

Called to Be the Church

CONGREGATIONAL GIVING PROGRAM

WORSHIP
FOR FIVE
SUNDAYS

The United Church of Canada | L'Église Unie du Canada | 2019

Loving Our Neighbours

These *Loving Our Neighbours* worship resources were written by the Rt. Rev. Richard Bott, Moderator of The United Church of Canada. Richard is an experienced liturgist and author, and we are very grateful that he has shared his creativity and gifts with us. We are also grateful to the Rev. Dave Jagger for writing reflections for each Sunday, and to Jen Auger who has created the Sunday school program, an online resource.

All of these resources can be used as written, combined with your own ideas, or used as broad suggestions for designing your own sermons, worship, and Sunday school program. Ideally these will all be integrated, so it would be wise to have worship leaders and Sunday school leaders review them together.

Progression of the Five Sundays

Worship for the five Sundays of Lent invites congregants to engage in Lenten practices that will guide them in sharing their gifts with the wider community.

- We begin on Sunday 1 with the Lenten practice of naming values to which we say “Yes!”
- On Sunday 2 we focus on how our blessings can be a blessing to others.
- Sunday 3 is about the stewardship of our time and the practice of regular worship.
- Sunday 4 includes the invitation to be generous and to be intentional in our gift giving.
- On Sunday 5 we engage in the practice of hope; we offer gratitude and celebrate.

Giving Team Commissioning Liturgy

This congregational giving program is so important to the life of our church that, as at other times when congregational leaders take on new roles, we commission or bless their work in the context of our congregational worship. A suggested liturgy follows.

By offering so many resources, we have erred on the side of abundance, trusting that you will select from the wide choice of ideas and adapt them for your own community.

- Use them as written.
- Adapt them to suit your situation.
- Or use them as a jumping-off point for your own creativity, particularly for the sermons.

StewardshipToolkit.ca

- See StewardshipToolkit.ca for a full Sunday school program for these Sundays

Giving Team Commissioning Liturgy

Congregational Chair/Clerk of Session presents the Giving Team members:

I present these sisters and brothers in faith (*names*) to be commissioned as members of the Giving Team of (*name of your pastoral charge/congregation*) to lead our congregational giving program, *Called to Be the Church*.

Worship Leader: Friends, we celebrate with joy and gratitude that you respond to God's sacred calling to be leaders among us as we all seek to be stewards of God's gifts to us. Your commitment to this calling comes from your awareness that we are all church together and that all gifts come from God, return to God, and are intended to give glory to God.

As we are all called to be the church, your response through assistance, organization, prayerful engagement, encouragement, and action as members of our congregation's Giving Team will help us all become more generous and grateful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Worship Leader (*to the Giving Team*): As followers of Christ, will you commit yourselves to respond to God's generosity, inspiring openness to Spirit-filled giving in this community?

Response: I will, God being my helper.

Worship Leader: Will you do all you can to assist (*name of your pastoral charge/congregation*) in revealing how we love our neighbours and respond to God's mission here in our community and through the Mission & Service of the United Church?

Response: I will, God being my helper.

Worship Leader: Will you be prayerful and diligent in this task as members of our Giving Team, carrying out your work joyfully and with integrity?

Response: I will, God being my helper.

Worship Leader (*to the congregation*): And will you, the community of (*name of your pastoral charge/congregation*), support this ministry with open hearts, faithful prayer, and generous response as they seek to help us all live lives of gratitude and grace, responding to Jesus' call to love our neighbours in the world?

Response: We will.

Worship Leader (*to the Giving Team*): Thank you for your willingness to undertake this ministry. In the name of our generous and faithful God, in the name of Jesus, our teacher and stewardship model, and in the name of the Spirit that inspires and sustains us, we recognize and affirm you in your ministry of service in (*name of your pastoral charge/congregation*) as our Giving Team.

Let us pray:

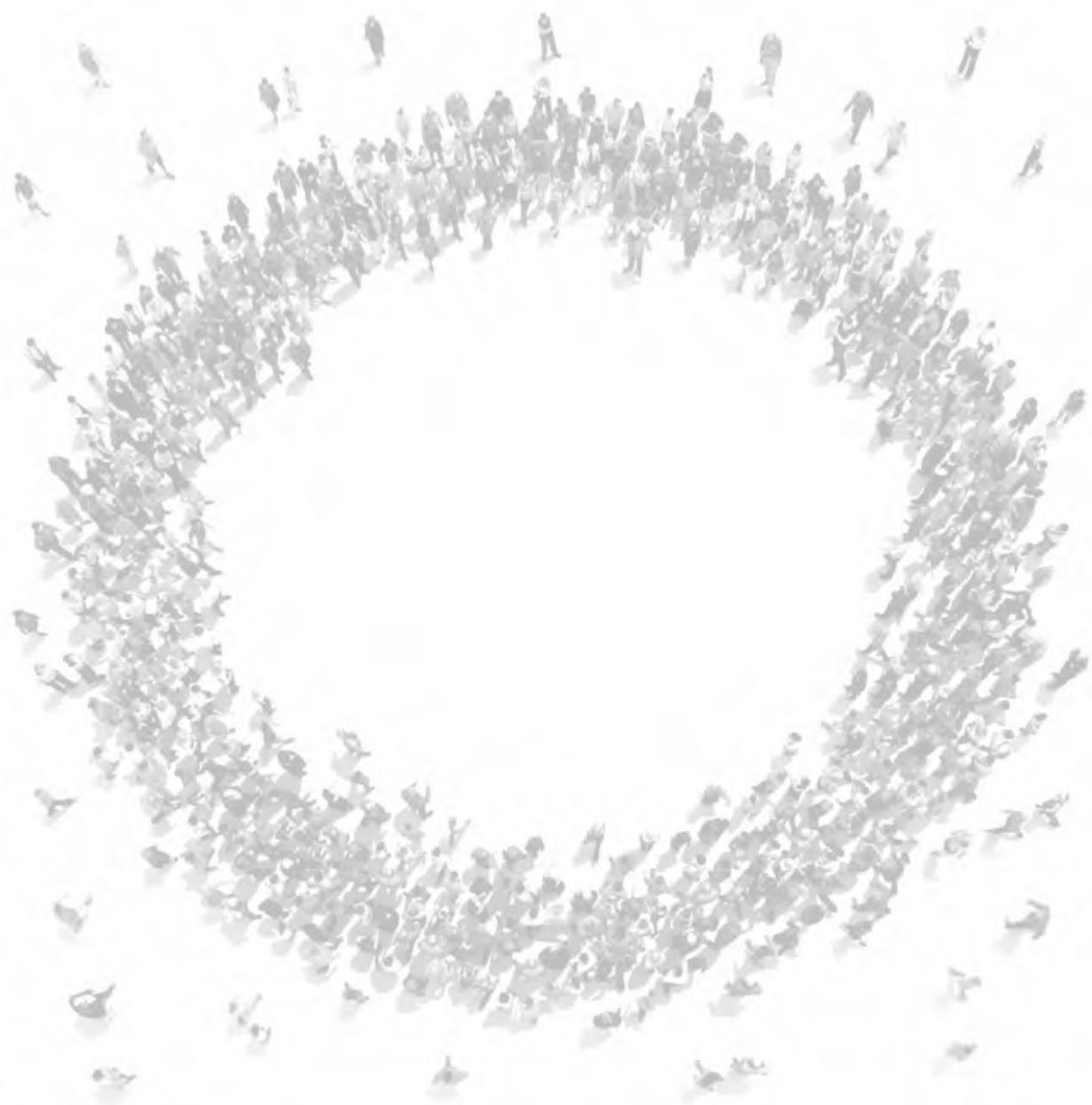
Loving God, as we give thanks for your generosity alive among us, so may your faithful grace be known among these your servants as they seek to encourage, celebrate, and give thanks for all your gifts in (*name of your pastoral charge/congregation*). Give to them vision, devotion, and energy as they carry out this ministry. May they be sources of comfort and challenge as we continue to be your church together, remembering who and whose we are. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Planning Your Giving Program for the Fall?

There are two sets of services, sermons, and Sunday school programs to accompany the Loving Our Neighbours resource:

- *28 Days to Thanksgiving—Offering Our Gratitude*—designed for Sundays after Labour Day
- *Season of Gratitude, Thanksgiving to All Saints*—designed for Sundays after Thanksgiving

Check them out at StewardshipToolkit.ca.



Program Week 1

Getting the **right information** to the **right people** at the **right time** using the **right method** is the best way to communicate.

Week 1 at a Glance

Inspire: Communications

- Introduce the *Called to Be the Church Congregational Giving Program* to your community of faith.
- Prepare a communications strategy for the program to keep interest, enthusiasm, and commitment high.
- Assemble the Invitation Package for each person or household so it is ready to hand out at face-to-face conversations, community meals, or to mail with the Letter of Invitation.
 - Narrative Budget (Program Guide, p. 20)
 - “Why I Give” (Program Guide, p. 10 and p. 18)
 - Giving Guide and Proportional Giving Chart (Program Guide, p. 32)
 - Step Chart (Program Guide, p. 35)
 - Response Card (Program Guide, p. 34) and return envelope
 - Other vehicles that you think will enhance your program

Inspire: Worship

- The worship resources for Sundays 1–5 introduce a series of Lenten practices that will help participants explore giving as part of their personal faith journey.
- The reflections for Weeks 1–5 have been written by the Rev. Dave Jagger. Use them as is or as inspiration for your own sermons.
- Sunday 1 might also include a commissioning of the Giving Team (see Giving Team Commissioning Liturgy, pp. 2–3).

