the mouths of the mute, \**  
*and gave speech to the tongues of a new-born people.*

The leader begins with the first line; the group joins in on the second line.

## Closing Song

If the group enjoys singing, the song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Alleluia! Sing to Jesus!,” *Hymnal* 460, 461

“Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain,” *Hymnal* 199, 200

“In Christ there is a Table Set for All,” *Gather Comprehensive* 749

“What Wondrous Love is This,” *Hymnal* 439

“Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” *Hymnal* 618

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve Christ in all of life.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost  
*Alleluia. Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.



# LifeCycles

UNIT 1

## Encountering Our Story

### SESSION 2

## Stories of Creation: Genesis

**Purpose:** To help participants explore the meaning of the Creation stories for themselves and the Church

**Skills:** Learn how to participate in, lead and use Guided Meditation

**Discover:** New translation—*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures*

### **Before this Session**

**Telling the Story:** Read *Telling the Story* (following)

**Scripture to be read:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140)

### **Materials Needed:**

- Name tags (unless you are certain that everyone knows everyone else and has this information)
- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- Bibles and any hymns/song book you will be using

## GATHERING

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**Leader:** We gather in the name of Christ.

**All:** *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

### **Centering**

The song leader may lead the group in the singing of a simple verse, or more, of a hymn or song. Below are three suggestions.

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Wonder Love and Praise* 831

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Gather Comprehensive* 408

“Dona nobis pacem,” *Hymnal* 712

## Praying

Prayer Leader:

Please find a comfortable position in which to sit – feet flat on the floor, hands laying gently on your lap, eyes closed. Listen with your heart as we move through the meditation. When we are finished, you will be invited to open your eyes slowly.

## Meditation

“And God saw that the light was good.” (Genesis 1:4)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence for meditation.)

“God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together God called Seas. And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:10)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

“The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:12)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

“God made the two great lights. . . God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth. . . . And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:16, 17, 18)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

”So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind. . . . And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1: 21)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

“God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind. And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:25) (Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

“So God created humankind in his image. . . . And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:27, 31)  
(Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

“And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and rested. . .” (Gen. 2:2) (Leave about 20 seconds of silence.)

Prayer Leader:

Now you may open your eyes. (*Wait quietly until everyone’s eyes are open.*)

Let us pray together Psalm 36 from the Easter Vigil beginning with the fifth verse.

5 Your love, Adonai, reaches to the heavens (AD-oh-ni)  
*your faithfulness to the skies.*

6 *Your justice is like the mountains in their splendor,  
Your judgments like the great deep.  
Whether human or animal, Adonai,  
you keep us all in your care.*

7 *How precious is your love!  
Whether creatures of heaven or children of earth,  
we all find refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

8 *We feast on the bounty of your estate,  
and drink from the stream of your delights.*

9 *In you is the wellspring of Life,  
and in your light we become enlightened.*

10 *Prolong your love for those who know you,  
and your justice for upright hearts.*

*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures, Volume III: The Writings*

Prayer Leader: Call us to you, Jesus  
All: like Martha from her kitchen,  
like Zacchaeus from the tree, (Za-KEE-uhs)  
to hear and to do your will. Amen.

*A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612*

### **Check-in**

- Who is missing?
- Who will contact those who are missing?

The session leader initiates check-in using Mutual Invitation or another method that encourages full participation by all group members (see *Guidelines*). Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak but that no one speaks no more than about 30 seconds. Reflection is appropriate on your rule of life disciplines and, if you did it by now, on your Biblical Overview session.

## ***TELLING THE STORY***

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### **Genesis: The Community Tells Its Stories of Creation**

*Some groups have found it helpful to read this on their own and have the leader start the session with a brief summary before discussing it; other groups have found it helpful to read it aloud before discussing it.*

Question(s) or comment(s) from your personal reading:

Part of what makes the Hebrew people's stories of creation so amazing is that they felt called to write them down during their time of exile and captivity in Babylon – six hundred years after the Exodus. Here we have a nation driven from its promised homeland in humiliating defeat – people slaughtered, homes destroyed, a way of life lost. It is this vanquished people that audaciously claims, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that all creation has come from the hands of God and all is good. Despite appearances, the people stake their claim, their hope, that God the Creator is their God. In the face of annihilation, the people dare to write a story of beginnings. Their life as a people, or genesis, although ancient, has in many ways just begun. Out of the Babylonian chaos and darkness which threatens to consume them, they tell of a God who is in fact creating something both new and good. In the midst of death, the people sing through their writing of Genesis, “we are in life – no earthly king can rob us of this.”

There is the old gospel hymn, “This is my story, This is my song.” We tell and sing our stories to remind us who we are. The more we tell the story, the more it shapes us. Our stories remind us of what we treasure, as well as what we fear. Our stories hold our past struggles as lessons from which we draw wise guidance to handle present dangers.

Genesis is our story and our song. These ancient accounts of creation remind us of some of the more profound truths of our faith – truths without which we become lost in life. One of these truths is that God is a good Creator – One who takes delight in the divine handiwork. Genesis never pulls back from the claim that God can be trusted even when all else may point to the contrary. Not only can we trust God, we can trust what we learn from creation and its beauty, because it belongs to God. Creation is not a pretty disguise hiding a different god who is plotting against us or who uses the universe to toy with our suffering. The story of Genesis never lets us forget that God has seen creation and “it” is good – we are good! This goodness, and God's love of creation, does not depend on what we do.

Goodness is a gift – the result of being created by a good God. For the Hebrews in Babylon, this story of faith flowed from their hearts as a river of hope in a desert of deflating loss. They could rest their lives upon

What is the story of your birth, and how do you think God was present?

Read Genesis 1 to 2:25. Notice that there are two stories of creation:

- Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a (the first chapter plus verses one to the first half of verse four of chapter two)
- Genesis 2:4b - 25 (the second half of the fourth verse through the 25<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter two)

In the first story:

- God is called *Elohim* and is presented as a majestic transcendent being whose mere word creates the world
- The focus is on “creating”
- Water is present and must be restrained
- Creation is an orderly process
- Animals are created before people
- Humanity are “male and female” and are made in the “image and likeness” of God which exalts humanity and sets them apart from animals

In the second story

- God is called *Yahweh* and is directly involved in creation (forms clay; breathes into)
- The focus is on “forming”
- The earth is a desert and water must be brought to it
- Creation seems to happen as it goes with God getting it a bit out of order (e.g., animals are created as partners before God realizes they are not suitable and amends the creation by adding the woman)
- Man is created before animals
- Humanity are “male and woman” and are fragile, dependent beings who together with animals are “living beings” vs. made in the image and likeness of God (first story)

These differences in language and style suggest two different traditions or sources for the two creation stories. The fact that two stories are preserved helps us understand that even in ancient times there was not a single, literal explanation for a truth or an event.

[NOTE: The practice of looking for the underlying sources of a document is an academic technique called “source criticism.” You will learn more about source criticism in Cycle II, Unit 1, Introduction.]

this story of creation, trusting that God would indeed carry them through the present dangers to a new place – a place of new beginnings for a weary people.

The creation accounts reveal the most profound truths about who God is and who we are – all through the use of poetry and story, rather than literal or scientific language. Another word for this kind of story is myth. Myth, in this sense, has the power to reveal truth where ordinary language would fail. Genesis is not a mathematical equation or a chemical formula for creation. Genesis is a celebration whose stories are a song of praise to the Creator. A scientific or literal truth would be too small, too confining for this celebration of God’s handiwork. The seven days speak not of seven 24-hour periods, but to something on a much grander scale – God’s unswerving and constant devotion to creating all that exists in our rhythm of day and night. The truth that the Hebrews in exile need to be reminded of again and again, as do we, is that absolutely nothing can separate us from our Creator (to draw upon the much later words of Paul).

We return over and over again to the story of Genesis, because it has that power of story to reach down into our trembling and fearful hearts and hold our attention – especially when we are lost and suffering. Whenever we find ourselves in exile – torn away from the home and the friends we love – Genesis sings out to remind us we are God’s and God longs to carry us home. Through the myth of Genesis, God can continually reach into our hearts wherever we are and create life and hope in the midst of death and despair.

### **Group Activities:**

*Below, you will find suggested ways to engage the stories of Genesis. Choose one of these ways or create your own. After engaging with the stories, use the questions for group reflection.*

#### ***Collective Telling of Creation “Story” from Group Memory***

Tell as much of the creation “story” from memory as you can. You may wish to use “Mutual Invitation” and have each person offer a line or two of the story and then invite another person to continue. Or you can just go around the circle with each person adding a line or two (remembering that in both methods anyone can “pass” for any reason). Once the “story” is finished, each member of the group responds to the question: What stands out most in the story for you?

**OR**

#### ***Public Group Reading of the Two Stories of Creation*** (1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25)

The group reads aloud the two stories of creation in Genesis. After reading the two stories, the group considers:

- What did we forget in our own original retelling?
- What did we add?
- How do the two stories differ?

#### **Questions for group reflection**

- What difference does it make in our own lives to know and tell these Genesis stories?
- What truth(s) do these Genesis stories tell you about God? About creation? About human beings?

- What are some of the “truths” we have been taught to believe are revealed in these stories?
  - Do you disagree with some of these “truths”?
  - Do you think some of these “truths” are not true?
- Why do you think there are two stories? Does their order make a difference? What if their order were reversed?
- What might it mean that God is singular or plural in the stories?
- What might it mean for human beings to have “dominion”? Can there be dominion without domination?
- When God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” to whom does “our” refer? God alone? God and the rest of creation? What difference might it make who we understand “our” to mean?
- How have these stories shaped your understanding of the appropriate relationship between women and men?

Resources: *In Our Image: God's First Creatures*, Nancy Sohn Swartz

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## ***BREAKING BREAD***

A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

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## ***SENDING FORTH***

### **So What?**

The group takes a few minutes for each person and the group as a whole to reflect on what difference this session, your conversation, reading or reflection makes. OK, so you’ve had this experience....so what? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do differently tomorrow? How are you going to be different?

How do you carry out Christ's ministry in the church and in the world?

### **Housekeeping**

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session:

- session leader(s)
- prayer leader(s)
- music leader(s)
- hospitality
- other

### **Preparing**

The session leader reviews the daily scripture reading and prayer experience.

- The scripture reading of your choice.
- For the prayer experience, use any of the Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140).
- Point out the *Telling the Story* in the next session to be read before the next meeting.

Ask the participants to bring a CD or tape next week of a song and/or a copy of (or title of) a poem which expresses best for them the meaning of love.

The prayer leader for Session Two reads through the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42, which is to be used as the guided meditation for the next session) several times and becomes very familiar with it; this includes following up the reading with their efforts to pray themselves into the story. They need to carefully study the steps for the meditation in the next session, so that they have a good feel for the rhythm and timing of the guided meditation.

### **Praying**

The prayer leader invites the group to center itself in silence and then respond as desired to the question: For whom or what would you like to pray as we go forth to celebrate and serve the reign of God this week? (Pause – so people can name their concerns, silently or aloud.)