Invite

- Community meals held between now and no later than the Saturday before Sunday 4.
- Letter of Invitation: can be mailed this week or no later than the Saturday before Sunday 4.

Thank

- While much of the thanking will happen later in the program, begin thinking about ways you can integrate a culture of gratitude into the life of your congregation. For ideas, see *All in One Gratitude Sunday* on p. 13 of the Planning Workbook and thanking section at StewardshipToolkit.ca.

Lent Week 1

Sunday 1: How to Say No!

Introduction to Lenten Practices and Called to Be the Church

(This introduction is used each week as there may be people who have not been present for a previous week of the program. Modify this introduction as you see fit. Build in time for exploring the experience of the spiritual practices. These could also be compiled and shared in various ways—in the bulletin, on the website, etc.)

Congratulations! Our congregation has chosen the five weeks of Lent this year to be part of the growing number of United Church congregations across Canada using *Called to Be the Church*. The service today and for the next four Sundays were prepared by our Moderator, the Rt. Rev. Richard Bott. The reflection for each Sunday was written by the Rev. Dave Jagger.

Called to Be the Church is so much more than the United Church's congregational giving program. Using *Called to Be the Church* is a clear indication that your congregation cares about you. We want you to grow in faith and be closer to God and we're not willing to leave that to chance.

We know that growing in the Way of Jesus takes intentionality. It's not a spectator sport. You have to do it. So, over the coming weeks of Lent, we will inspire each other; we will invite each other deeper into faith; and we will give thanks for all God is doing in us and through us, as each week we explore a different Lenten practice.

So what is a Lenten practice? A Lenten practice is anything we do, during Lent, that opens us up and brings us closer into God's presence. A Lenten practice is like going to the gym for your faith. It may be awkward at first and difficult, but afterwards you feel good; and after doing it for a while, you notice changes and strengths, and it becomes so much a part of your routine that you can't imagine life without it. Some common and traditional Lenten practices include prayer, fasting, generosity, confession, Bible study, hospitality, working for justice, and meditation.

The Lenten discipleship practices that we will explore are each tied to the Christian values of generosity, thankfulness, and stewardship. Each week, not only will we learn about a specific Lenten practice, but you will be given ideas about different ways that you can actually do it. Try it; play with it; see how it opens you up to God. By taking this opportunity and trying each practice, you will be making space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus. We think that's really exciting, and it's great that we're on this Lenten journey together!

So let's begin.

Prelude

Welcome

One: In Jesus' name, welcome!
 First-time participant or one who's been here many days;
 child or elder or somewhere in-between;
 stewards, caretakers, disciples, children of God—
 neighbours all, loved and loving.
 Welcome. Welcome in Christ's name!

Recognition of the Land and Indigenous People

A Time for Silent Reflection

Call to Worship

One: As we travel this Lenten pathway,
 we journey together, a community of faith.

**All: As we travel this Way of Jesus,
 we journey together, but also alone.**

One: Practising our faith:

**All: living Christ's call
 to love God with all that we are,
 to love our neighbour
 as we love ourselves.**

One: Practising our faith:

All: as stewards on the Way.

Opening Prayer

**All: God of the hungry times,
God of the difficult times,
God of all the times of our lives,
we need to talk.
Sometimes it's difficult to understand
the direction we need to go.
With all the choices we have in our lives,
sometimes we're not sure
when to say "Yes,"
or when to say "No."
So we ask for your guidance.
We ask for wisdom.
We ask for Spirit.
In our worship, in our work,
in our choices, in our lives.
May it be so, loving God!
Amen.**

Hymn

"Forty Days and Forty Nights" (*Voices United* (VU) 114) or "Come Touch Our Hearts" (*More Voices* (MV) 12)

Scripture

Matthew 4: 1–11

(Consider sharing the scripture as readers' theatre (people reading dramatically) or invite people to prepare it as a drama as follows. Three voices are needed.)

Narrator: After his baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness,
to be tempted by the Tempter.
Jesus fasted for a long, long time—
forty days and nights—
and, by the end of it, he was painfully hungry.
At that point, the Tempter came to him.

Tempter: If you are the Son of God,
tell these stones to become...hmm...loaves of bread!

Jesus: No.
It is written in the Torah, "One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Narrator: So the Tempter took Jesus to the holy city
and sat beside him on the highest part of temple,
the absolute top.

- Tempter: If you are the Son of God, jump!
Throw yourself to the ground,
for (*sounding reasonable*), as it is written in the Torah,
“He will command his angels for you,” and
“They will gather you up in their hands,
so you will not dash your foot against a stone.”
- Jesus: No! Again, it is written,
“Do not put Adonai, do not put God, to the test!”
- Narrator: So, this time, the Tempter took Jesus to a very high mountain
from which they could see all the kingdoms, all the nations,
all the places of the world,
in all of their greatness.
As they looked down, the Tempter spoke again.
- Tempter: I will give you all of this. I will give you all of this.
You only need to do one thing.
Bow down.
Bow down and worship me.
- Jesus: No. No! NO!
Go away, Adversary. Go away.
It is written,
“There is only one you will worship,
only one you will serve—
the Lord your God!”
Go away!
- Narrator: And, right then, the Tempter left Jesus.
Suddenly, God’s Holy Messengers appeared,
and Jesus was cared for.

Reflection

How to Say No! (*See p. 13 at the end of the service outline.*)

Hymn

“How Firm a Foundation” (VU 660) or “When We Are Tested” (MV 65)

Work of the People

Announcements and a Minute for Mission

The Offering

Invitation

One: The Way of Lent is a path that we travel each year,
as a time for us to remember Jesus' journey.
On that journey he met many people.
He laughed with them, he cried with them,
he taught them, and he learned from them.
But, most of all, he loved them,
not just with his words, but with his actions.
Jesus taught his followers that they were to
love one another as he had loved them.
Our offering is one way to do that,
to share the work of our hands and hearts
through our dollars and cents.
As you share what you are able,
you support the ministry here,
and the ministry of The United Church of Canada
through Mission and Service.
Let us celebrate what God has given,
and what we have to share.

Hymn

“Though I May Speak” (VU 372) or “You Are Holy” (MV 45)

Prayer

**All: We do not live on bread alone,
but by your Word, loving God.
May that Word fill our hearts and our hands,
all that we have, and all that we are,
that it may be a blessing in your world.
In Jesus' name, we ask it. Amen.**

*(Some congregations might commission their Giving Team at this point in the service.
See the liturgy on pp. 2–3.)*

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

One: Loving God,
 we thank you for the journey of our lives,
 with its ups and downs,
 with its questions and challenges,
 and with its moments of joy.
 We thank you for the beauty around us,
 for the hills and the trees,
 for the water and the weather,
 for all that reminds us of life,
 and life made new.
 Today, we are especially thankful for...
(Thanksgivings of the community and/or from current events)
 In the quiet of this place,
 we offer you our own celebrations.

(A time for silent prayer)

Even as we say "Thank you,"
 we realize that there is brokenness in us
 and in our world.
 We realize that we have not always lived the love
 to which you call us.
 Sometimes by action or by inaction,
 sometimes by just going along with things,
 we have broken faith with each other,
 and with you.
 We offer to you, our brokenness, loving God,
 not only asking that we would be forgiven,
 but that, by your love, we would be made whole,
 living in new ways, living out Christ's love.
 Receive the prayers of our hearts, God.

(A time for silent prayer)

Knowing that we are forgiven,
 knowing that we are loved,
 we turn to the world, to love it into wholeness.
 We pray for people living in desert times in their lives,
 people who are facing famine—of body or spirit,
 people who are tempted to turn away from what is right and just;
 and we pray for a world, all creatures, all places,
 facing destruction.

We remember especially...
(Name concerns of the congregation, or from current events)
We pray for healing and wholeness,
and we ask that we would be a part of the solution,
loving God,
turning our prayer from words to actions.
Bless our journey, we pray,
sharing the words that Jesus gave all his disciples...

The Lord's Prayer
*(Use a version of The Lord's Prayer that is appropriate
for your community of faith.)*

Amen.

Hymn

"God Be with You till We Meet Again" (VU 422) or "As Long As We Follow" (MV 140)

Benediction and Commissioning

One: As we travel this Lenten pathway,
we journey together, a community of faith.

**All: As we travel this Way of Jesus,
we journey together, but also alone.**

One: Let us go into God's world,
practising our faith,

**All: living Christ's call
to love God with all that we are,
to love our neighbour
as we love ourselves.**

One: Let us go into God's world

**All: knowing we are never alone.
Christ's peace,
the Creator's love,
and the breath of the Holy Spirit
go with us.
Amen!**

Reflection: How to Say No!

I find it funny that one of the first words we learn to speak and use as small children becomes for many of us the hardest word to use as our life progresses. Spend any time around a two-year-old and you will know how often they use the word “no.”