The prayer leader may choose a prayer – such as the creation collect from Easter Vigil listed below, or *The Creation* story on the next page. Someone may have prepared this beforehand as a dramatic reading/presentation for the group. The group may pray the story with each person reading a paragraph. Or, the group may act out the parts.

The prayer leader closes with this prayer:

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

### **Singing**

If the group enjoys singing, the song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Alleluia! Sing to Jesus!,” *Hymnal* 460, 461

“Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain,” *Hymnal* 199, 200

“In Christ there is a Table Set for All,” *Gather Comprehensive* 749

“What Wondrous Love is This,” *Hymnal* 439

“Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” *Hymnal* 618

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve Christ in all of life.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost  
*Alleluia. Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.

# The Creation

by James Weldon Johnson; adapted by Kevin L. Thew Forrester

And God stepped out on space. And looked around and said: ‘I’m lonely . . . I think I’ll make me a world.’ And far as the eye of God could see, darkness covered everything. Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. Then God smiled and the light broke, and the darkness rolled up on one side, and the light stood shining on the other, and God said, ‘That’s good.’

Then God reached and took the light in Her hands. And She rolled the light around and around until the sun was made. And She set that sun a-blazing in the heavens. And the light that was left from making the sun God gathered it up in a shining ball and flung it against the darkness, spangling the night with moon and stars. Then down between the darkness and the light—She hurled the world. And God said: ‘That’s good.’

Then God stepped down . . . and the sun was on Her right hand, and the moon on Her left. The stars were clustered about Her head. And the earth was under Her feet. And God walked. And where She trod Her footsteps hollowed the valleys out and bulged the mountains up.

Then God stopped and saw that the earth was hot and barren. So She stepped over to the edge of the world and God spat out the seven seas . . . Her eyes batted, and the lightning flashed . . . Her hands clapped, and the thunder rolled . . . And the waters above the earth came down, the cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted, and the little red flowers blossomed, the pine tree pointed its finger to the sky, and the oak spread out its arms, the lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground, and the rivers ran down to the sea; and God smiled again, and the rainbow appeared, and curled itself around Her shoulder.

Then God’s hand waved over the sea and over the land, and She said: ‘Bring forth, bring forth.’ And quicker than Her hand could drop, fishes and fowls and beasts and birds swam the rivers and seas, roamed the forests and the woods, and split the air with their wings, and God said: ‘That’s good!’

Then God walked around, and God looked around on all of creation. She looked at Her sun, and She looked at Her moon. And God looked at the little stars; God looked on the world with all its living things, and said: ‘I’m lonely still.’

Then God sat down on the side of a hill to think. By a deep, wide river She sat down. With head in hands, God thought and thought, till She thought, ‘I’ll make me a human child.’

Up from the bed of the river, God scooped the clay; and by the bank of the river, She kneeled down; and there the great God Almighty—Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, and rounded the earth; this great God—like a mother bending over her baby—kneeled down in the dust, toiling over a lump of clay ‘til She shaped it into Her own image; then into it She blew the breath of life. And the human child became a living soul.



# LifeCycles

UNIT 1

## Encountering Our Story

### SESSION 3

## Stories of Loving in John

**Purpose:** To introduce participants to different concepts of love and how they shape Christian relationships

**Skills:** Learn how to participate in, lead and use Guided Meditation  
Learn about different ways to lead the Psalms

**Discover:** New translation—*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures*

#### **Before this Session**

**Read *Telling the Story***

**Daily Scripture Reading:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140)

#### **Materials Needed:**

- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- A sound system, if needed to listen to songs participants bring
- Bibles and hymnals or songbooks you may be using

## ***GATHERING***

**Leader:** We gather in the name of Christ.

**All:** *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

#### **Centering**

The song leader may lead the group in the singing of a simple verse, or more, of a hymn or song such as:

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Wonder Love and Praise* 831

“Ubi caritas et amor,” *Gather Comprehensive* 408

“Dona nobis pacem,” *Hymnal* 712

## Praying

Prayer Leader: Today we will be meditating on a scripture story, but not in the traditional Bible study sense. Instead, we will go back in time and enter the story as players. It will be read twice, and everyone is invited to take a particular character's role. Let the story wash over you; think about your reactions and feelings as the drama unfolds. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Have I ever experienced something like this before?
- If so, where and what was it like?

After the reading of the story, you'll have a few moments to replay the story in your mind.

If there are no questions about the meditation, find a comfortable position in which to sit – with your feet flat on the floor, hands laying gently on your lap, eyes closed. When we are finished, you will be invited to open their eyes slowly.

### Guided meditation

Prayer Leader begins the guided meditation reading of Luke 10:38-42.

*If you go too quickly, you will lose people; if you go too slowly, their concentration may break. You will need to follow along with the meditation in your own mind in order to estimate how much time may be needed. And you will need to carefully observe those engaged in the meditation, as they will give clear signs if they are frustrated or if their attention is beginning to wander.*

- Slowly read aloud the story of Mary and Martha. Pause.
- Read the story aloud, slowly, a second time. Pause. Ask:
  - Can you smell the scent of cooking in the house? [Pause briefly.]
  - How many people are there? [Pause again.]
  - Is it hot or cold? [Pause.]
  - Is it morning, afternoon, evening, or night? [Pause.]
  - What are people wearing? What are YOU wearing? [Pause.]
  - Look around you; what else do you notice? [Pause.]
- Next, invite the group into absolute silence while they slowly replay the story being the character they chose and being aware of what they are experiencing and how they are feeling.
- Remain in silence for several minutes (3-4 minutes; less if people get restless).
- After several minutes have passed (and especially if you can see several of them getting restless), suggest that they come to the end of their meditation, bringing the story to a close, and then sitting in silence for a moment or two. All remain quiet until everyone has come back to full awareness.

Prayer Leader:

Now you may slowly open your eyes. (*Wait quietly until everyone's eyes are open.*)

Let us pray Psalm 136 responsively with the group responding to each acclamation with "Your love is everlasting!"

1 Thank you Adonai, for you are good!

*Your love is everlasting!*

(AD-oh-nai)

A guided meditation is a story, Scripture passage, poem, song or saying that is told in stages or, if it is short, in phrases. The silence between sentences or phrases enables the hearers to meditate on the passage, letting the words sink into their hearts. This method is also called "praying the Scriptures" and/or "imaginative visualization".

- 2 Thank you, God of gods!  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 3 Thank you, sovereign of sovereigns,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 4 you alone perform such great marvels.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 5 Your wisdom made the heavens.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 6 You spread the land out over the waters.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 7 You made the great lights:  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 8 the sun to govern the day,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 9 moon and stars to govern the night.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 10 You struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 11 and brought Israel out.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 12 With mighty hand and outstretched arm,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 13 you split the Sea of Reeds,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 14 and led Israel through the middle,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 15 and drowned Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 16 You led your people through the wilderness,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 17 and struck down mighty rulers.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 18 You cut down famous leaders,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 19 like Sihon, ruler of the Amorites, (SIGH-hon; AM-uh-rites)  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 20 and Og, ruler of Bashan. (BAY-shuhn)  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 21 You gave their land as an inheritance,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 22 an inheritance to Israel, your faithful one.  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 23 You remembered us when we were under the yoke,  
*Your love is everlasting!*
- 24 and snatched us from our oppressors.  
*Your love is everlasting!*

Psalms can be said or sung in unison (also known as direct recitation), responsively or antiphonally (an-TIH-fun-al-ee). In a responsive reading, the leader reads the odd verses and the congregation the even verses. Antiphonal readings are verse-by-verse alternation between groups of readers—e.g., one side of the congregation and the other, the choir and congregation or men and women.

An asterisk is provided in the *Book of Common Prayer* and especially in monastic to divide each verse into two parts. Most monastic communities and some congregations observe a distinct pause at the asterisk (rather difficult for a group that does not pray the Psalms together daily as the timing is tricky). But in any case, the verse is read in full, rather than “switching sides” at the asterisk. The exception to this is when the poetry lends itself to repetitive chant and you want to read the Psalm more as a dramatic reading than as an ordinary Psalm. Psalm 136 probably is the best example of this where one group chants “Your love is everlasting!” in response to the leader or the other group. In most cases, however, it is best to keep the verses intact as written. See p. 583 in the *Book of Common Prayer* for more information.

*The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures, Volume III: The Writings*

Prayer Leader: Call us to you, Jesus  
All: like Martha from her kitchen,  
like Zacchaeus from the tree,  
to hear and to do your will. Amen.

(Za-KEE-uhs)

*A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612*

### **Check-in**

- Who is missing?
- Who will contact those who are missing?

The session leader initiates check-in using Mutual Invitation or another method that encourages full participation by all group members (see *Guidelines*). Make sure everyone has a chance to participate while still keeping this segment short enough so you have time to engage the topic. Reflection is appropriate on your rule of life disciplines and, if you did it by now, on your Biblical Overview session.

## ***TELLING THE STORY***

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### **Our Stories and Songs about Loving**

Choose one or more of the following, or do a mixture of them with each person offering a song, movie, poem, novel/story, etc. as they choose.

Did you experience the story of Mary and Martha in a different way through guided meditation, as compared to hearing it read in a service or reading it yourself?

The leader will guide participants in sharing the following:

#### ***Songs***

Listen as a group to the songs of love you were invited to bring. Identify a song which expresses best for you the meaning of love, and describes the kind of love you find expressed in it.

#### ***Movies***

Recall or write down the name of a movie which expresses best for you the meaning of love. Take turns identifying your movies, describing the kind of love you find expressed in it.

#### ***Poems***

Read your poem and describe the kind of love you find expressed in it.

#### ***Novel/Story***

Recall or write down the title of a novel or story which expresses best for you the meaning of love. Take turns identifying your novels/stories, describing the kind of love you find expressed in it.

#### ***Relationships***

Identify a time in your life when you have felt “beloved.” Describe this experience.

#### ***Role Models***

Identify the first person in your life you saw as a loving human being. What about that person was loving?

## Stories of Loving in John

### Reading: Kinds of Love

*Some groups have found it helpful to read this on their own and have the leader start the session with a brief summary before discussing it; other groups have found it helpful to read it aloud before discussing it.*

Question(s) or comment(s) from your personal reading:

Our songs, movies, poems, stories, relationships and role models all remind us of the diverse ways love is expressed in our lives. This diversity is nothing new. In fact, the ancient Greeks and Romans had some fairly clear descriptions of the kinds of love we experience as human beings throughout our lives. The biblical writers were also aware of this varied landscape of love. As we continue our study of “Stories of Love in John,” it might be helpful to describe some of the different kinds of love we will come across.

*Agapé* (ah-GA-pay) is a Greek word for love, and it may well have first been used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (called the Septuagint (SEP-too-a-jint)). *Agapé* occurs only twice in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24:12 and Luke 11:42). It is used much more often in John’s Gospel, as well as in the letters of Paul and those attributed to John. We find *agapé* being used to describe God – “God is love” (1 John 4:16), as well as Jesus’ love for God – “I love Abba God” (John 14:31). In John’s Gospel, *agapé* occupies the center of Christian life – “love one another” (John 15:12). Paul also draws on *agapé* to characterize Christian relationships – “Love is patient, love is kind...” (1 Corinthians 13:4). *Agapé* even comes to describe the meal early Christians shared with one another (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In all these instances, some theologians argue, *agapé* speaks to a kind of love that does not have the sensual overtones usually associated with eros. *Agapé* is a love based on a reasoning attachment to another, constituted by a deliberate choice of, and respect and reverence for that other, i.e. God and one’s neighbor. Our English word, “charity,” is indirectly derived from *agapé*. The Romans translated *agapé* into their Latin tongue with the word *caritas* (CAR-ee-tahs). The English people eventually came to speak of this *caritas* in terms of charity (compassionate love)

The Latin language offers five different terms for the word love providing different variations to convey love’s many meanings. The five terms are: amor, affectus, dilectio, amicitia and caritas.

**Amor** is an attraction or a pull in any way; the force of being driven or pulled together.

**Affectus** refers to the movement of sensibilities and affections. Affection for another person grows over time.

**Dilectio** is when we choose to bestow love on another person.

**Amicitia** introduces a note of mutuality and also implies the strong bond of friendship and reciprocated love.

**Caritas** is God’s love – a fire of his own nature – so fierce that it generates another person, and continues to generate a Third. Caritas is the inner life, the perpetual action of the Trinity. Caritas names God’s own principal activity - the embrace of the good and true.

Adapted from: “Why Believe in Religion?”  
Planet Papers, 27 July 2004  
<http://www.planetpapers.com/Assets/4883.php>

which evolved into being used as “a charity” (an organization that acts out compassionate love) or charitable acts.

*Storge*, (STORE gay) is familial love. It is a strong bond of affection between people in a family unit. *Storge* might also be called the love of the familiar. Our family members (often including pets) are familiar to us; the affection we have for them is nurtured by the fact that they are around us regularly and often don’t require more than being around them. We often feel this love most acutely when the familiar person is gone — moved away, on a trip or died.

*Eros* (AIR-ohs) accentuates the sensuous dimension of love, reminding us that we are incarnate beings and that our creative energy is inextricably connected with our bodies. Perhaps the most well-known expression of erotic love in the Scriptures is found in the Hebrew Scriptures’ poem, Song of Songs. What is so remarkable about the erotic love of Song of Songs is its incorporation in the Bible. The implication is that this erotic human story also reveals something to us about who the God of love is. *Eros* and *agapé* may not be that far apart after all. We mentioned above that some theologians see *agapé* as quite distinct from *eros*. On the other hand, others argue that *eros* and *agapé* are actually the same, claiming that *agapé* is *eros*. (You might want to take a look at *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, by Phyllis Trible, 144-165 and Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, p. 210.)

What is one way you've encountered Christ or the Sacred since the last *LifeCycles* gathering?

*Philia* (FIL-ee-ah) comes from the Greek word, *philos* (meaning friend), and is love between friends. Friendship lies at the heart of John’s vision of life in God. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus does not consider us either slaves or servants, but as friends: “I no longer speak of you as subordinates, because a subordinate doesn’t know a superior’s business. Instead I call you friends (*philos*), because I have made known to you everything I learned from Abba God” (John 15:15). The same root is found in *philanthropia* (humanitarianism) from which we take our word “philanthropy” and philanthropist (one who seeks to help others, especially by donating money to charities or good causes).

Any concrete and specific expression of love embodies a mix of *agapé*, *eros*, *storge* and *philia*. For example, in Luke 7:36-38, the woman’s tears fall upon Jesus’ feet and then she proceeds to dry his feet with her hair, kiss them, and anoint them with oil. This thoroughly sensuous and tender act of love is at once *eros*, *philia*, *storge* and *agapé*. Jesus is deeply moved and weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus – sorrow and tears of both *agapé* and *philia* (John 11:33-38).

Often in our history, Christianity has sought to separate and rank these kinds of love: *agapé*, *storge*, *philia*, and *eros*. *Agapé* usually has been seen as the purest and *eros* the least pure form of love. We might be wiser to recognize the goodness of all forms of love, and seek simply to become more aware of the wondrous richness of love expressed in our lives. The question is not which form of love is better, but which expression(s) of love is most appropriate in nurturing, healing, and enjoying our relationships with one another in Christ. We also might find it worth our while to wonder if there are other kinds of love we experience in our lives, different from these. What are they? How might they relate to *eros*, *agapé*, *storge* and *philia*?

### **Group Activity: A “Jigsaw” Reading of a Story of Love**

A “jigsaw” reading involves asking members of the group to read the different parts of the story. Each participant takes a character or part. After the story has been told, take some time in quiet to identify for yourself the kinds of love you see expressed in the story. Then share your discoveries. If you have time, you might read two or three of the stories below.

- Woman at the Well (John 4:1-26)
- Lazarus (John 11:1-45)
- Washing of the Feet (John 13:1-20)
- Jesus’ Words to Mary (John 19:17-30)
- Feed my Lambs (John 21:15-19)

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## ***BREAKING BREAD***

A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

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## ***SENDING FORTH***

### **So What?**

The group takes a few minutes for each person and the group as a whole to reflect on what difference this session, your conversation, reading or reflection makes. OK, so you’ve had this experience....so what? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do differently tomorrow? How are you going to be different?

How do you carry out Christ’s ministry in the church and in the world?
--

### **Housekeeping**

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session:

- session leader(s)
- prayer leader(s)
- music leader(s)
- hospitality
- other

### **Preparing**

The session leader reviews the daily scripture reading and prayer experience:

- The scripture reading of your choice
- For the prayer experience, use any of the Daily Devotions (BCP, p. 136-140).
- Point out the *Telling the Story* in the next session to be read before the next meeting.

Check who can supply materials needed for the next session:

- Art supplies, paper and markers/pens, clay, etc.
- Bibles or copies of the passage if you do the “Jigsaw” exercise
- Equipment for viewing either *Armistad* and/or *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story* (Paulist Press), if you choose to view one of them
- Copies of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* and *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* if you choose to include this

### **Praying**

The prayer leader invites the group to center itself in silence and then respond as desired to the question: For whom or what would you like to pray as we go forth to celebrate and serve the reign of God this week? (Pause – so people can name their concerns, silently or aloud.)

The prayer leader may choose a prayer such as the Canticle, “A Song of Christ’s Goodness.”

## **A Song of Christ’s Goodness**

*Anselm of Canterbury*

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you; \*  
*you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.*  
Often you weep over our sins and our pride, \*  
*tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.*  
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds, \*  
*in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.*  
Jesus, by your dying, we are born to new life; \*  
*by your anguish and labor we come forth in joy.*  
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness; \*  
*through your gentleness, we find comfort in fear.*  
Your warmth gives life to the dead, \*  
*your touch makes sinners righteous.*  
Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us; \*  
*in your love and tenderness, remake us.*  
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness, \*  
*for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) was a noted theologian, monk and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Notice that he uses the feminine imagery in this selection – something we often think of as a recent “feminist” innovation. This practice, however, is quite ancient and has been used by Christians over the centuries.

### **Singing**

If the group enjoys singing, the song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Cantemos al Señor,” (based on Psalm 19), *Gather Comprehensive* 553  
“Ubi Caritas,” *Wonder Love and Praise* 831  
“Where Charity and Love Prevail,” *Hymnal* 581  
“Here I am Lord,” *Gather Comprehensive* 686  
“Jesu, Jesu,” *Hymnal* 602  
“Pescador de hombres,” *Wonder Love and Praise* 758  
“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” *Hymnal* 469, 470  
“What Wondrous Love is This,” *Hymnal* 439

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve Christ in all of life.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost  
*Alleluia. Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.

NOTE Session 4-6 of Year 1, Unit 1 are not included. The sample pages continue with Sessions 3-6 from Year 2, Unit 3. By comparing the two you will be able to see the increased complexity in content and process.

The first year begins slowly with minimal reading in order to maximize community building and the establishment of trust, confidence, skills and good norms for group work. Subsequent years assume this groundwork and an increased commitment to the process/group so provide increased amounts of reading and more challenging materials.

Over time, sessions will acquire additional materials either at the end of the session (as in this sample) or in books or other resources that can enhance an individual member's learning or may be attractive to a group that wishes to go "off track" to explore a specific topic in greater depth.



# LifeCycles

## UNIT 4 Washed & Renewed

### Session 4 Betrothed to Christ, Set Free to Reform: Teresa of Avila

**Purpose:** To explore introduce participants to Teresa of Avila as a model of a mystic who becomes a reformer.

**Practice:** Understand and use power

#### **Before this Session**

**Background Reading:** *Telling the Story* (below)

**Daily Scripture reading:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:**

Materials Needed:

- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- Symbol(s) for the center of your meeting table
- Copies of the hymnal, songbook, CD or tape player used in this session
- Personal journals of each participant (for reference during reflection time)

### ***GATHERING***

**Leader:** We gather in the name of Christ.

**All:** *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

#### **Centering**

The song leader may choose a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Nada te turbe,” *Gather Comprehensive* 639

“Be Not Afraid,” *Wonder, Love, and Praise* 811

## Praying

Prayer Leader:

Find a comfortable position in which to sit – with your feet flat on the floor, hands lying gently on your lap, eyes closed. When we are finished, you will be invited to open your eyes slowly.

To begin our time of meditation, which will last ten minutes, I will read a brief passage from Teresa of Avila. Teresa describes the soul's relationship with God as two lovers gazing. Let this image draw the attention of your heart, mind, and body. Center yourself with this image. May the lovers gaze draw you into an awareness of God's abiding presence.

## Lovers Gazing

God and the soul understand each other...It's like the experience of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance, it seems, they understand each other....[T]hese two lovers gaze directly at each other, as the Bridegroom says to the Bride in the Song of Songs.

O my Jesus, who could explain the benefit that lies in throwing ourselves into the arms of this Lord of ours and making an agreement with His Majesty that *I look at my Beloved, and my Beloved looks at me.*

*Life 27:10 and Meditations on the Song of Songs,*  
found in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Writings*, 156-157

Prayer Leader: Let us rest silently, in the presence of our God.

Prayer Leader: Let us pray together:  
*All: Let nothing disturb you,*  
*Nothing dismay you.*  
*All things are passing,*  
*God never changes.*  
*Patient endurance*  
*Attains all things...*  
*God alone suffices. Amen.*

Teresa's bookmark

)

## Check-in

- Who is missing?
- Who will contact those who are missing?

The leader initiates check-in using a method that encourages full participation by all group members (see *Guidelines*). Reflection is appropriate on your rule of life disciplines and on your learning plan.