“Please eat your peas.” “No!”

“It’s time for bed.” “No!”

“Did you break the lamp?” “No!”

“Do you want to go for a walk?” “No!”

They are very good at saying, “No!” For many of us, however, you’d think we’d never heard the word before: “I know you’re already serving communion this morning, reading scripture, ushering, and teaching Sunday school, but we need someone to run the tech equipment. Could you do it?” “Yes.”

“I know you worked all day and have two church meetings tonight, but I need help with my homework...and can I have a dozen cupcakes for school tomorrow?” “Yes.”

Does any of that sound familiar? We have become so good at saying “Yes” and so poor at saying “No” that we are exhausted, overworked, burned-out, and spiritually depleted. How can I hear God speaking to me, and why would I want to, if all it means is more work? Even this idea of Lenten practices just sounds like more work. Right?

So maybe it’s time to regain the practice of saying “No,” not indiscriminately or selfishly like that two-year-old, but wisely and intentionally like a follower of Jesus. It means not saying “No” just because I don’t want to, or because it’s too hard, or too new, or it scares me, but saying, “No” to this because I have already said “Yes” to that.

We are given a great example of how this works in today’s Bible reading from Matthew’s Gospel (4:1–11). Three times Jesus has to make a choice. Three times he can either say “No” or “Yes.”

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread!” “No” or “Yes”?

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the highest point of the Temple.” “No” or “Yes”?

“All these kingdoms and all their wealth and power I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” “No” or “Yes”?

Each time Jesus says “No!” on account of that to which he has already said “Yes!”

“Yes, I will trust God to provide what I really need.”

“Yes, I will trust God to care for me.”

“Yes, I will serve and worship God alone.”

(continued)

Now, probably, hopefully, you're not going to be asked this week to throw yourself off a roof, or intentionally starve yourself, or turn your back on God or the church, like Jesus was. However, you are going to be faced with choices and temptations of your own.

Every time you pick up your phone—I just want to check Facebook, or Instagram, or my work e-mail, or level up in Candy Crush—the people around you cease to exist.

Every time you open your wallet—cash? debit? credit?—you spend more because a strong economy is what really matters, and it will make you feel good.

As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose “No” or “Yes.” How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That's a stewardship question.

So here's our first Lenten practice. Early this week, maybe tomorrow, I want you to make a list of three things, three Christian values, to which you have said “Yes.”

Maybe they are similar to the three that Jesus relies on in the Bible story:

“Yes, I will trust God to provide what I really need.”

“Yes, I will trust God to care for me.”

“Yes, I will serve and worship God alone.”

Maybe they're broader:

“Yes, I value faithfulness.”

“Yes, I value kindness.”

“Yes, I value generosity.”

Think about it and pray about it and write down three things, three Christian values, to which you have said “Yes.” Carry that list with you as a reminder. Make a copy or two and put it in places where you will keep running into it. Then, through the rest of the week, whenever a choice presents itself, say “No” when it contradicts your list—those Christian values to which you have said “Yes.”

Then come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God, as you made space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus.

Amen.

Program Week 2

Week 2 at a Glance

Inspire: Communications

- To keep interest high, use announcements, bulletin inserts, bulletin covers, and other ways to continue communicating about your *Called to Be the Church* program.

Inspire: Worship

- Sunday 2 focuses on our being blessed by God so that we, in turn, might be a blessing to others through our congregation.

Invite

- A community meal may be hosted this week.
- Letter of Invitation can be mailed this week or no later than the Saturday before Sunday 4.

Thank

- Identify a person or people who make a significant difference in the ministries of outreach, pastoral care, fellowship, learning, and worship. Thank them in a personal and sincere way this week.

Lent Week 2

Sunday 2: Bless You!

Introduction to Lenten Practices and Called to Be the Church

(Repeat Introduction from Lent Week 1, p. 6.)

Prelude

Welcome

One: In Jesus' name, welcome!
First-time participant or one who's been here many days;
child or elder or somewhere in-between;
stewards, caretakers, disciples of Jesus, children of God—
neighbours all, loved and loving.
Welcome. Welcome in Christ's name!

Recognition of the Land and Indigenous People

A Time for Silent Reflection

Call to Worship

One: Blessed and blessing,
loving and loved,
God's people, (*name of your community of faith*),
come to this place!

All: We're ready!

One: From times of work,
from times of play,
from times of busy-ness,
from times away,
God's people of (*name of your community of faith*), come!

All: We're set!

One: To speak and to receive,
to sing and to pray.
God's people of (*name of your community of faith*), come!

All: We're here!

We're here!

We're here to worship God!

Opening Prayer

One: God of the smooth road,
 God of the rough places,
 God of the wilderness paths,
 thank you.
 Thank you for calling us out
 when we want to wrap ourselves up and hide.
 Thank you for giving us safe space
 when everything is just too much.
 Thank you for blessing all creation with your presence,
 and with your love.
 Open our hearts, we pray—open our minds—
 open our souls and, by your grace,
 fill them with your abundant love;
 not only so that we would be changed,
 not only so that we would be blessed,
 but so that we can be blessing
 and people of transformation,
 in your world.
 In Jesus' name we ask it.
 Amen.

Hymn

“Come, Touch Our Hearts” (*More Voices* (MV) 12, verse 1 only)

Witness of the Stewards

In the reflection last week, people were asked to “come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God.” Consider a variety of ways that this could be done. You might want to ask one person to be prepared to speak, and then offer the opportunity for one or two others to spontaneously share. Perhaps there's an opportunity to have wall space in the room where the worship service takes place for people to post their stories (in written form or perhaps through art they've created). This sharing time is an important part of this community practice. After the stories have been shared, think about offering a prayer of thanksgiving, for example:

One: For the stories we have shared,
for the lives we have lived,
for the love you have given—

All: Thank you, God!

One: May the stories of our friends
remind us, all,
that we are on the Way, together!

All: Thank you, God! Amen!

Hymn

“To Abraham and Sarah” (*Voices United* (VU) 634) or “I Have Called You by Your Name” (MV 161)

Scripture

Genesis 12:1–4a

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

Reflection

Bless You! (*See p. 22 at the end of the service outline.*)

Hymn

“Live into Hope” (VU 699) or “Christ Has No Body Now but Yours” (MV 171)

Work of the People

Announcements and a Minute for Mission

The Offering

Invitation

One: The Way of Lent is a path that we travel each year,
 as a time for us to remember Jesus' journey.
 On that journey he met many people.
 In that meeting, they were blessed.
 In that blessing, many of them were changed.
 In that change, many of them shared what they had experienced.
 In that sharing, they changed the world.
 We are disciples of Christ, blessed by his teaching
 and blessed by his love.
 So, let's share who we are and what we have,
 that, in that sharing, we would be part
 of blessing God's world.
 Let us gather together what we are able to offer!

Singing

"Though I May Speak" (VU 372) or "You Are Holy" (MV 45)

Prayer

**All: God of all creation,
 we know that
 all that we have,
 all that we are,
 is blessed and blessing.
 In this sharing,
 we add our blessing to yours.
 May all of these blessings
 bring hope and healing to your world.
 Amen.**

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

For the prayers today, we ask that you prepare three differently coloured slips of paper (*given out at the beginning of the service*). The ushers will gather them with the financial offering.

One: Today, for our prayers, we're going to take some time to offer to God a few things.
Before we begin, take a moment to look around the room.
Take a look at the people who are here.
You may know them really well, a little bit, or not at all.
Think about them, and, through them, about all of the people whom you come into contact with in some way.
(Pause for a moment)
Now I'd like to ask you to take one of the coloured slips of paper you were given;
it doesn't matter which colour.
I'd ask you to imagine writing the name of someone or something for which you are grateful—
a person, a place, something from your past, something from now.
Whatever it is for which you are thankful, imagine naming it,
or drawing it, on that piece of paper.
(A few moments for reflection)
Now, let that name or image represent all for whom and for which you are thankful in your life.
(A moment for reflection)
Take the second slip of paper.
Take a moment to reflect on the past week.
Was there a time when, for whatever reason,
you did something or failed to do something
that got in the way of your loving God,
or loving your neighbour, or loving yourself?
Is there something broken that you want—or need—to tell God about?
(A few moments for reflection)
Imagine writing that down on the slip of paper.
(A moment for reflection)
Now, let that image represent all of the broken moments in your life.
Take the third slip of paper.
Is there someone or some place that you know
is in need of an extra measure of your love,
and of God's love?
Perhaps it's someone you know, or something you have heard about on the news.
(A few moments for reflection)

Imagine describing that person, place, or situation on the slip of paper.
(*A moment for reflection*)

Now, let that image represent all of the people and places
around the world that are in need.

Let's sit in silence, as the slips are gathered up.
(*When the slips are gathered up, take them in your hands to the communion
table and let them fall from your fingers, fluttering down, as you say:*)
Blessed and blessing, these are our prayers, God of all.

(*Then begin into the version of The Lord's Prayer
that is appropriate for your community of faith.*)

Hymn

"Go to the World" (VU 420) or "When Hands Reach Out Beyond Divides" (MV 169)

Benediction and Commissioning

One: Blessed and blessing,
loving and loved,
God's people, (*name of your community of faith*),
go from this place!