# TELLING THE STORY

## Betrothed to Christ, Set Free to Reform: Teresa of Avila

### Repeated Question

Participants are asked to pair-off and stand facing each other, just a few feet apart. Each of the pairs decides who is “A” and who is “B”. “B” begins by asking “A” Question 1 below. After “A” has responded, “B” says “thank you,” and simply repeats the question. “A” again responds (however short or long “A” chooses to make the answer) and “B” says “thank you.” “A” may take as much time as desired before responding, which means there may be quiet pauses. The question is repeated for 5 minutes, and then the roles are reversed.

The exercise enables two persons to stand, face-to-face, and gently explore more fully one’s heart and mind with each repeat of the question. The listener’s role is to hold the other in her/his gaze and affirm the response without any judgment.

Question: How do you experience God’s presence in you?

### Reading

*Participants read the following before the session. If desired, the leader may briefly summarize this or invite the group to quickly identify the key points before moving the group into discussion using the discussion questions and/or activity at the end of the reading.*

Your question(s) or comment(s) to raise in the session:

## Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) – Feast Day, October 15

*God leads souls by many paths and ways.  
I want to speak now of the way He led my soul.  
There is no reason why we should expect everyone else to travel by our own road,  
and we should not attempt to point them to the spiritual path  
when perhaps we do not know what it is.*

Teresa of Avila  
*The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, The Book of Her Life,*  
Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Chapter. 22  
*The Interior Castle, 69*

We find these words of Teresa of Avila in both her earliest book – her *Autobiography* – as well as her later and greatest work, *The Interior Castle*. They reveal a mystic, a prioress, and a teacher whose early years give very little hint of a woman later set free as an egalitarian reformer.

A prioress (PRI or ess) is the nun in charge of a convent.

“Mysticism from the Greek  $\mu\upsilon\omicron$  (*muo*, "concealed") is the pursuit of achieving communion or identity with God through direct experience, intuition, or insight; and the belief that such experience is an important source of knowledge or understanding. **Mystics** generally hold that there is a deeper, more fundamental state of existence hidden beneath the appearances of day-to-day living (which may become, to the mystic, superficial or epiphenomenal). For the mystic, the hidden state is the focus, and may be perceived in any of various ways — as God, ultimate reality, a universal presence, a force or principle, psychological emancipation — and be experienced or realized directly. (excerpt from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism>) Mystics believe that God can be experienced directly and focus their prayer on that experience.

## 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spain: A World of Dominating Hierarchies

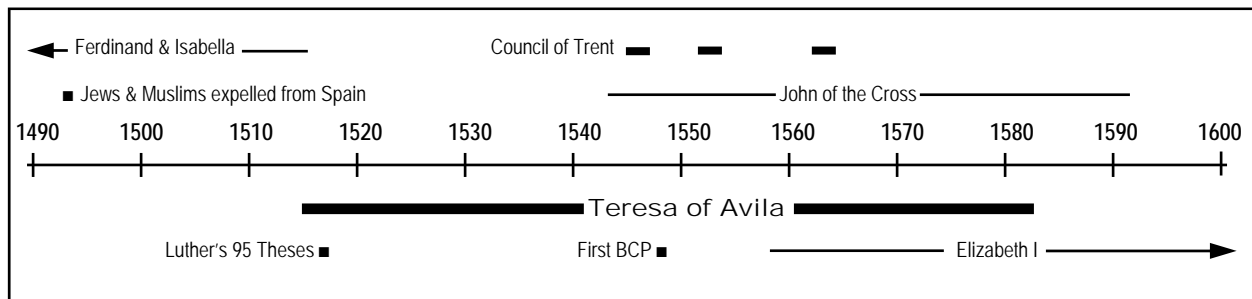
### A Jewish Family Tree

It is fair to say that Teresa was born in Avila because of the abuse, if not persecution, her grandfather, Juan Sanchez, and her father had endured in Toledo – embarrassing information suppressed by earlier biographers which only became public in the 1940s. Juan Sanchez, a *converso*, a person who “converted” to Christianity from Judaism,

had been a wealthy *converso* merchant and tax farmer in Toledo. In 1485 the Inquisition of Toledo prosecuted him as a *judaizante*, a secret practitioner of Jewish customs. He was found guilty and sentenced to walk along with his children in penitential processions to Toledo’s churches on seven consecutive Fridays.

After this public humiliation, Juan Sanchez moved his family to Avila where he began the slow task of rebuilding his family’s honor. He established a “rich shop of woolens and silks” and eventually was granted such status as a gentleman that he was exempt from taxes. But in truth, everyone still knew that Juan Sanchez was a *converso* and never could be fully accepted as one of them – Christian from birth.

To be a *converso* (cən VER sō) was to be always second-class and held with some suspicion because a *converso* family often mixed together Jewish ritual practices with Christian belief usually under the cover of the family home and away from the watchful public eye. Such suspicion could be harmless enough until the political winds changed, as they were to do during Teresa’s life, with the purifying fervor of the Inquisition. To be of *converso* heritage was also to have one’s honor held in question. The matter of honor features heavily throughout Teresa’s writings, and a close reading of Teresa’s later writing reveals the continued influence of Jewish mysticism in her life.



## Beauty, Honor, Convent

In 1528 when Teresa was just 13, her mother, Dona Beatriz, died. One of 12 children, Teresa was left without womanly guidance, for her eldest sister married not long after the mother's death. Considered an unusually beautiful woman, Teresa found friendship in female cousins who reinforced in her the importance of this beauty for asserting and maintaining her honor. When a male cousin became enamored with Teresa, her father caught wind of the relationship and moved to avert an honor-shattering predicament by placing her in the convent of Nuestra Senora de Gracia (Our Lady of Grace).

This Augustinian convent was not an ascetic prison as it received the daughters of the well-to-do. The daily life was quite strict, however, and after eighteen months, Teresa left, but she did leave changed.

About five years later, at the age of 20, she decided on her own to enter a convent, but this time she chose one whose rule of life was much more relaxed: the Carmelite house of la Encarnacion (the Incarnation), one of the biggest convents in Avila and a house for the city's upper classes. Many of Teresa's relatives and friends were already members of this convent. "Most of the nuns descended from the 'honored and principled men of the city.' While entering the religious life, they remained women of privilege."

Such privilege took quite practical forms. "For example, whereas women of more limited economic means slept together in a common dormitory, the wealthy lived in their own quarters, enjoying both relative comfort and privacy. Many elite nuns had their own servants, or even slaves." La Encarnacion reproduced "in microcosm" the conditions of Avila society, perpetuating "the issues of class, caste, and 'honor.'"

Teresa, not a woman of limited economic means, resided in her private two-story quarters with several relatives, free to come and go. She spent hours in conversation and gossip about the daily affairs of Avila society. Attractive, witty, and popular, Teresa

## The Inquisition

*Inquisition* is a special ecclesiastical institution for combating or suppressing heresy – The Inquisition in the Vatican was renamed the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in 1965 when its authority to do much was largely restricted to issuing statements on doctrine.

When we talk about *The Inquisition* we generally mean one of two eras when the suppression of heresy was conducted in severely oppressive ways: the Albigensian Inquisition and the Spanish Inquisition.

The Albigensian Inquisition began in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Cathars, a gnostic group in Southern France (Albigensian region) rose in popularity. They believed in dualism (spirit = good; material = evil) and devoted themselves to purity, practiced poverty, chastity, clean living, equality of the sexes and non-violence. They were very popular and were aligned with the wealthy Knight Templar (a Catholic men's organization that "protected" the Holy Grail and Catholicism). When Pope Gregory IX launched the Albigensian Inquisition in 1233, he probably wanted the wealth and lands of these two groups as much as he wanted to stamp out their theology. In any case, the Inquisition tortured and killed thousands of accused heretics (including many innocents) over the next couple of centuries.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish Inquisition began (during Teresa's time). It started in 1478 on the premise that Jews and Muslims were falsely converting to Christianity in order to undermine the church in Spain. Since it is virtually impossible to prove what someone secretly believes in their heart, there were no "alleged" heretics – only repentant (punished) and unrepentant (killed) heretics.

Another key element in the Spanish Inquisition is that King Ferdinand (of Isabella, Ferdinand and Christopher Columbus fame) wanted to rid Spain of Muslims and Jews. It may well be that he figured out that he would not have to repay the money his father borrowed from Jewish lenders if they were branded as heretics. In any case, eliminating the Muslims (who controlled Spain before their conquest) and the Jews along with political enemies was clearly a motivation of the King and was carried out over the objections of the Pope.

The Spanish Inquisition is notorious for its *extremely* creative and horrendous use of torture and its tendency to focus on anyone at any time for any reason. It lasted over 300 years until it was abolished in 1834 – which actually wasn't that long ago! It is important to remember the impact that this event has had on the subsequent life of the church in Spain (and throughout the world) as well as Teresa and other *convertos*.

was a nun who benefited from her family's wealthy merchant status. She was a woman of honor (or privilege) in an institution that gave elevated status (or honor) to the more wealthy.

## **Teresa's Personal Transformation**

### **Why not Marriage?**

Deirdre Green, a Teresian scholar, summarizes Teresa's view on marriage:

She was, she says, 'afraid of marriage' which she saw as little more than being a slave to one's husband. A wife, she says, must follow her husband's every whim, appearing happy *if* her husband is happy and sad *if* he is sad, regardless of how she may actually feel. 'See what slavery you have escaped from, sisters!' A natural 'leader,' courageous, adventurous, intelligent, a little headstrong, Teresa could not bring herself to take on a role of total submission.

For Teresa, marriage would have meant entering into a life of illusion, where how *she* felt inside would not have mattered. She would have had to live a life of "as if." At least partially motivated to enter the convent in order to escape a life of married slavery, she gradually discovered that another form of slavery continued to dominate her life.

### **The Culture of Honor**

The class structure and honor culture of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain permeated every nook and cranny of convent life. The prayer life of the convent existed, in large part, to satisfy the prayer requests of wealthy patrons who had died. Sisters might well be in prayer rotations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – prayers paid by the wealthy for the souls of the faithful departed. This prayer-income was a primary source of revenue, keeping the convent financially solvent and tied to the city's elite.

### **Near Death – A Wake-Up Call**

In 1538 Teresa almost died. In fact, her relatives thought her paralyzed body was dead. She awoke in the midst of being prepared for burial. Her recovery was excruciatingly slow, and she never fully recovered her health, battling various illnesses until her death from cancer.

Being near death was for Teresa a call to wake-up, but she did not awaken all at once. With many ups and downs and twists and turns, the next twenty years embark Teresa on a gradual awakening without one single momentous conversion experience. She is transformed by the grace of God from someone obsessed with maintaining worldly privilege (or honor) and status to someone set free to courageously engage in reform in the face of tremendous and potentially lethal opposition.

### **Teresa's Sickness and "Mental" Prayer**

Teresa's journey into freedom began with her fall into sickness. That sickness gave her soul new eyes, so for the next twenty years she explored what she called "mental" prayer, or contemplative prayer, much to the chagrin of spiritual advisors who knew only the way of spoken prayer.

Frail, yet determined, Teresa in her mid-twenties experienced her first divine revelations. The initial impact is that she began to see her times of gossip "with the eyes of the soul" and found

them no longer attractive. As the days, weeks, months, seasons, and years passed, she grew increasingly dissatisfied with her way of life, but her attachment to the “things of the world,” such as honor, possessions, family, kept hold of her heart.

For fifteen years she stayed faithful to her way of “mental” prayer. Then, somewhere around her 40<sup>th</sup> year she began to experience a profound and new transformation:

[Teresa] began to have frequent and powerful spiritual experiences, hearing voices, seeing visions, and even achieving a coveted mystical Union with God. She came to recognize the connection between behavior and prayer and the reception of divine favors. ‘Now then, when I began to avoid occasions [of sin] and to devote myself to prayer, the Lord . . . started to grant me favors.’

Her heart began to find pleasure and peace in service and care rather than honor and status. The transformation was rooted utterly in her life of “mental” prayer. The so-called experts she sought out for guidance concluded she suffered from demonic delusions. Fortunately for her, Teresa found kindred souls in the Jesuits.

### **Teresa and her Friends: United in God, not Honor**

These Jesuit friends and guides encouraged Teresa, and she came to trust without reserve that God was the origin of her mystical experiences. For Teresa, her mental prayer was “nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends.” The image of friendship here is crucial.

She was becoming friends with very influential religious reformers. Like Teresa, these men and women had been transformed by the intimate presence of God in their lives. They felt called to a mission to change the world about them. Transformation in Christ was not a private affair: it called the heart out into the world. The basis of her friendships was no longer a common social status. Union with God was what united friends in their common mission.

### **Teresa’s Transformation of the Church: Reforming the Carmelites**

#### **The Discalced Carmelites**

In 1560 Teresa received a new vision with very practical consequences. “I was thinking about what I could do for God, and I thought that the first thing was to follow the call to the religious life, which His Majesty had given me, by keeping my rule as perfectly as I could.”

Teresa felt commanded by God to found a new monastery – one in which she and her sisters would keep the rule as “perfectly” as they could. Since much of the imperfection of the Carmelites lay in its tethering to the honor system (the privileged) of Spanish culture,

Discalced Carmelites (Diss KAL sid KAR mu-lite): discalced means “without shoes), emphasizing their poverty; Carmelites take their name from Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. The order began with a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel who were given a Rule of Life by Saint Albert of Jerusalem between 1206 and 1214. St. Theresa (along with St. John of the Cross) initiated a reform movement that resulted in two current Roman Catholic orders – the Carmelites of the Ancient Observances and the Discalced Carmelites.

Teresa boldly cut through this debilitating financial tether. She insisted that her houses “rely entirely on the fruits of their own labor and on God to move people to donate alms for their survival.”

Teresa was creating economic independence for the nuns and it did not go unnoticed. She had to contend with the challenge of angry townsfolk, who saw their traditional role of influence being diminished. She also had to convince potential sellers that her convents would not become poorhouses, unable to sustain themselves, and a debt the seller could not recoup. Teresa prevailed, and the reformed Carmelite houses she established were founded in poverty, depending solely on the sisters’ labor and alms. Economic freedom was thus partially won.

### **An Egalitarian Culture**

This economic freedom supported and nurtured a new egalitarian culture within the convents. Jodi Bilinkoff describes this new culture:

‘[The sister] who is from nobler lineage should be the one to speak least about her father. All the sisters must be equals.’ At San Jose [one of Teresa’s convents], Teresa abolished all distinctions based on social rank.

Her egalitarian reform struck at the heart of Spanish society and convent life. Birth and blood were no longer important. For a woman of *converso* heritage this reform was particularly liberating. Teresa was saying there was no need to look *back* in order to discover one’s source of value. Value was to be found here and now in union with God. This egalitarian message did not go unheard by the *conversos*. Between 1567 and 1582, they supported and became members of Teresa’s convents of Discalced (wearing sandals, not shoes) Carmelites.

What are the sources of power being used? Is this use of power for good or for ill? How does it build up the community? Strengthen people for ministry?

### **Teresa: Despite Great Odds, a Pioneer of Contemplative Spirituality**

Teresa was pioneering a new form of spirituality, especially among women. It is true that she influenced, and was influenced by, her many male friends, one of whom was John of the Cross. But Teresa’s convents offered the women of her age something truly new – *the ability not only to trust one’s own experience of God but also to speak humbly, yet forthrightly, about this experience in public before the learned men of the day.*

She initiated her reforms during the Spanish Inquisition, an accusatory and dangerous crusade that imprisoned her friend John of the Cross, along with many others, and sentenced many to their deaths. This was a time when women were not taught to read in the power-languages of the church: Latin and Greek. The experts were the male theologians, well-trained but often with little experience of spirituality. Teresa, politically very astute, proved more than able to respond to their inquiries.

A **Papal Nuncio** (PAY pul NOON see oh) is a permanent diplomatic representative of the Pope to a state having the rank of an ambassador and usually with the ecclesiastical rank of titular bishop. The Nuncio also serves as the liaison between the Holy See and the Church in that particular nation, supervising the diocesan episcopate and has an important role in the selection of bishops.

The Papal Nuncio, Felipe Segá, described as “one of the most powerful Churchmen of Teresa’s time,” offered this account of her life:

A restless, disobedient, stubborn, gad-about female who, under the guise of piety, has invented false doctrines, left the enclosure of her convent against the orders of the Council of Trent and her own superiors, and has gone around teaching like a Professor, contrary to the exhortations of St. Paul who said that women were not to teach.

Teresa would not be dismissed. She trusted in herself. She trusted in her union with God. So, she spoke of the way of contemplative prayer and she acted to reform the life of the church consistent with her own transformed life.

### **Politically Wise, Yet a Woman of Her Culture**

A modern reader might be taken aback by Teresa's self-deprecating language. How can such language be consistent with a woman convinced of her own worth? Deirdre Green explains Teresa's tactics in this way. "Teresa's apparently negative and self-deprecatory allusions to being a woman often turn out to be simply a ruthlessly realistic acknowledgment of the limitations under which women in sixteenth-century Spain were forced to operate."

Teresa's writing and reforming efforts placed her life at stake during the Inquisition. She survived, which is a testimony to the creative and transformative power of her contemplative spiritual life. Rooted in the experience of her radical openness to the presence of God, she laid before the oppressive church and society an alternative vision of Jesus' view of women:

Nor did you, Lord, when you walked in the world, despise women; rather, you always, with great compassion, helped them. And you found as much love and more faith in them than you did in men. Among them was your most blessed mother. . . .Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us. . . .so that we may not do anything worthwhile for you in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without your also failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of your goodness and justice, for you are a just judge and not like those of the world. Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them are men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect. Yes, indeed, the day will come, my king, when everyone will be known for what he is. . . .these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women.

Except for the first sentence, this entire passage of Teresa was not included in the second editing of the *Way of Perfection*. Even today it is often omitted from Spanish editions of Teresa's writings.

### **The Role of Jewish Mysticism**

It is perhaps impossible to determine how self-aware Teresa was in drawing upon sources of Jewish mysticism in her writings, but Jewish mystical imagery does pervade her work. The central image of

The mystical school of thought came to be known as **Kabbalah**, from the Hebrew root *Qof-Bet-Lamed*, meaning "to receive, to accept." The word is usually translated as "tradition." In Hebrew, the word does not have any of the dark, sinister, evil connotations that it has developed in English. For example, the English word "cabal" (a secret group of conspirators) is derived from the Hebrew word Kabbalah, but neither the Hebrew word nor the mystical doctrines have any evil implications to Jews. In modern times some of the concepts have been twisted and used in Tarot cards, divination and other magical customs that have no real connection with Jewish teachings which is more "wisdom."  
From "Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism"

the *Interior Castle* is a “beautiful crystal or diamond castle, symbolizing the soul, with seven mansions. . . each with many chambers.” These are images rooted deeply in the *Jewish Kabbalah mysticism* of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain.

## **The Spiritual Life and Human Sexuality**

For Teresa, the soul could experience a spiritual marriage, or betrothal, with God in the inner castle. This betrothal imagery might sound peculiar or inappropriately sexual to modern ears, but for someone steeped in the Jewish spirituality of the Song of Songs, this language was able to convey a sense of bare intimacy of the soul with God. *Conceptions of the Love of God* is Teresa’s *brave* commentary on the Song of Songs. Brave, because it invited the scrutinizing eye of the Inquisition – an unconventional woman of Jewish heritage writing about the spiritual life in terms of intimate sexuality.

My Lord, I do not ask you for anything else in life but that *You kiss me with the kiss of your mouth*, and that you do so in such a way that although I may want to withdraw from this friendship and union, my will may always, Lord of my life, be subject to Your will and not depart from it; that there will be nothing to impede me from being able to say: ‘My God and my Glory, indeed *Your breasts are better and more delightful than wine.*’ (*emphasis added*)

## **A “Doctor” and a Saint -- with Blindness**

This “gad-about female” who went “around teaching like a Professor” was canonized 40 years after her death, and in 1970 Paul VI added her name along with that of Catherine of Siena to the list of those considered “Doctors of the Church.” These are theologians distinctly recognized for their “eminence in theology and holiness.”

Teresa is not a saint because she was without fault. She had a glaring blindness when it came to the Protestant reformers. Indeed, much of her energy directed toward the establishment of convents stems from her desire to combat the inroads of the Reformers. She also shared her culture’s prejudice against the “infidels” of Islam.

She was a child of her age, yet she called her age, her church, and her society into a new way of life. She was courageous enough to trust her own experiences; she was wise enough to forge friendships with other reformers who not only supported her work but challenged and corrected her as well. She established 17 convents of the Discalced Carmelites, places that offered a vision of community free from the shackles of honor and lineage, where women might come to *trust* their experiences of union with God – leaven of freedom for the rest of the church and the world.

Resources: Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers; Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, Translated by J. M. Cohen; Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*; Tessa Bielecki, *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Writing*; Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*; Stephen Clissold, *St. Teresa of Avila*; Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*; Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Mystics*; Deirdre Green, *Gold in the Crucible: The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez; Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages*; Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul*; Bridge Building Images (Icons) – [www.bridgebuilding.com](http://www.bridgebuilding.com); Trinity Stores (Icons and Art) – [www.trinitystores.com](http://www.trinitystores.com)

**Activities:** Choose one of the following activities for this session.

**Activity: The Role of Women**

Using a form of mutual invitation, discuss how have you experienced and seen the roles of women change in religious/faith communities.

**OR**

**Activity: Wise as Serpents and Gentle as Doves**

How might we, like Teresa, be “wise as serpents and gentle as doves,” as we work to survive and transform oppressive institutions in our lives?

- As you have worked to survive and transform oppressive institutions in your life, what compromises have you found yourself making (such as Teresa’s self-deprecatory statements in the face of the deadly Inquisition)?
- As you have worked to survive and transform oppressive institutions in your life, what have you hidden of yourself for the sake of your own “mission” (such as Teresa’s own *converso* heritage)?