All: We're ready!

One: To times of work,
to times of play,
to times of busy-ness,
to times away,
God's people of (*name of your community of faith*),
go to the world!

All: We're set!

One: To speak and to listen,
to sing and to pray,
to be a blessing, each and every day.
God's people of (*name of your community of faith*),
go and be stewards of the faith,
Jesus' people on the Way.

**All: We go, knowing we are never alone!
Carried by the wings of the Holy Spirit,
moving forward with Christ's peace,
enfolded in the Creator's love, we go!
Amen. Amen! AMEN!**

Reflection: Bless You!

Last week we explored the Lenten practice of saying “No!” It is easier to say “No” to something when you have already said “Yes” to something else. As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose “No” or “Yes.” Will I do this or will I do that? How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That’s a stewardship and discipleship question.

Actually, that is THE stewardship and discipleship question. As people of faith, we believe that all we have, from mismatched socks to our very lives, comes from God. God generously shares and gives to us, because God loves us. And not just us, but everyone. Every living being on the planet and beyond the planet. Okay, and even the planet. That’s how expansive God’s love is.

It’s up to each of us, then, to decide how we are going to use whatever God has given us. Not a bad deal, right? Right.

However, God knows us pretty well. So God has given us some guidelines, assistance, and yes, even some rules, to help us make good decisions about how we are going to use all this that God gave us. It’s not that God doesn’t trust us, but let’s just say our track record for using what God has given us hasn’t been exactly stellar. There’s an example of this in the Bible reading we heard today:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.” (Gen. 12:1–2b)

Not a bad deal for Abram. Go where God takes you and you will get it all. You will become a great nation, blessed by God. Money? Yup. Power? Yup. Possessions? Yup. Descendants? Yup. He gets it all! There’s only one little caveat: “***...so that you will be a blessing.***” (Gen. 12:2c)

It’s not so much a hitch or a condition, but God gives Abram a guideline as to how to use all this blessing that God is going to give to Abram: “Use it to bless others.”

As spiritual descendants of Abram, whose name God later changes to Abraham, we, too, have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others. Which brings us to this week’s Lenten practice, the practice of blessing; and because we are also talking stewardship and discipleship, the practice of using what we have been given to be a blessing to someone else. Blessed, to be a blessing.

Now blessing is one of those words that often gets used, but doesn’t often get defined. So let’s check with Google.... Blessing: a beneficial thing for which one is grateful; a person’s sanction or support.

No surprises there, I hope. Being blessed is a good thing. A blessing can be both physical and non-physical. *(Give examples of a time when you were blessed in each way.)*

I'm going to give you a moment, now, to bring to mind some time when someone blessed you, either physically or in some other way. *(pause)* How did it feel to be blessed? What did being blessed make you want to do in return? *(Encourage people to share their answers with a neighbour or with the whole congregation.)*

Now let's flip it around. I'm going to give you another moment to recall a time when you were a blessing to someone else. Maybe you gave them something. Maybe you did something for them. Maybe you said something—something for which they were grateful, even if they didn't come out and say it. When were you a blessing for someone else? *(pause)* How did that feel, to be a blessing to someone? What did being a blessing make you want to do? *(Encourage people to share their answers.)* *(You may wish to share how you felt when you were a blessing to someone.)*

Being a part of this congregation gives you many opportunities to be a blessing to others. *(Share some opportunities that your congregation offers for people to give and be a blessing to others.)*

We also have the opportunity to be a blessing to people we may never meet through the Mission & Service of the United Church. When you give to Mission & Service, you are a blessing to thousands, maybe millions, of people across Canada, a blessing that in some cases actually saves lives:

- 63 community ministries serving God's people in areas such as housing, food security, employment training, mental health treatment, advocacy, and pastoral care
- 33 chaplaincies in universities, hospitals, and communities
- grants for Embracing the Spirit, Healing Fund, Justice and Reconciliation, and Vision Fund projects
- 20 ecumenical and social movement organizations
- 7 theological schools and 3 education centres serving God's people by providing theological education, continuing education, and training for vocation of ministry and for lay leaders
- 83 pastoral charges, in 13 Conferences, serving God's people through worship, pastoral care, education, and mission.

When you give to Mission & Service you are also a blessing to thousands (likely millions) of people around the world directly and through 92 global partners in 21 countries which change lives and save lives.

(continued)

So that's what we're going to work on this week for our Lenten practice: using what we have been given to be a blessing for someone else. We're going to have some fun this week, so here's what I want you to try.

Jesus warns us not to be showy and draw attention to ourselves when we are generous and use what we have to bless someone else (Matthew 6:1–4). So, I want you to go into blessing stealth mode. Be creative. At least once a day, this week, use something you have been given, something you have been blessed with, to secretly bless someone else. Don't let them know it was you. It could be a family member. It could be a co-worker. It could be a total stranger. It doesn't matter who. At least once a day, this week, use something you have been given, something you have been blessed with, to secretly bless someone else. (*Offer some of your own ideas for doing this.*)

Then come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God, as you made space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus.

Amen.

Idea for the children's message: Read the book (or use the ideas in) *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* by Carol McCloud.

Program Week 3

Week 3 at a Glance

Inspire: Communications

- Continue using announcements, bulletin inserts, bulletin covers, and other ways to communicate your *Called to Be the Church* program.

Inspire: Worship

- Sunday 3 focuses on the stewardship of our time and the value of committing to a regular pattern of worship in which we reflect on sharing the gifts that God has entrusted to us.

Invite

- Letter of Invitation can be mailed this week or no later than the Saturday before Sunday 4.
- Remind people to send in their Response Card or bring it on Sunday 4.

Thank

- Take this opportunity to acknowledge those who have been strong workers for or supporters of Mission & Service and especially Mission & Service Enthusiasts.

Lent Week 3

Sunday 3: Worship—Are You a Regular?

Introduction to Lenten Practices and Called to Be the Church

(Repeat Introduction from Lent Week 1, p. 6)

Prelude

Welcome

One: In Jesus' name, welcome!
First-time participant or one who's been here many days;
child or elder or somewhere in-between;
stewards, caretakers, disciples of Jesus, children of God—
neighbours all, loved and loving.
Welcome. Welcome in Christ's name!

Recognition of the Land and Indigenous People

A Time for Silent Reflection

Call to Worship

One: It is in God that we live, and move, and have our being.
And so, in every moment of every day,
we dance with God, and God dances with all creation.
We don't often notice that we're dancing,
but sometimes, every once in a while,
God's music and movement breaks through,
and we *know*!
When we gather together, as community of faith,
we gather to help one another become open
to the presence of God;
we gather to help one another be intentional
in that relationship;
we gather to help one another,
and in helping one another,
we worship God.

Opening Prayer

One: This is a movement prayer, so I would invite you to repeat my actions as you are able*.

(Touching head)

Creator, touch our minds—

**All: *(Touching head)*
that we may worship with understanding.**

One: *(Touching above eyes)*

Christ, touch our eyes—

**All: *(Touching above eyes)*
that we may recognise each other.**

One: *(Touching lips)*

Holy Spirit, touch our voices—

**All: *(Touching lips)*
that our words would always praise you.**

One: *(Touching chest, above heart)*

Love Divine, touch our hearts—

**All: *(Touching chest, above heart)*
that your compassion would overflow.**

One: *(Placing one hand on top of the other, palms up)*

God of all, touch our hands—

**All: *(Placing one hand on top of the other, palms up)*
that all we touch would be blessed,
that all we touch would be transformed,
that all we touch would be made new,
by your love.**

One: *(Touching head, above eyes, lips, heart, and hands)*

With all that we are—

**All: *(Touching head, above eyes, lips, heart, and hands)*
we worship you.
Amen.**

*Some worshipping communities might wish to adapt this body prayer by replacing key words, e.g., replacing “eyes” with “foreheads,” (second) “eyes” with “senses,” “lips” with “temples,” “voices” with “spirits,” and “words” with “thoughts.”

Hymn

“Come Touch Our Hearts” (*More Voices* (MV) 12, verse 1 only)

Witness of the Stewards

In the reflection last week, people were asked to “come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn’t) open you up to God.” Consider a variety of ways that this could be done. You might want to ask one person to be prepared to speak, and then offer the opportunity for one or two others to spontaneously share. Perhaps there’s an opportunity to have wall space in the room where the worship service takes place, for people to post their stories (in written form or perhaps through art they’ve created). This sharing time is an important part of this community practice. After the stories have been shared, think about offering a prayer of thanksgiving, for example:

One: For the stories we have shared,
for the lives we have lived,
for the love you have given—

All: Thank you, God!

One: May the stories of our friends
remind us, all,
that we are on the Way, together!

All: Thank you, God! Amen!

Hymn

“We Are One” (*Voices United* (VU) 402) or “This Is the Day” (MV 122)

Scripture

Psalms 95:1–7 (*Voices United* p. 814, Part One)

One: O come, let us sing to God.

All: Let us shout with joy to the rock of our salvation.

One: Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving.

**All: Let us joyously shout to God
with songs of praise!**

**Come, let us bow down and worship,
let us kneel before God our maker.**

One: For you are a great God,

All: high sovereign above all gods.

One: In your hand are the depths of the earth;

All: to you belong the heights of the mountains.

One: The sea is yours, for you made it;

All: your hands also formed the dry land.

One: You are indeed our God.

**All: We are your people, the flock that you shepherd.
Come, let us bow down and worship,
let us kneel before God our maker!**

Reflection

Worship – Are You a Regular? (*See p. 34 at the end of the service outline.*)

Hymn

“Worship the Lord” (VU 401) or “Let Us Build a House” (MV 1)

Work of the People

Announcements and a Minute for Mission

The Offering

Invitation

One: The Way of Lent is a path that we travel each year,
as a time for us to remember Jesus’ journey.
On that journey he met many people.
In that meeting, they were blessed.
When he was with them,
he was careful to listen
to the people and to the Creator.
When he was with them,
he would pray, sometimes with words,
sometimes with tears.
When he was with them,
he would share what he had—
his teachings, his table, his love.
Let us worship God
by listening, by praying, and by sharing!

Singing

“Though I May Speak” (VU 372) or “You Are Holy” (MV45)

Prayer

**All: The bills and the coins
and the numbers in the bank
are symbols of the work of our hands,
loving God.
We offer them to you,
that they would be signs and symbols
of our worship as they go out into the world.
May they be used in ways
that bring healing and wholeness
to all creation.
Amen.**

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

One: The psalmist said, "O come, let us sing to God,
Let us shout with joy to the rock of our salvation.
Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving.
Let us joyously shout to God with songs of praise!"
So, let's do all those things, as we join together in prayer.

Singing

"My Soul Is Thirsting for You" (MV 109, refrain only)

**All: My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,¹
thirsting for you, my God.
My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.**

One: Our hearts beat with thanksgiving, God.
They mark every moment that we live in you!
For the earth and all its goodness;
for the seas and the waves so high;
for the air, which surrounds this planet;
and for all the creatures with whom we live—
we say,

All: Thank you, loving God!

One: For the relationships we share
with all creation,
with each other;
for the love that brings new life—

¹ The English translation of Psalm Response "My Soul Is Thirsting for You" from *Lectionary for Mass* © 1969, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.

All: Thank you, loving God!

One: For your presence in and with all things,
every heartbeat, every day,
for the fact that you are always with us—

All: Thank you, loving God!

Singing

“My Soul Is Thirsting for You” (MV 109, refrain only)

**All: My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God.**

**My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.**

One: Even as we celebrate, in praise and thanksgiving,
we remember that we have also sinned
in our thoughts, our words, and our actions.
There are times we have failed to love you
as completely as we could have;
times we have failed to love our neighbour
as we love ourselves.
Forgive us, God.

**All: We ask you to forgive us, God.
But, even more than that,
we ask that you help us to
make the choices
and live the decision
to love more completely,
tomorrow and the days to come.**

One: Hear the prayers of our hearts...
(A time for silent prayer)

Singing

“My Soul Is Thirsting for You” (MV 109, refrain only)

**All: My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God.
My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.**

One: As a forgiven and forgiving people,
we remember others who are in need.
For the world and all that lives in it...
For people and places damaged by war and conflict...
For people whose humanity is diminished
by racism, ableism, sexism, classism, heterosexism,
and all the other –isms we live....
For all who are afraid, all who are lonely,
all who are hurting, in body, mind, or spirit...
For our neighbours—
those we know and those we will never meet...
For our families...
For ourselves...

Singing

“My Soul Is Thirsting for You” (MV 109, refrain only)

**All: My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God.
My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.**

One: We pray all of these things,
sharing the words that Jesus gave to all of his disciples,
including us...

(Use a version of The Lord’s Prayer that is most appropriate for your community of faith.)

Hymn

“May the God of Hope Go with Us” (VU 424) or “Three Things I Promise” (MV 176)

Benediction and Commissioning

One: This is a movement prayer, so I would invite you to repeat my actions as you are able*.

(Touching head)

Creator, touch our minds—

**All: *(Touching head)*
that we may worship with understanding.**

One: *(Touching above eyes)*

Christ, touch our eyes—

**All: *(Touching above eyes)*
that we may recognize each other.**

One: *(Touching lips)*

Holy Spirit, touch our voices—

**All: *(Touching lips)*
that our words would always praise you.**

One: *(Touching chest, above heart)*

Love Divine, touch our hearts—

**All: *(Touching chest, above heart)*
that your compassion would overflow.**

One: *(Placing one hand on top of the other, palms up)*

God of all, touch our hands—

**All: *(Placing one hand on top of the other, palms up)*
that all we touch would be blessed,
that all we touch would be transformed,
that all we touch would be made new,
by your love.**

One: *(Touching head, above eyes, lips, heart, and hands)*

As we go into your world—

**All: *(Touching head, above eyes, lips, heart, and hands)*
we worship you!
Amen.**

*Some worshipping communities might wish to adapt this body prayer by replacing key words, e.g., replacing “eyes” with “foreheads,” (second) “eyes” with “senses,” “lips” with “temples,” “voices” with “spirits,” and “words” with “thoughts.”

Reflection: Worship—Are You a Regular?

In Lent Week 1 we explored the Lenten practice of saying “No!” It is easier to say “No” to something when you have already said “Yes” to something else. As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose “No” or “Yes.” Will I do this or will I do that? How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That’s a stewardship question.

Then last week we looked into being a blessing. We have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others. We looked deeper into THE stewardship question. As people of faith, it’s up to each of us to decide: How are we going to use everything God has given us?

Stewardship is really all about caring for, managing, and using something that is not yours, but which you have been given for a time. It’s yours to look after and use on behalf of its rightful owner. A good steward always manages what they have been given as a response to the one who owns it and who has given it to them. And that includes our time, as well as our physical resources.

Now, maybe we should have started with this Lenten practice two weeks ago, but today we’re going to talk about worship—worshipping regularly and often.

...

One day, two people from the same congregation were having coffee and talking about church stuff: you know, the regular chitter chatter. Finally, one says to the other, “You know I’ve gone to worship for 30 years now, and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can’t remember a single one of them. So, I think I’m wasting my time, and the ministers are wasting theirs by their giving sermons at all.” Well, the other person thought for a moment and then replied, “You know, I’ve been married for 30 years. In that time, my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this, they all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to worship for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!”

According to N. Graham Standish, a Presbyterian minister in the United States, worship must provide, “...a tangible sense that Christ is in their midst,” “...an encounter and experience of God.”² Worship is not just a show we attend on those Sunday mornings when we have time. Worship is not a spectator sport. Worship is not something that can only occur in this building and this space. Worship does not even require the traditional trappings of minister, organist, and choir; hymn book and

² N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2016), p.73.

bulletin. “In worship, as we sing songs, listen to messages, read through scripture, and pray together, we can experience that precious love of God that is for each of us, and in that love discover a sense of belonging and perhaps even purpose for our own lives...worship takes us into the heart of God.”³

Worship, like stewardship, is about our response to God; who God is and what God does. As part of our worship today we read Psalm 95. It starts with our response. “Let us shout with joy to the rock of our salvation. Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving; let us joyously shout to God with songs of praise.” (Ps. 95:1-2 - VU p.814) Sounds like worship! Which is our response to, “For you are a great God, high sovereign above all gods. In your hand are the depths of the earth; to you belong the mountains. The sea is yours, for you made it; your hands also formed the dry land.” (Ps. 9:3-5 - VU p.814)

Who is God? God is great! God is the creator. God made it all and owns it all. And God is good. God provides everything for us. All that we have has come from God.

So we thank God by using some of the time God has given us to come together with other followers of Jesus for worship. Regularly and often.

When we worship:

We **enter into God’s presence**. We start by settling ourselves and centring ourselves. Often that involves silence, prayer, and music.

We **listen** for what God is saying to us: reading scripture, hearing a sermon or message, watching a video, talking with someone, or practising quiet meditation. Any of these can become vehicles through which we listen for what God is saying to us.

We **respond**: As a result of our experience of God’s presence and listening for God’s message to us, now what do we have to do? A time of dedication or commitment. Praying both for ourselves and for others. Each of us responds differently depending on what we heard or felt from God.

And we need to do this thing we call worship regularly and often, as the church-goer said about being spiritually nourished. So, here’s what we’re going to work on this week for our Lenten practice: worship regularly and often.

By now you should have received the stewardship invitation package for your family. In it you will find information and stories to inspire you about the ways that your church is living out its mission and making a difference in people’s lives. You will also find information to help you respond to the invitation to give generously and consistently to your church, both here in the local congregation and beyond through

³ Jamie Holtom and Debbie Johnson. *Bullseye: Aiming to Follow Jesus* (United Church Publishing House, The United Church of Canada, 2015) p. 45.

Mission & Service. If for some reason you haven't received your package, please contact (*name*) right away and they will look after you.

This week, I want you to use some of your time (remember also the stewardship of time) every day to worship. No, we won't be holding daily worship here in the church building (unless you do). Yes, you can do this—together with others or on your own.

Worship at home with your family. Worship in an arena with friends. Worship wherever is convenient. Just worship, regularly and often.

Use the outline for worship we have talked about (enter into God's presence, listen, respond) and using the stewardship invitation package, offer some of your time EVERY DAY, to worship God. This is a great Lenten practice to do together as a family, or with a good church friend or two.