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## ***BREAKING BREAD***

A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

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## ***SENDING FORTH***

**So What?**

The group takes a few minutes for each person and the group as a whole to reflect on what difference this session, your conversation, reading or reflection makes. OK, so you’ve had this experience....so what? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do differently tomorrow? How are you going to be different?

How do you carry out Christ’s ministry in the church and in the world?
--

**Housekeeping**

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session.

**Preparing**

The session leader reviews the Rule of Life disciplines:

- Calls attention to the Scripture readings and prayer experience
- Encourages participants to use a form of reflection
- Points out the Background Reading in the next session to be read before the next meeting

**Praying**

The prayer leader invites the group to center itself in silence and then reads the following passage from Teresa of Avila's *Meditations on the Song of Songs*. We hear Teresa celebrating the divine gift of the human body and sexuality.

My Lord, I do not ask you for anything else in life but that *You kiss me with the kiss of your mouth*, and that you do so in such a way that although I may want to withdraw from this friendship and union, my will may always, Lord of my life, be subject to Your will and not depart from it; that there will be nothing to impede me from being able to say: 'My God and my Glory, indeed *Your breasts are better and more delightful than wine* .

*Meditations on the Song of Songs,*  
found in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Writings*, 157-158

Intercessions: The prayer leader asks participants to name, either aloud or silently, those whom they would like the group to hold in prayer now and throughout the coming week.

### **Singing**

The song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following:

"Be Thou My Vision," *Hymnal* 488

"Come, My Way, my Truth, My Life," *Hymnal* 487

"Joyous Light of Heavenly Glory," *Gather Comprehensive* 762

Leader: Go in Christ's peace to set God's people free.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost  
*Alleluia*. *Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.



# LifeCycles

UNIT 4

## Washed & Renewed

### Session 5

# Envisioning the Reign of God: From Domination to Wholeness

Purpose:	To introduce participants to the world that the tradition/story envisions as that of a people moving from the slavery of domination to the liberation of wholeness.
Practice:	Understand and use power

#### **Before this Session**

**Background Reading:** *Telling the Story* (below)

**Daily Scripture reading:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Meditation

#### **Materials Needed:**

- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- Symbol(s) for the center of your meeting table
- Copies of the hymnal, songbook, CD or tape player used in this session
- Personal journals of each participant (for reference during reflection time)

## ***GATHERING***

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Leader: We gather in the name of Christ.

All: *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

## Centering

The song leader may choose a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Nada te turbe,” *Gather Comprehensive* 639

“Be Not Afraid,” *Wonder, Love, and Praise* 811

## Praying

Prayer Leader:

Find a comfortable position in which to sit – with your feet flat on the floor, hands lying gently on your lap, eyes closed. When we are finished, you will be invited to open your eyes slowly.

To begin our time of meditation, which will last ten minutes, I will read a brief poem from Teresa of Avila. Teresa reminds us that in our very soul, our very self, is where we find God. In her own voice, we hear God saying “in yourself seek Me.” Let this image of our self as God’s abiding place draw the attention of your heart, mind, and body. Center yourself with this image. Let your own self draw you into an awareness of God’s abiding presence.

### **In Yourself Seek Me**

And should by chance you do not know  
Where to find Me,  
Do not go here and there;  
But if you wish to find Me,  
*In yourself seek Me*

Soul, since you are My room,  
My house and dwelling,  
If at any time,  
Through your distracted ways  
I find the door tightly closed

Outside of yourself seek Me not,  
To find Me it will be  
Enough only to call Me,  
Then quickly will I come,  
*And in yourself seek Me.*

*Poetry 8, found in Teresa of Avila Mystical Writings, 40-41*

Prayer Leader: Let us rest silently, in the presence of our God. (silence for ten minutes)

Prayer Leader: Let us pray together:  
*All: Let nothing disturb you,  
Nothing dismay you.  
All things are passing,  
God never changes.  
Patient endurance  
Attains all things...  
God alone suffices. Amen.*  
(Teresa’s bookmark)

*A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612*

## Check-in

X Who is missing?

X Who will contact those who are missing?

The leader initiates check-in using a method that encourages full participation by all group members (see *Guidelines*). Reflection is appropriate on your rule of life disciplines and on your learning plan.

# TELLING THE STORY

## Envisioning the Reign of God: From Domination to Wholeness

Your question(s) or comment(s) to raise in the session:

*Participants read the following before the session. If desired, the leader may briefly summarize this or invite the group to quickly identify the key points before moving the group into discussion using the discussion questions and/or activity at the end of the reading.*

We began this Unit, “Washed & Renewed”, talking about how we, as theologians, draw upon our traditions and their stories as a source for doing theology. With the *LifeCycles* Collect (“We are a community gathered...”) providing a framework to reflect on history, we distinguished three distinct yet interrelated worlds we need to consider as we tell, retell, and reform our defining stories as a people of God:

The world behind the tradition/story

The world of the tradition/story

The world the tradition/story envisions

Our focus now is this last world – the world the tradition/story envisions – because it, above all else, is the world we are endeavoring to live into here and now in the present. As Christians, the world the tradition/story envisions is, simply put, our response, in word and deed, to living out the reign of God in our midst.

We have spent these past weeks and months discovering and discussing the worlds *behind* and *of* Hosea, Colossians, and Teresa of Avila. We ask now whether we have before us simply more than a collection of different worlds and their stories. Might there be a common thread running through it all? Might this thread be the Spirit of God in our midst, continually inviting us, in the face of so much domination and oppression, to discover and restore redeeming wholeness? It is this thread, this Spirit of God, which weaves the many, many different stories into a common history – a history of a people moving from the slavery of domination to the liberation of wholeness.

## Renewal, not Destruction: Hosea

Despite all expectations to the contrary, Hosea's prophesy does not end in words of destruction for Israel. Israel has failed to be a faithful covenant partner – abusing the poor, trusting in its own brutal power, and seeking recourse in the formalities of ritual and sacrifice. The traditional theology would speak of God's mighty and righteous divine justice bearing down on Israel.

Hosea knows the traditional story line well. But it no longer has the power to make sense of what Israel is experiencing. Hosea's faith has offered him a glimpse of a different face of God. Hosea struggles for ways to give expression to this new vision in which "healing and reconciliation, not harm and destruction, finally prevail."

Hosea's words change the trajectory of the story in a very profound way. His words graciously stamp a new punctuation on Israel's story of faith. He "speaks a final word to Israel of well-being and restoration." And so to our utter surprise the promise of vengeance is replaced by a God wooing tenderly in love.

What makes God YHWH, Brueggemann tells us, is that "YHWH is not 'a man' to react in anger; YHWH, rather, is 'God.'" Hosea, and through him, Israel, is discovering that for God to be God means that the Holy One is not captivated by emotions as the human ego is. God cannot be reduced to the human need for revenge and bloodshed – no matter how great the injustice.

Hosea invites us into the awareness that it has been human beings, in our fear, anger, and greed, who have created a God of wrath to fulfill our own desires. God does not dominate, nor is God dominated by and enslaved by the emotions of fear, anger,

## Post-Modernism and Deconstructionism

Warning: this is complicated – so complicated that many academicians and scholars don't get it. But it's worth at least trying to catch some of these concepts which are at the forefront of theological and biblical scholarship today.

**Modernism** usually means events that were set in motion with the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when people shifted from thinking that the best of everything was done is some past Golden Age to thinking that the best was yet to come. Based on the humanist movements during the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries), it moved from a more agrarian (rural, farming) culture to an urban, industrial and rational worldview. In Modernism the world is seen as a marketplace full of possibilities and opportunities; there is a belief in optimism and in changeability. The individual takes precedence over the community and secular values compete with religious values. The scientific method is born and dominates cultural thinking. The mathematical sense and a sense of the linear make written music, quantification and measurement possible.

**Postmodernism** emerged from or in reaction to modernism in the last century. In philosophy (and religion) postmodernism rejects the idea that we are moving to ever grander, wiser, better understandings of truth, beauty and knowledge. It raises questions about the dualistic thinking that underlies the earlier division: why does one need to assume that one (the past or the future) is superior to the other? It points to many such assumptions in Western thought: the superiority of speech over writing, full over empty, meaning over meaninglessness, life over death. Ideology and historical perspective become prominent in critical thinking: Liberation movements, Feminist movements, Civil Rights movements, Indigenous people's movements challenge the prevailing Western assumptions and dominance. Instead of searching for grand, universal "truths," postmodernity looks to local, particularized experience to make sense of experience – and assumes that even that interpretation will be superseded by another, equally valid, interpretation if/when it arises and is accepted as real. Postmodernity even questions the reality of a universal truth.

**Deconstructionism** is reflected in the types of literary criticism we have studied in this Cycle. It tries to show how texts can't be a single author communicating a single message. Rather it assumes that all texts absorb multiple "voices" and perspectives (sometimes even opposing each other) from the culture in which it is said or written. These voices are multiplied in the transmission from one person to another and even more as the text is transmitted from one time, place and culture to another. Deconstruction does just that – it "de-constructs," it takes the text apart in an attempt to understand all those voices. Deconstructionism is a postmodern process – it incorporates the assumption that who you are and what you have experienced will impact how you hear and interpret a text and that your involvement in interpreting a text is inescapable. What's more, as you change, your experience and interpretation of the text will change as well.

and greed. God is YHWH because God is always a God of healing and reconciliation. We, as human beings, have gotten it wrong. Our traditional story has all too often hidden this all-compassionate One behind stories of vengeance and retribution.

Through Hosea, we are able to retell the story in a new, liberating, and expansive way -- a way which offers wholeness. God, we begin to recognize, is “big” enough to embrace all of us.

### **Clothed with a New Self: Colossians**

However, again and again we find ourselves restricting the gracious reach of God, and we do this in the very name of God. We need look no further than the book of Colossians to see this restrictive theology at work.

We discovered that the author of Colossians would have us believe that “an ethically softened or humanized notion of domination and rule” is how we are to “live in the Lord.” Paul, on the other hand, declares that all such domination and rule is clearly submersed and drowned in the waters of baptism.

And so, we did not criticize the author of Colossians for being creative with, as well as adaptive of, Paul’s teaching. We have become keenly aware that the scriptures are full of such dynamic and creative application – which is why we have four gospels in the canon, and not just one. Created in the image and likeness of a creative God, it is our *responsibility* to seek *new* ways to express God’s passionate desire to restore all creation to relationships characterized by love and liberty – relationships where people are free to express their love creatively. These kinds of relationships restore people to wholeness. This kind of wholeness is indeed a garment which resurrects the human spirit and renews us to live again despite all suffering.

The author of Colossians fails to consistently perceive this restoration of wholeness as the will of God and envisions the reign of God such that there is room for subordination of wives, ownership of children, and the domination of slaves.