To start, offer a prayer and a bit of silence to **enter into God's presence** and into worship. Maybe sing or listen to a worship song. There are lots online. Then, read the scripture from today's worship. Read the inspiring stories in the stewardship package (*detail other materials in the package that your congregation included, like a narrative budget*). Read them prayerfully. **Listen** to what God, through the Holy Spirit, is saying to you through them. Consider what will be your **response**. If you are worshipping as a family or a group, talk about it. What did you hear God saying? How will you respond to the invitation to generous stewardship? Remember next Sunday is Invitation Sunday (*or whatever you are calling Sunday 4*). Pray for your family and friends; and pray for your church.

In order to build a habit, I encourage you to choose the same time each day. Pick a time that works for you, but every day this week use some of your time to worship. Then, come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God as you made space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus.

Amen.

Program Week 4

Week 4 at a Glance

Inspire: Worship

- Sunday 4 focuses on appreciating and being content with all that God had given us and by doing so find the path to generosity.

Invite

- Today you will make the invitation and explicitly remind people to submit their Response Cards.
- Follow up over the next few weeks with those who have not yet responded or returned their Response Cards.

Thank

- Invite people in the congregation to identify individuals they would personally like to thank. Leave space at announcement time or at the offertory for this recognition.

Lent Week 4

Sunday 4: I've Had Enough!

Introduction to Lenten Practices and Called to Be the Church

(Repeat Introduction from Lent Week 1, p. 6)

Prelude

Welcome

One: In Jesus' name, welcome!
First-time participant or one who's been here many days;
child or elder or somewhere in-between;
stewards, caretakers, disciples of Jesus, children of God—
neighbours all, loved and loving.
Welcome. Welcome in Christ's name!

Recognition of the Land and Indigenous People

A Time for Silent Reflection

Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

One: As we gather for worship this morning, you might find things are a bit different.
This is the week, in our exploration of spiritual practices that help us to be disciples of Jesus and good stewards of all God's gifts, when we are invited to share our individual stewardship plans for the coming year.
We shall share our plans for giving with the *(Stewardship Team)* by filling out and bringing forward our Response Cards.
If you haven't received your Response Card, please see the folks in the *(name location)* when we sing our first hymn.
The gathering and blessing of our stewardship plans will happen around the same time we gather our offering today.
So, as people of hope and wonder,
as people of peace and joy,
as disciples of Jesus, wandering his Way—
let's get ready to worship God!
To prepare ourselves, join me in the Prayer of the Three Deep Breaths!
Take a deep breath, and as you breathe out say, "Thank you, Creator."

All: Thank you, Creator.

One: Take a deep breath, and as you breathe out say, “Thank you, Jesus Christ.”

All: Thank you, Jesus Christ.

One: Take a deep breath, and as you breathe out say, “Thank you, Holy Spirit.”

All: Thank you, Holy Spirit.

One: Thank you, loving God,
for being with us, always,
and helping us to make time in this place.
We ask you to help us remember
all the moments of gratitude that have filled this week,
and we ask you to help us look forward
to all of the moments of gratitude that are still to come.
Blessed are you, forever and ever.
And the people said—

All: Amen!

Hymn

“Come, Touch Our Hearts” (*More Voices* (MV 12), verse 1 only)

Witness of the Stewards

In the reflection last week, people were asked to “come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn’t) open you up to God.” Consider a variety of ways that this could be done. You might want to ask one person to be prepared to speak, and then offer the opportunity for one or two others to spontaneously share. Perhaps there’s an opportunity to have wall space in the room where the worship service takes place where people might post their stories (in written form, or perhaps through art they’ve created). This sharing time is an important part of this community practice. After the stories have been shared, think about offering a prayer of thanksgiving, for example:

One: For the stories we have shared,
for the lives we have lived,
for the love you have given—

All: Thank you, God!

One: May the stories of our friends
remind us, all,
that we are on the Way, together!

All: Thank you, God! Amen!

Hymn

“Come, Let Us Sing” (*Voices United* (VU) 222) or “Ev’ry Day Is a Day of Thanksgiving” (MV 185)

Scripture

Psalms 23 (*Voices United*, p.749) or consider writing and sharing a paraphrase, e.g.:

God is my shepherd,
everything I *need* is taken care of:
good food to eat,
sweet water to drink,
safe place to sleep!
When my soul is broken,
God restores it.
When my path gets twisted,
God returns me to the right ways
by the Holy Name!
When I walk in shadowed places,
where death is waiting for me,
I will not be afraid.
I know that you are with me, God.
I am comforted by your guidance,
by your readiness to defend me.
Even in the presence of those who would do me harm,
you make sure that I have enough,
and more than enough!
You mark me as yours.
I am certain that your goodness and your mercy
will always be in my life,
and I will be a part of your household forever.
A part of your household, *forever!*

Reflection

I’ve Had Enough! (*See p. 44 at the end of the service outline.*)

Hymn

“God of the Sparrow” (VU 229) or “Grateful” (MV 182)

Work of the People

Announcements and a Minute for Mission

The Offering

(The offering is for both financial gifts and Response Cards.)

Invitation

One: The Way of Lent is a path that we travel each year as a time for us to remember Jesus' journey. On that journey, Jesus met many people. In everything he did, he reminded people of the importance of God in their lives. Jesus talked differently to people who had power and privilege than he did to those who were without. He challenged people with big "asks," like, "Sell everything you own, and come, follow me!" What does it mean for us to trust God with all that we have, and all that we are? What does it mean for us to trust and follow?

Stewardship Team

(The team has this time to give instructions about the Reponse Cards. Remind the team to include information about how they will be gathered. One idea that has worked well is to have two offering plates on the table, one for this week's offering and the other for Response Cards. Everyone is invited to come forward, as they are able, to place their card on one offering plate and their weekly offering on the other. If people don't usually have a weekly offering, inviting them to give, from their heart, a special gift they would like to give God in the coming week (e.g., some kind of tangible act, such as helping a neighbour) and to mime placing it on the plate, is a powerful statement of giving. Don't forget to have someone on hand who can gather up the offerings from those who are unable, physically, to get to the offering plates. When everyone has brought forward their cards and offering, continue with the singing.)

Singing

"Though I May Speak" (VU 372) or "You Are Holy" (MV45)

Prayer

**All: Every day is a day of thanksgiving,
every choice an opportunity
for us to sing praise to you,
God of all,
because all these days,
all of these moments,
all of these possibilities,
come from your love and our love—
a blessing forever!
Thank you, Creator.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

One: For our Prayers of the People today,
I'd ask you to cup your hands together,
and place them close to your mouth.
(Give people a moment)

I'd like to ask you to think about:
something in your life that makes you smile;
something in your life that makes you happy;
something in your life for which you are grateful.
When you're ready, I'd ask you to whisper, into your hands,
what it is or what they are.
(Give people a moment to think and whisper)

Now, I'd like to ask you to think about
something that's happened
that is causing you pain, right now.
Perhaps it is something that you've done.
Perhaps it is something that has been done to you.
Whatever it is, I'd like to ask you if you're ready to give it to God,
that the hurt might be healed,
and whatever is broken might be made whole.
When you're ready, whisper that into your hands.
(Give people a moment to think and whisper)

Now I'd like to ask you to think about
someone or something or some place you know of
that is in need of God's particular attention.
It might be something quite personal to you,
or it might be something far away.

Take a moment to whisper into your hands
 a little about that person or situation.
 Perhaps you could ask God to help you understand
 how you might be of help.
 When you're ready, whisper that into your hands.
(Give people a moment to think and whisper)

Now comes the time to offer the prayers that are in our hands.
 Open the cup so that your hands are flat
 and bring them up to your lips.
 Take a deep breath and...
 blow!
(Give people a moment to blow their prayers into God's world)

One: We pray all of these things,
 sharing the words that Jesus gave to all of his disciples,
 including us...

(Use a version of The Lord's Prayer that is most appropriate for your community of faith.)

Hymn

"Oh, Sing to Our God!" (VU 241) or "Deep in Our Hearts" (MV 154)

Benediction and Commissioning

One: Let's go into the world as people of gratitude.

All: Let's go into the world as people of hope.

One: Let's go into the world as people of joyfulness.

All: Let's go into the world ready to share Christ's love!

One: And let us go knowing this:
 we are never, ever alone.

**All: The peace of Christ holds us,
 the love of the Creator enfolds us,
 and the wings of the Holy Spirit carry us,
 today and always.
 Amen!**

Reflection: I've Had Enough!

In Lent Week 1, we explored the Lenten practice of saying “No!” It is easier to say “No” to something when you have already said “Yes” to something else. As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose “No” or “Yes.” Will I do this or will I do that? How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That’s a stewardship question.

In Lent Week 2 we looked into being a blessing. We have been blessed, in order to be a blessing to others. We looked deeper into THE stewardship question. As people of faith, it’s up to each of us to decide “How are we going to use everything God has given us?”

Last week, as we thought about the stewardship of our time, we explored the Lenten practice of worship that is regular and often.

This week, hopefully, each of us was intentional about preparing for today’s invitation to generosity.

So here we are, face to face with one of the most popular and well known pieces of the Bible there is. I wonder how many of us, hearing the words, are taken back to the funeral for a loved one? “The Lord is my shepherd.” It’s a phrase that I expect even the majority of non-church people would recognise. *(If you have a story or experience that includes Psalm 23, you may wish to share it.)*

These words are heard as words of comfort, support, and encouragement.

Traditionally we know them as:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23)

But before you jump to all the great and amazing things God does for you and gives you:

rest in green pastures near a clean water source;

spiritual restoration;

leadership;
 protection;
 comfort and reassurance;
 all you can eat and drink (the ultimate all inclusive!)
 goodness and mercy;
 forever in God's presence...

Before you jump to all that, just pause for a minute at the very first line: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Ps. 23:1) Wouldn't that be great? "I shall not want." Can you imagine not being in a state of want? For our day and age, it might be the most revolutionary idea in the entire Bible since everything we see and hear and experience demands, over and over, that we consume, buy, accumulate, hoard, succeed, and want. Faster, stronger, smarter. More, more more! Yet this Bible song starts with the subversive idea that "I shall not want." Not because I can't afford it. Not because I have three of them. Not because I already have the best and newest. Not because it's back ordered on Amazon. "I shall not want" because "The Lord is my shepherd." "I shall not want" because God provides me with everything I need. "I shall not want" because I trust in God, who came in Jesus the Word made flesh; to reconcile and make new. Jesus clearly taught and lived that we are inter-connected and inter-related; neighbours to one another; to love and serve each other, sharing what we have and who we are for each other's good.

"I shall not want" because to want is the path to greed and selfishness; which is *not* Jesus' Way. To want means never being happy; never being content; always, well... wanting, and always at someone else's expense.

So what's the best way to help God steer you into those lovely green pastures of "I shall not want"? Let me suggest that appreciating what you have is a great way to counteract greed and want, and to grow contentment and happiness in their place. So, for our Lenten practice this week, here's what we're going to work on: Appreciation and Contentment.

This week, in order to help you experience and increase your sense of contentment, I want you to do an "Appreciation Inventory." Look, touch, smell, remember, and immerse yourself in what you have been given. You may choose to physically walk through your home to do this, or you can do it sitting in your favourite spot and using your mind's eye. Either way, as you encounter or experience your physical stuff (clothes, car, food, money, toys, and so on), your non-physical stuff (job, memory, learning, faith), and your relationships (family, friends, co-workers, people that support you), pause with each one and appreciate what you have. Afterwards, acknowledge to yourself just how much you have been given. Be content. Be grateful. In these will you find the path to generosity.

(continued)

Then come back next week (our last week) ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God, as you made space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus.

Amen.

Program Week 5

Week 5 at a Glance

Inspire: Worship

- Sunday 5 is a service of both thanksgiving and reflection as congregants are encouraged to think how God would respond to difficult situations. Today you will report the results of the giving program and model gratitude by thanking everyone for their gifts.
- Take time to celebrate!

Invite

- Follow up with those who have not yet responded or returned their Response Card.

Thank

- Begin the timely, personal, and sincere thanking of all who made a contribution and to those who helped to implement the giving program.

Lent Week 5

Sunday 5: Who'd Have Thunk It?

Introduction to Lenten Practices and Called to Be the Church

(Repeat Introduction from Lent Week 1, p. 6)

Welcome

One: In Jesus' name, welcome!
First-time participant or one who's been here many days;
child or elder or somewhere in-between;
stewards, caretakers, disciples of Jesus, children of God—
neighbours all, loved and loving.
Welcome. Welcome in Christ's name!

Recognition of the Land and Indigenous People

A Time for Silent Reflection

Call to Worship

One: Each step on Christ's Way, each step of our lives,
takes us to new places, new times.
Some of those are times to rest—
like Jesus did, when he stopped to pray.
Some are times to be challenged—
as Jesus was, by the woman from Syrophonecia.
Some are times to celebrate, even in the face of grief—
as Jesus did, when he shared his last meal with his friends.

**All: Whether our bones are dry, our spirits weary,
or we are filled with energy, ready to go;
this is our time to be together—**

One: listening for the Spirit,

All: loving one another,

One: worshipping our God!

All: Worshipping our God!

Opening Prayer

One: You, who are the Holy Spirit, moving the waters,
 you, who are the Creator, whispering in Ezekiel's ear,
 you, who are the Christ, breathing new life into the church,
 you, who are the Wind that Makes All Winds Blow,
 your people are here.
 Your world is here.
 Dry bones, wondering if there is still life in us,
 speak to the winds, we pray.
 Fill us again, with life,
 life abundant,
 life made new.
 Fill us again, that we might breath, loving God!
 Amen.

Hymn

“Come Touch Our Hearts” (*More Voices* (MV) 12, verse 1 only)

Witness of the Stewards

In the reflection last week, people were asked to “come back next week ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God.” Consider a variety of ways that this could be done. You might want to ask one person to be prepared to speak, and then offer the opportunity for one or two others to spontaneously share. Perhaps there's an opportunity to have wall space in the room where the worship service takes place, for people to post their stories (in written form or perhaps through art they've created). This sharing time is an important part of this community practice. After the stories have been shared, think about offering a prayer of thanksgiving, for example:

One: For the stories we have shared,
 for the lives we have lived,
 for the love you have given—

All: Thank you, God!

One: May the stories of our friends
 remind us, all,
 that we are on the Way, together!

All: Thank you, God! Amen!

Hymn

“Breathe on me, Breath of God” (*Voices United* (VU) 382) or “Oh, a Song Must Rise” (MV 142)

Scripture

Ezekiel 37:1–14

(Consider sharing the scripture as readers' theatre (people reading dramatically) or invite people to prepare it as a drama as follows. Two voices are needed. You might want to include the song "Dem bones" before the Ezekiel passage is read or as a theme played quietly during the reading: www.songsforteaching.com/folk/dembones.php.)

Ezekiel: I felt as if God's hand was upon me.
 By the spirit I was carried to the middle of valley—
 a dry valley, covered in...bones.
 God led me around that valley,
 around those bones.
 There were so many.
 Old. Brittle. Dry.
 And then I heard God's voice!

God's Voice: You. I ask you, can these bones live?

Ezekiel: God, Most High, you know.

God's Voice: Then be a prophet, Ezekiel.
 Speak to these bones.
 Say to them:
(God's Voice whispers in Ezekiel's ear.)

Ezekiel: So I did as God commanded me.
 I said to the dry bones,
 "O dry bones, hear God's word!
 God says to you,
 'I will breath into you,
 and you will live.'
 God says to you,
 'I will put muscle and flesh on you.
 I will cover you with skin.
 I will fill you with breath.
 You will live, and you will know that I Am God!'"
 And when I finished speaking, there was a terrifying sound.
 Bones rattling against stone. Bones rattling against other bones.
 Bones coming together, each finding its proper place.
 And, as I watched, muscles grew, and flesh grew,
 and skin covered the new bodies.
 But they were lifeless.
 There was no breath in them.

God's Voice: Speak to the breath, prophet.
 Say to the breath:
(God's Voice whispers to Ezekiel.)

Ezekiel: So I prophesied to the breath,
I spoke the words given to me,
like I had never spoken before,
“God says to you, ‘Breath:
come from the four winds,
breathe into these who were killed,
so that they may live!’”
The breath came into them.
They lived.
They stood on their feet.
Thousands upon thousands of them!

God’s Voice: Man? Listen to me.
These bones are the whole house of Israel.
They say, “Our bones are dried up,
our hope is lost,
we are cut off completely.”
So prophesy to them.
Tell them that God, their God,
is going to open their graves,
and bring them back to life,
and back to the land of Israel,
O, my people!
In that moment,
you will know that I am God!
I will put my spirit within you,
and you shall live.
I will take you home,
and you will know that
I have spoken.
I have acted.

Ezekiel: So I did exactly that.
And so did God.

One: This is the witness of God’s people.

All: Thanks be to God!

Reflection

Who’d Have Thunk It? (See page 58 at the end of the service outline.)

Hymn

“Spirit of Life” (VU 381) or “Spirit God, Be Our Breath” (MV 150)

Work of the People

Announcements and a Minute for Mission

Stewardship Team

(The team has this time to, thankfully and with great celebration, announce what they have heard from the congregation about their stewardship plans for the coming year. If your community of faith uses offering plates, consider having the team read their announcement from a small book that can be placed on the offering plate and celebrated as part of the offering prayers today.)

The Offering

Invitation

One: The Way of Lent is a path that we travel each year,
as a time for us to remember Jesus' journey.
On that journey he met many people.
On that journey, he meets us:
in our times of prayer,
in our times of blessing,
in our times of worship,
in our times of sharing.
So, come, siblings in Christ!
Come to the table, so that we might share
all that we have,
all that we are,
for the love of our neighbours,
for the healing of creation,
for the hope of the world.
Come!

Singing

“Though I May Speak” (VU 372) or “You Are Holy” (MV45)

Prayer

All: What we have, we freely share,
 loving God.
 Blessed by your love,
 may we be a blessing in your world.
 May what we offer always be used
 in service of your grace,
 your peace, and your love.
 Amen!