The tensions and conflict we discover in the worlds envisioned by Colossians requires of us, as theologians, to judge which vision of the reign of God is true. Exactly what kind of clothes are we to wear, to use the biblical language? Does the Spirit gather us together in communities where there remains room for domination? Or, are we called to be a whole people in which, as the letter to the Galatians reminds us, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus?” (Gal. 3:28). Which form will the story as we retell it, take?

### **Betrothed to Christ and Set Free to Reform: Teresa of Avila**

Which form will the story take as we retell it? This is not an idle question as Teresa of Avila’s life reveals. Almost 1500 years after Colossians was written, Teresa finds herself called by God, her betrothed, to confront the church about its oppression of women.

Teresa is not content to be a critic. Her life is not simply about deconstruction, or taking things apart. She, envisions a new way of life, rooted in the way of Jesus.

As with Hosea, Teresa looks about her, and through prayer and conversation, discovers a God who does not desire her subjugation. She, as a human being, is the property of no one. God helps Teresa wake up to the beauty and worth of her own interior life – her faith, her hopes, her failure, her intellect, her creativity.

Teresa initiates a reform of convent life that reflects the transformation she herself has undergone. Her convents will be a place for women, many of whom are *conversos* (see Session 4), to discover that they too are creative children of God, they too are leaders and reformers of the church. Teresa is wise enough to know that her reform, God's reform, is not the crusade of a lone woman. It is the spiritual movement of the women of God who are full members of the church of God. Teresa is envisioning a world in which the liberating grace of God reigns among us, making us whole. One final time we quote Teresa's prophetic words:

Nor did you, Lord, when you walked in the world, despise women; rather, you always, with great compassion, helped them. And you found as much love and more faith in them than you did in men. Among them was your most blessed mother. . . .Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us. . . .so that we may not do anything worthwhile for you in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without your also failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of your goodness and justice, for you are a just judge and not like those of the world. Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them are men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect. Yes, indeed, the day will come, my king, when everyone will be known for what he is. . . .these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women.

### **A Theology of Liberation: From Domination to Wholeness: How Shall We Live?**

Hosea and Teresa, each in their own way, invite us to consider how we will live together as people of God. As theologians, Hosea and Teresa reflect upon their traditions and the stories they hold to discover how God may be at work now in their lives. Their discoveries lead to new words which retell and reform the stories. In the face of brokenness, the prophet speaks a word of healing and in the face of Inquisitorial persecution, the mystic speaks one of equality. Both words invite the communities to become redemptively whole.

We are all theologians --- be we prophets, mystics, parents, teachers, custodians – and therefore we are all leaders. As theologians, we ask our communities to face head-on whatever form of domination threatens, and then invite them into a more gracious embracing way of life. Theologians, as Teresa reminds us, speak of what they have experienced and know in their own lives. They invite because they already know that transforming power of the ever-present God.

Theologians, as leaders, are midwives of redeeming wholeness.

**Activities:** Choose one of the following activities for this session.

### **Activity: A Theology of Embrace**

Remember that as a group you are also a community of theologians. As such, identify several examples of domination which you have experienced individually or as a group. Divide into groups, if possible, and discuss the following questions:

How has the experience affected your willingness to be compassionate? Are you more or less gracious to others as a result of the experience?

How has the experience changed how you read the scriptures? How has it changed what you look for from tradition to sustain your faith?

After about 30 minutes reconvene the large group and share your insights.

OR

### **Activity: Midwives**

Discuss the following quote:

“We are all theologians. Theologians, as leaders, are midwives of redeeming wholeness.”

- What does it mean to be a midwife?
- How does one be a “midwife of redeeming wholeness?”
- What does that look like? How do you know when you have done it – or, more accurately, when God has done it through you?
- What would it mean to have the ministry of theologian lifted up, identified and supported in your congregation?

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## ***BREAKING BREAD***

A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

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## ***SENDING FORTH***

How do you carry out Christ's ministry in the church and in the world?

### **So What?**

The group takes a few minutes for each person and the group as a whole to reflect on what difference this session, your conversation, reading or reflection makes. OK, so you've had this experience....so what? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do differently tomorrow? How are you going to be different?

An identified ministry in a congregation has symbolic as well as practical value. For example, the ministry of priesthood, holds up the priesthood of all believers. Those exercising that identified ministry fulfill practical roles in the congregation. But they also fill the symbolic function of reminding all of us of our priesthood. A few churches, usually Cathedrals, have identified theologians (usually scholars). What might be the value of congregations identifying those with the ministry of “theologians” – discerning and calling people who are “midwives of redeeming wholeness” to exercise that ministry openly in the congregation to lift up theologizing and as a way to remind everyone that we are all theologians?

## **Housekeeping**

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session.

## **Preparing**

The session leader reviews the Rule of Life disciplines:

- Calls attention to the Scripture readings and prayer experience
- Encourages participants to use a form of reflection
- Points out the Background Reading in the next session to be read before the next meeting and encourage participants to review their journals in preparation for the group review and celebration next week.

## **Praying**

The prayer leader invites the group to center itself in silence and then reads the following passage from Teresa of Avila.

### **In Weeping Be My Joy**

In weeping be my joy,  
My rest in fright,  
In sorrowing my serenity,  
My wealth in losing all.

Amid storms be my love,  
In the wound my delight  
My life in death,  
In rejection my favor.

In poverty be my riches,  
My triumph in struggling,  
Rest in laboring,  
In sadness my contentment.

In darkness be my light,  
My greatness in the lowly place  
My way on the short road,  
In the cross my glory.

In humiliation be my honor,  
My palm in suffering  
Increase in my wanting  
In losing my gain.

My fullness be in hunger,  
In fearing my hope,  
My rejoicing in fear,  
In grieving my delight.

In forgetting be my memory,  
Humiliation my exalting,  
In lowliness my repute,  
Affronts my victory.

My laurels be in contempt,  
In afflictions my fondness,  
My dignity a lowly nook,  
In solitude my esteem.

In Christ be my trust,  
My affection in Him alone,  
In His weariness my vigor,  
My repose in His imitation.

My strength is founded here,  
In Him alone my surety,  
My integrity's proof,  
In His likeness my purity.

*Poetry 26, found in Teresa of Avila: Mystical Writings, 197-198*

Intercessions: The prayer leader asks participants to name, either aloud or silently, those whom they would like the group to hold in prayer now and throughout the coming week.

### **Singing**

The song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“Be Thou My Vision,” *Hymnal* 488

“Come, My Way, my Truth, My Life,” *Hymnal* 487

“Joyous Light of Heavenly Glory, *Gather Comprehensive* 762

Leader: Go in Christ's peace to set God's people free.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost  
*Alleluia.* *Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.



# LifeCycles

UNIT 4

## Washed & Renewed

### Session 6

## Reflect and Celebrate

**Purpose:** To reflect on this unit, identify what was learned and how the individuals and/or group grew, changed, etc.; to synthesize what they learned and experienced.

**Skills:** Ability to reflect and learn from reflecting on one's experience

#### **Before this Session**

**Background Reading:** *Telling the Story* (below)

**Daily Scripture reading:** Your choice of daily reading options

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Meditation

#### **Materials Needed:**

- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- Symbol(s) for the center of your meeting table
- Copies of the hymnal, songbook, CD or tape player used in this session
- Personal journals of each participant (for reference during reflection time)

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### ***GATHERING***

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**Leader:** We gather in the name of Christ.

**All:** *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

#### **Centering**

The song leader may lead the group in the singing of a simple verse, or more, of a hymn or song.

## Praying

Prayer leader: Begin the session as usual, creating your own gathering time modeled on the one used in the unit you just completed. Be as creative as you like with the prayer forms used in the unit, in the resource books you draw from, the way you do things, etc.

## Checking in

“Check in” with each other as usual. Include a few minutes for the group to offer any insights or raise questions about this week’s Scripture reading, prayer experience or reflection on ministry in daily life.

# TELLING THE STORY

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The purpose of this time is to name what was learned, identify the learning process and develop an ability to transfer this to another situation. You then will look at spiritual growth in a similar manner.

Your reflections before the session:

### What did I/we learn?

Invite group members to take about five minutes to identify a couple of things (information, skills, experience, etc.) they learned during this unit. Encourage the group to identify how learning occurred, what blocks to learning were present and how those blocks were overcome.

After everyone has named what they learned personally, invite the group to reflect on what they, as a group, learned—what has changed about your interaction or about what you are doing during sessions or during the time between sessions. Encourage members to identify how learning occurred, what helped it, what hindered it, etc.

Your reflections before the session:

### How did I/we grow in faith?

Invite the group to now focus on the entire unit and think about how they have grown in faith, how their faith was renewed or strengthened, when they encountered God and what difference this community made in their lives. Encourage them to reflect silently a few minutes, perhaps making a few notes, and then take turns talking about their relationship with God and God’s people. The purpose of this time is to help participants become aware of their spiritual formation and to identify what facilitated that growth in them and in others. This will help them understand how individuals, groups and a congregation grows in faith.

Your reflections before the session:

### **How did this unit work/not work for me/us?**

Finally, take a few minutes to reflect on this unit—what worked for you and what didn't work and why. This is a time to discuss things about the session plan that you especially liked or found difficult or to identify topics you want to spend more time on or explore at greater depth. This is also the time to talk about how the group worked together, leadership, interpersonal concerns, etc. Sometimes this will be simple; sometimes you will need to discuss a leadership style, a problematic personal habit (like interrupting people) or a logistical issue that some find difficult. It is important to discuss difficult issues honestly and yet gently.

This is also the time to revisit the norms you established at the first session and to review the *Guidelines for Promoting Good Listening and Conversation*. Add to or amend your norms as appropriate. The group can also decide they will add specific portions of the *Resource* section that they feel might be helpful to their between-sessions reading.

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## ***BREAKING BREAD***

A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

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## ***SENDING FORTH***

### **So What?**

Invite the group to take five minutes to think silently (and make notes) on how they, both individually and as a group have or will use what they have learned/gained in this unit. Invite the group to discuss:

- What have you done as individuals at home, work, school, neighborhood? In your congregation, diocese, the broader church? In your community, state, nation?
- What have you done as a group?
- What do you plan to do? (Name specific plans and commitments.)

How do you carry out Christ's ministry in the church and in the world?

This is an appropriate time for group members to make changes to their rule of life or learning plan. Remember to review the decisions you made about the use of your power as individuals and/or as a group and to make plans for the next period of time.

### **Housekeeping**

Before you conclude, make the following decisions:

What do we want to study next?

Review the units. Decide if you want to start a new unit or if you want to repeat this or an earlier unit. Review the *Resource* sections and the modules to see if they respond to any questions and issues your group is raising.

What will we contribute to the *LifeCycles* community?

Identify anything you created or discovered that worked well (a different prayer, Psalm, a way of doing things, a specific activity you did, a passage in a book you found helpful,

etc.). Decide who will be responsible for transmitting this to LeaderResources. <sup>1</sup> (See *Guide to Getting Started in LifeCycles*)

The group also decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session.

### **Preparing**

The session leader reviews the Rule of Life disciplines:

- Calls attention to the Scripture readings and prayer experience

- Encourages participants to use a form of reflection

- Points out the Background Reading in the next session to be read before the next meeting

If the group will be taking a longer break, it will be helpful to remind participants of the Scripture reading, prayer experience and other preparatory reading a week prior to the next meeting. Also, if applicable, remind the group to read selections from the *Resources* the group agreed upon.

### **Praying**

Prayer Leader: End the session as usual, creating your own closing time modeled on the one(s) used in the unit you just completed. Be as creative as you like in using the prayer form(s) in the unit, in the resource books you draw from, the way you do things, etc.

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<sup>1</sup>See the *Guide to Getting Started* for detailed instructions and answers to frequently asked questions. Send to [LifeCycles@LeaderResources.org](mailto:LifeCycles@LeaderResources.org) or mail to LeaderResources, PO Box 302, Leeds, MA 01053. Call 800-941-2218 for further information..



# LifeCycles

## “Between Units” Session

Purpose:	To help integrate any new participants and/or to help participants prepare for the next Unit.
Skills:	Developing learning goals and/or a learning plan

### **Before Session**

**Background Reading:** Review the material to be covered in the next unit

**Daily Prayer Experience:** Continued from prior unit

**Daily Scripture Reading:** According to personal choice

### **Materials Needed:**

- A copy of this lesson plan for each participant
- Cards and pens/pencils, if using the activity that requires them
- Paper and pencils
- Symbol(s) for the center of your meeting table
- Copies of the hymnal, songbook, CD or tape player used in this session
- Personal journals of each participant (for reference during reflection time)

## ***GATHERING***

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Leader: We gather in the name of Christ.

All: *Amen.*

*We are a community, gathered and sent forth by the Spirit  
to encounter our story,  
to be washed and renewed,  
to be fed, with thanksgiving,  
and to celebrate and serve the reign of God.*

### **Centering**

The song leader may lead a hymn or song. Suggestions:

“Thuma Mina/Send Me Jesus,” *Gather Comprehensive* 677

“Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God,” *Hymnal* 711

“O Master Let Me Walk With Me,” *Hymnal* 660

“You Are Called to Tell the Story,” *Gather Comprehensive* 680

### **Praying**

The Prayer Leader introduces a prayer using the form introduced in the prior unit.

Prayer Leader: Let us pray together:  
All: *Let nothing disturb you,  
Nothing dismay you.  
All things are passing,  
God never changes.  
Patient endurance  
Attains all things...  
God alone suffices. Amen.*

### **Check-in**

- Who is missing?
- Who will contact those who are missing?

The leader initiates check-in; ask: How is your prayer time going? What one thing have you learned/discovered that you can share with the rest of us?

## ***TELLING THE STORY***

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### **Our Experiences of LifeCycles**

Choose one of the activities, depending on whether your group is incorporating new members or is continuing with the same members. In the latter case, you may choose to omit this part of the session if your group was satisfied with their opportunity to reflect on the prior unit and develop learning goals for the next unit.

The time between two units is a logical time to invite and incorporate any new group members. It is also the time to “split” a group that has grown too large (i.e. more than 12 members). In both cases, it is important to find a way to help the “new” group re-form. These activities are designed to do that.

### **Re-forming the Group**

Use when you have new members joining
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#### **Activity – Our Hopes and Fears**

Hand out index cards. Invite each participant to write on one side what they hoped to experience in these sessions or, for newcomers, what they hope to experience. On the other side, write what concerns or fears they had (or have) about LifeCycles. Depending on the comfort level of the group, you can either read aloud your hopes and fears or each person can put their card in a box or basket, and then take turns drawing a card from the box or basket and reading its contents aloud to the group. In the early stages, you might want to put the cards into a box or basket. Later it will be easier for participants to voice their own hopes and fears.

After all have been read, ask, “From what we have heard, what is your sense of why we are gathering together? What are we anticipating? What are our concerns and fears?”

OR

### **Activity – The Road Behind Us, The Road Before Us**

Invite each person to draw a picture of a road winding around or across a piece of paper. Add images or words along the way that indicate significant road markers (high points, low points, aha moments, barriers, breakthroughs, etc.) you have passed and draw what you imagine the road ahead looks like. Agree on a time period to cover. In the earlier stages you can make it longer (during your life or the last decade); after a couple of units you can focus on the time since you started LifeCycles plus the next six months or the past year and the next year. Newcomers would chart the same time period. Share your road maps with each other.

### **AND**

***Learning Goals*** and ***Background Reading*** (below)

Use when you do <b>not</b> have new members joining
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### **Continuing Group**

### **Activity – The Road Behind Us, The Road Before Us**

Invite each person to draw a picture of a road winding around or across a piece of paper. Add images or words along the way that indicate significant road markers (high points, low points, aha moments, barriers, breakthroughs, etc.) you have passed and draw what you imagine the road ahead looks like. Agree on a time period to cover. In the earlier stages you can make it longer (during your life or the last decade); after a couple of units you can focus on the time since you started LifeCycles plus the next six months or the past year and the next year. Share your road maps with each other.

### **OR**

You could invite the entire group to draw a road on a long sheet of newsprint and put both personal and groups road markers on the sheet. Invite the group to talk about their road map as they draw it.

### **Activity – Learning Goals**

Give participants about 15 minutes to work on their learning goals using one of the options offered in the special session on Learning Goals (normally done between the second and third units) or whatever method is useful for them.

Use with BOTH groups (new members and continuing groups)
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The leader invites each participant to share their learning goals and plans. Some may choose to “pass.” Some may take this opportunity to ask the group to help them identify resources, ask for a partner to do something, support them in a decision or commitment they feel called to make, etc. For example, someone who has not led singing before, may set that as a learning goal and ask the best musician to help him. Someone who has decided to offer an adult education course about a topic that engaged her might invite the group to come to the sessions to support her. Someone who has decided to learn a skill or research something related to work might ask for time to report on what she learned.

This is the time for the group to reflect on the group, as a whole, wants to learn. Again, look at the next unit to see what material will be covered. Perhaps you want to work together more effectively or you would like your theological discussions to have more depth. Perhaps you want to learn how to take your group’s experience into the congregation or life. Maybe you just want to be brave and

try one of the suggestions you thought you couldn't do before. It doesn't have to be major — just intentional. What would you, as a group, like to have learned or done by the end of the next unit.

### **Reading**

Participants read the Introduction to the next unit and come prepared to discuss the *Tools of the Trade*, *Spiritual Formation* skills (all four Cycles), *Leadership Skills* (Cycles II-IV), *Christian Practices* (Cycles III-IV). Participants can use their journals to record questions they might have about the materials or resources they have/know about that they want to share with the group.

### **Methods and Skills**

The leader(s) help the group review the Introduction and make sure that everyone understand what skills are going to be practiced in the next unit. Remember, the *LifeCycles* group is a safe place in which to practice new skills, try out new ideas, do things in new ways. It is important to practice new things for several weeks so they become familiar and a bit less scary, strange or unusual. Not everything with work for everyone....the goal is simply to introduce the group to the options available. Each person and group will discover some things that are life-giving and re-energize their personal, spiritual or communal life. Those are the things that you want to incorporate into your daily life. Other things may not appeal to you or may never “feel right.” That's fine. They may not be for you or for your group/congregation. But, your life may change and something you don't like now may be useful in the future – knowing them means you have them in your “kit bag” for future use. Or you may discover that there is someone else or some specific situation where that particular way of praying or understanding of Scripture or that group facilitation skills may be useful.

The purpose of what you encounter in *LifeCycles* to say that everyone or every congregation should *do* all of these things – it is simply a way to introduce you to them so you have them available as options. So, encourage everyone to *try* each new skill or way of doing things. Often we are surprised to discover that what we guessed would not be our skill or would not be something we liked, turns out to be a favorite. The motto here is: “Try it for awhile. If you don't like it, try something else!” If the group develops this attitude, it will discover many interesting and useful things to enliven their lives as individuals and as a congregation.

### **Bible Study**

You may also want to use this time (perhaps even as another separate session) to discuss the Scripture readings you are doing, if you have chosen a single reading plan for your group. Some groups take a session to either review what they read during the past unit or to get an overview of what they will read in the next unit – or both. In either case, individual group members can come prepared with Bible Commentaries and Study Bibles which they have read and are prepared to share their perspectives. If you are reviewing your past readings, each group member can come with comments and questions. Make sure you have resources, such as commentaries, Bible dictionaries, etc. available so the group can look for answers.

Remember, the goal of the Scripture readings is as personal encounter with the Scriptures, not Bible study. So, it is not essential that every group member acquire an in depth understanding of the passages being read. The goal is to invite God to speak to each of us in and through God's Word. However, it is likely that some group members will find their reading especially interesting,

confusing or even troublesome. These are the times when it would be very helpful to stop and look at the readings, make sure the participants understand the context, the basic story, and are able to discuss whatever is exciting or troubling them. Depending on your discoveries and interest, this might motivate one or more group members to offer a Bible study class for other members of the congregation – which would enable him/her to explore a book in depth and share that with others in the congregation.

## ***BREAKING BREAD***

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A time for snacks, informal conversation and stretching.

## ***SENDING FORTH***

### **So What?**

The leader invites each group member to say what he or she has gained from *LifeCycles* thus far and/or to tell a story about how *LifeCycles* has impacted his or her life at home, work or in the congregation.

Newcomers say what has drawn them to join a *LifeCycles* group. The group reflects on how the *LifeCycles* group may have changed or contributed to the life of the congregation and/or community.

How do you carry out Christ's ministry in the church and in the world?
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### **Housekeeping**

The group decides who will take responsibility for the various leadership roles in the next session. This is a good time to review the next unit and plan ahead. Some groups have found it helpful to look ahead several sessions and decide who will lead the sessions for the entire unit. That enables the group to be prepared further in advance and to be more intentional about a focus they want to maintain. It also allows them to identify possible “extra” sessions or areas they already know they will want to delve into at greater depth.

### **Preparing**

The session leader reviews the rule of life disciplines:

- Daily Scripture reading of your choice
- The prayer experience described in the Introduction and discussed earlier.
- Point out the Background Reading in the next session to be read before the next meeting. Make sure you make plans for any resources, materials, etc. that are needed for the next session (or unit).

### **Praying**

The prayer leader invites the group to prayer using a prayer he or she has selected.

Intercessions: The prayer leader asks participants to name, either aloud or silently, those whom they would like the group to hold in prayer now and throughout the coming week.

The prayer leader invites the group to pray the Lord's Prayer or another prayer of his or her choosing.

### **Singing**

The song leader chooses a song or uses one of the following suggested songs:

“I Know Not Where the Road Will Lead,” *Hymnal 647*

“Take My Life and Let It Be,” *Hymnal 707*

“Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God,” *Hymnal 711*

“Come Labor On,” *Hymnal 541*

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve Christ in all of life.

All: *Thanks be to God.*

From the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost *Alleluia*.  
*Alleluia* may be added to the dismissal.