Celebrating at Christ's Table

One: God is with you!
All: **And also with you.**
 One: Lift up your hearts!
All: **We lift them to God.**
 One: Let us give thanks to God, the God of all the universe!
All: **It is right to give God thanks and praise!**
 One: And so we do praise you, loving God!
 From the beginning of the beginning,
 when there was nothing at all, but your Presence,
 you called creation into being.
All: **You said, "Light!"**
You said, "Earth!"
You said, "Heavens!"
You said, "Stars!"
 One: You said, "Creatures of the water and air!"
 You said, "Creatures of the land!"
 And you said,
All: **"This is good. This is very good."**
 One: It is good! Thank you, loving God.
All: **Thank you, loving God!**
 One: We give you thanks for our ancestors,
 those of our bodies, and those of our faith—
 our grandparents
 who have taught us what it means to be your people.
 Sarah and Abraham,
 Miriam and Ezekiel,
 Mary and Peter...
 and all those who have shared your stories
 in the years that followed.
All: **Thank you, loving God!**

One: For all that you have given us,
your people (*name of faith community*),
The United Church of Canada,
our siblings who walk Jesus' Way,
people of faith,
all people,
and all our relations—
for life and life abundant,
we give you thanks!

All: Thank you, loving God!

One: And so we join our voices with the song of all creation,
celebrating your love:

**All: (*Sanctus and Benedictus appropriate for your community of faith*)
Holy, holy, holy God,
God of love and life,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is the one who comes in your name!
Hosanna in the highest!**

One: But, even as we thank you, we remember
that we have not always lived out your call.
We have sinned in thought, word, and action,
by what we have done, and by what we have failed to do.
We have not loved you with our whole heart,
or loved our neighbours as we love ourselves.
We have maintained systems
that give more power to those who already have it,
and take away what little some people have.
We have turned away when your love would have had us turn toward.
Receive the prayers of our hearts
for those parts of our lives that we have broken.
(*A time for silent prayer*)

Forgive us, we pray.

All: Forgive us, we pray.

One: As forgiven and forgiving people,
 we pray for all those who are in need,
 wherever they are, whoever they are.
 We ask, God, that you would help us to be
 agents of healing and hope
 to all who are hurting, all who are afraid,
 all who are hungry, all who are broken.
 Receive the prayers of our hearts,
 for the people we know...
(A time for silent prayer)

Blessed are you, loving God.

All: Blessed are you, loving God.

One: In prayer and celebration, we give you thanks—
 for Jesus, the Christ,
 for his life among us,
 for his teachings,
 for his laughter,
 for his compassion,
 for his tears.

All: For all that he was, and is, and always will be!

One: And, with his death and resurrection in mind and heart,
 we sing the mystery of our faith:

**All: (*Memorial acclamation appropriate for your community of faith*)
 Christ has died.
 Christ is risen.
 Christ will come again!**

One: We remember that, on the night before he was taken
 to what would be his death,
 he gathered with his disciples for a feast of remembrance and celebration.
 As the meal began, he took the bread and gave thanks to you, saying,
 “Blessed are you, Lord God of the universe, who brings grain from the earth!”
 And then he broke the bread and gave it to those gathered saying,
 “Take this, all of you, and eat it.
 This is my body, given for you.
 Each time you eat bread—

All: Remember me.”

One: When the meal was almost over, he took a cup of wine and again gave thanks to you, saying, “Blessed are you, Lord God of the universe, who brings fruit from the earth!”

And then he lifted the cup up and gave it to those gathered saying,

“Take this, all of you, and drink it.

This is my promise, in my life’s blood,

that sin is forgiven.

Each time you drink—

All: Remember me.”

One: So, as people of Jesus’ Way,

we eat, we drink, and we remember.

Holy One, send your Spirit upon us and upon these gifts,

that they, and we, might truly be Jesus’ body and blood,

dry bones given new life,

dry bones alive in the world!

Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory is yours, God most holy,

now and forever.

All: Amen.

One: Let us share the words that Jesus gave to all his disciples...

(Use a version of The Lord’s Prayer that is most appropriate for your community of faith.)

One: The gifts of God, for the people of God!

All: Thanks be to God!

One: Come, for the table is ready, and our cup is overflowing!

(Communion is shared.)

Prayer after Communion

**All: For the bread we have eaten,
for the fruit on our tongue,
for the life we have received,
thank you, loving God.
May what we have done here
touch us so deeply,
that it will always remain in our hearts—
sending us into our lives,
living Christ’s love.
Amen.**

Hymn

“Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness” (VU 375) or “Go, Make a Difference” (MV 209)

Benediction and Commissioning

One: Each step on Christ’s Way, each step of our lives,
takes us to new places, new times.
Some of those are times to rest—
like Jesus did, when he stopped to pray.
Some are times to be challenged—
as Jesus was, by the woman from Syrophonecia.
Some are times to celebrate, even in the face of grief—
as Jesus did, when he shared his last meal with his friends.

**All: With bones given flesh, and lives renewed,
let us go into God’s world—
listening for the Spirit,
loving one another,
worshipping our God!**

One: And the peace of Christ,
that passes all understanding,
rests and remains with us,
now and forever.

All: AMEN!

Reflection: Who'd Have Thunk It?

In Lent Week 1, we explored the Lenten practice of saying “No!” It is easier to say “No” to something when you have already said “Yes” to something else. As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose “No” or “Yes.” Will I do this or will I do that? How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That’s a stewardship question.

In Lent Week 2, we looked into being a blessing. We have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others. We looked deeper into THE stewardship question. As people of faith, it’s up to each of us to decide how we are going to use everything God has given us.

In Lent Week 3, as we thought about the stewardship of our time, we explored the Lenten practice of worship that is regular and often.

Last week, as we responded to our congregation’s invitation to be generous, we contemplated the beginning of Psalm 23 and the Lenten practice of contentment. We compiled an Appreciation Inventory.

Now, it is one week before Palm Sunday, and Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time. It is one week before Holy Week and Jesus’ last days before he is handed over to the authorities and crucified. It is one week before the powers of empire and greed seem to win again. It is one week before the beginning of end; we stand with Ezekiel and stare into a valley filled with dead, dried human bones. What a sight! As far as you can see, nothing but bones. Leg bones. Ankle bones. Arm bones. Shoulder bones. And none are connected. The empty eye sockets of bleached human skulls stare into oblivion. Death reigns in this place. Endings. Sorrow. Grief. This is a valley of futility and hopelessness. It’s a feeling that many people know all too well. Depression. Grief. Hopelessness. You ask yourself, “Why bother?” (*If you have an experience of this and are comfortable sharing, do so.*)

They don’t know it yet, but there are some close followers of Jesus who will know this experience all too soon as they watch their messiah, their teacher and friend, their hope, hang on a cross and die. What might God do in this impossible situation? It’s a really good question. It may be the only question that matters. What might God do in this impossible situation?

Thankfully, for us, we know the answer in each of those past situations. In the vision that Ezekiel has, God has Ezekiel do the strangest thing. Prophecy to the bones! Yet, when he does, the rattling begins. Joining bone to bone; sinew, muscle, organs, skin; and spirit breath. Life! Hope! A future for God’s beloved people.

Then there's the disciples. I know we're getting a little ahead in the story, but they can't believe it. They watch as everything they had hoped for unravels around them and they are powerless to do anything. Jesus seems to embrace it: preparing them during his last meal with them; calling them to prayer in the garden; commanding them to love, not fight, when he is taken away. How can this be? Seeing his battered and abused body as he comes out of the Roman garrison and is led to the hill of the skull. Watching as Roman soldiers strip him and nail him to the wooden cross; as he dies a public and shameful death. Some disciples have it together enough to take possession of his body and bury it as best they can. The rest of his followers scatter and cower.

What might God do in this impossible situation? Resurrection! On the third day, an empty tomb. Vindication. Life! Hope! A future for God's beloved people. Which, I think, leaves us asking the question differently, for ourselves, in our present situations. Instead of a question of abandon and surrender (What might God do in this impossible situation? as if the situation is beyond God's help), it becomes a question of faith and hope. What might God do in this impossible situation? I wonder.... Let's find out. Let's watch for it and expect it. For God is surely in this place and time. God is surely about God's mission in our lives and through our lives. What might God do in this impossible situation? Because God will do something. Not often what we expect, granted. But God will do something: something that brings new life; something that transforms and heals and renews; something unexpected and unforeseen.

Who'd have thunk it?

When you ask the question "What might God do in this impossible situation?" you are activating your faith. You are opening yourself to God. You are reaching out and grabbing on to hope, even creating hope for yourself and those around you. Because as long as you can think of one answer, there is hope.

And that is our last Lenten practice: the practice of hope. It's a trickier one, but hang in there; it's worth it.

This week, take that question with you. Wherever you go. Whomever you encounter. Whatever life throws at you. What might God do in this impossible situation?

Maybe turn it into a prayer: "O God, what are you up to in this impossible situation?" Maybe write some creative spiritual fiction. Imagine what God might do and then write the story.

(continued)

Take that question with you and immerse yourself in it all week. What might God do in this impossible situation? As long as you can think of one answer, there is hope.

Then come back next week (one more time) ready to share a brief story of how this Lenten practice worked for you and how it helped (or didn't) open you up to God, as you made space in your life to actively live out the Way of Jesus.

Amen.